NEW ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE JEWS IN THE ERA OF REFORMATION AND COUNTER-REFORMATION:
THE PATRONAGE OF BISHOP ECHTER VON MESPELBRUNN

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Even today, Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, who reigned as bishop of Würzburg for more than forty years (1573–1617), is remembered as one of the outstanding personalities in a long line of ecclesiastical sovereigns of that episcopality. Both older and more recent publications present his achievements in the most favorable terms. Among these were the re-catholicization of Würzburg and its territories in the early days of the Counter-Reformation, the reopening of the local university, and the foundation of the Julius-Hospital, a renowned institution of church-sponsored welfare.¹ But his reign was not a blessing for all of the residents in his territories. During his tenure, Bishop Echter openly declared his intolerance of any confession other than the Catholic (as was the case, for example, in Münnerstadt in 1586), and consequently he expelled or persecuted mercilessly those who did not fit the Catholic mold—notably Protestants, Jews, and women accused of sorcery.²

The present essay examines one aspect of Bishop Echter’s program of

¹ Friedrich Merzbacher, Julius Echter und seine Zeit (Würzburg, 1973); Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn 1573–1617, Fürstbischof von Würzburg, Begründer der Universität und des Juliusospitals, exhibition catalogue, ed. Staatsarchiv Würzburg (Würzburg, 1973); Gottfried Mälzer, Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn: Leben und Werk (Würzburg, 1989). The author would like to thank Mitchell Merback for his interest in discussing the subject and his many useful suggestions. I also would like to thank Eva Frojmovic for her kind support.

² Vitus Brander, Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn, Fürstbischof von Würzburg (Würzburg, 1917), 93; cf. his declaration to the burghers of Münnerstadt, 19 September 1586, when asked to tolerate two confessions, i.e. Catholicism and Protestantism: “Ihr habt mir weder Ziel noch Maß zu geben, wie ich mit Schulen und Kirchen gebaren soll; denn ich bin der Herr; so seid ihr mir nicht allein in weltlichen, sondern auch in geistlichen Dingen zu gehorsamen schuldig… Ich kann unmöglich in meinem Lande zweierlei Religionen dulden…. Das Stift steht und fällt mit dem katholischen Glauben.” (You aren’t entitled to make any claims of how I should deal with schools and churches, as I am the lord. Thus you are obliged to obedience not only in secular but also in
church renewal, his patronage of churches and chapels dedicated to the miraculous bleeding host (*Heilig Blut*), especially those whose legends linked them to sacrileges committed by Jews against the eucharistic host; my purpose is to present a brief sketch of the treatment of the Jews in the episcopal territories of Würzburg during Echter’s reign, and consider this treatment in relation to that of other minorities and outsiders, in order to gain a better understanding of the Jews’ position amidst the social and political ferment preceding the Thirty Years War.

Between 1585 and 1587, after public interrogations, Protestants were expelled from every town and village in the episcopal territories. Those who still refused submission were forced to sell their immobile property within days, and were ordered to leave the territories together with their families. In March 1586 in Gerolzhofen, a district town, seventy-one burghers were forced to leave within four days. They took with them some 100,000 florins, which represented a considerable financial drain when compared to the 6,392 florins which were later needed for building the new town hall by order of the bishop. In Würzburg itself all Protestant families, among them some of the most prominent and wealthy merchants, were forced to leave in March 1587, and here as well the municipal economy suffered.

Harsher still was the fate of those accused of witchcraft at the instigation of Echter’s confessor, the Jesuit Gerard Phyen. So ruthless were Phyen’s inquisitorial activities that he became legendary throughout the Franconian countryside and was widely despised as a devil in human form. Bishop Echter even tried to extend the persecution of alleged sorceresses beyond the borders of his territories. In 1611 Count Wolfgang zu Castell, sovereign of his territory and a neighbour of Bishop Echter, refused to turn over to the episcopal court several women accused of sorcery. In a letter he adduced the following reasons: while in principle not averse to executing persons truly guilty of sorcery, he could not countenance it in undisclosed cases (i.e. those tried in secret), especially where the guilty plea had been extracted under torture; the poorest of people were still God’s creatures and vulnerable to injustice; and finally, he argued, he himself wouldn’t be able to justify such a procedure when standing trial before God at the Last Judgment. Just as

curchial affirs. . . . In no way would I tolerate two confessions in my territories. . . . The episcopal territories stand and fall with Catholic faith).

3 Brander, *Julius Echter*, 91–92 (on the expulsion of Protestants from episcopal territories), and 129 (on the building of the town hall in Gerolzhofen).