

The Reformation and the Jewish People: Culpable Heritage and Belated Renewal¹

Ulrich Laepple

ulrich_laeppl@arcor.de

I. Theological repentance

In the second of his 95 theses, Martin Luther asserts: “Christian repentance must encompass the whole life.” This includes theology. Although the criterion for theological repentance is the Bible, we sometimes need dramatic events to open our eyes to discover that historical theological and denominational traditions are obstructing our view.

One of the most influential pioneers of Christian-Jewish relations in Germany was Hans-Joachim Kraus.² In his *Rückkehr zu Israel*—“Returning to Israel”—he presents a good deal of his lifelong theological thinking, including the rather surprising statement: “Two events have thrown Christendom into a deep crisis: the extermination of the Jews in Europe and the establishment of the State of Israel.”³

Why should these constitute a crisis for Christendom rather than Israel? Each in its own way demonstrates the end of a Christian theology that, over many centuries, shaped itself in direct opposition to Judaism, the Torah, and the Jewish people. Beginning with the *adversus Judaeos* literature of the second century, Christian doctrine has configured itself in antithesis to everything Jewish. This anti-Judaism proved to be the precursor of the racist anti-Semitism that climaxed in the Holocaust. The Holocaust thus exposed the false direction Christendom took almost from its inception.

How and why has the establishment of the State of Israel contributed to this crisis, however? To the surprise of mainline churches and theologies, the establishment of the Jewish homeland and the vital Jewish life that has flourished within it has brought to light a simple but theologically neglected truth: Am Israel chai!—“The people of Israel live!” Although they had been scattered, forgotten, or hidden, they never vanished, surviving the atrocities of the Middle Ages and the Nazi death camps—which Martin Buber perceived as embodying the “eclipse of God.” They have been always there—and today have their own State!

¹ This is a revised version of a paper originally delivered at the LCJE conference in Berlin, 15 August, 2017.

² See https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans-Joachim_Kraus.

³ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Rückkehr zu Israel: Beiträge zum christlich-jüdischen Dialog* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener-Verlag, 1991), 6.

II. What has all this to do with Luther and the Reformation?

1. *Imagine Luther in Nazi Germany*

Although Luther had no premonition of either the Holocaust or the creation of the State of Israel, let us try for a moment to imagine him as having witnessed both. In the light of the advice he gave the civil authorities in his treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543, he may well have not opposed the measures taken by the Nazis from 1933 through to the *Reichspogromnacht* in 1938.⁴ While it is commonly alleged that the Nazis promoted his later writings, if he had seen the outcome of all this in 1945 and become aware of the murder of 6 million Jews, he might have said: “This is not what I wanted”—just as he responded when confronted with the slaughter of thousands during the peasant revolts in 1526, during which he had encouraged and even incited State violence and oppression.

With respect to the State of Israel, he would most probably have denied and rejected the common current belief that its establishment constitutes a “sign of the faithfulness of the God of Israel towards his Chosen People.”⁵ Applying his Augustinian hermeneutics, he would likely have argued that worldly things—such as an earthly Land—must not be mixed with spiritual truths. An earthly Messiah and kingdom being anathema in his eyes, like many of his followers today, he denounced the Jewish people’s ongoing vocation and eschatological relevance.

2. *“Law and Gospel” as a hermeneutical key*

Like many scholars, I am convinced that the anti-Jewish outbursts in Luther’s later writings reflect deeply-rooted aspects of his theology.⁶ Let me demonstrate this by examining one of its central features, which lies at the basis of much contemporary mainstream Protestant theology—the dialectic between “Law and Gospel.” While “Law” demands obedience to God’s ethical will, the “Gospel” promises forgiveness of sin through Jesus. The expression “Law and Gospel” is thus frequently used as a guiding principle in homiletics and pastoral care.

⁴ Richard Harvey summarizes Luther’s 1543 statements as follows: 1) Burn down synagogues; 2) Destroy Jewish homes; 3) confiscate prayer books and talmudic writings; 4) forbid rabbis from teaching; 5) Abolish safe conduct for Jews; 6) Prohibit Jewish usury; 7) Impose manual labour on the Jews (*Luther and the Jews: Putting Right the Lies* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017], 84). He concludes: “Luther’s unmistakable intention was that the religious and social substructure of Jewish life in German Protestant lands be destroyed and that Jews would be forced to leave as a result” (ibid).

⁵ These are the words of the well-known resolution of the Rhenish Church of 1980 (thesis 2.3): see www.ekir.de/www/service/2509.php (German).

⁶ See Thomas Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014); Matthias Morgenstern, *Martin Luther: Von den Juden und ihren Lügen—Neu bearbeitet und kommentiert* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2016); Harvey, *Luther and the Jews*; et al.

For Luther, however, “Law” is almost synonymous with guilt and sin. “Convicting” people, it is directly linked to God’s curse and wrath, from which people can only be freed by the justifying and gracious gospel of Christ. The Gospel, in other words, is pointless without the Law: where there is no sin, there is no need of forgiveness.

Does this view of the Law—in dogmatic terms, the *usus elencticus legis* (the convicting use and character of the law)—cover all its biblical aspects, however? While it is one feature in Paul’s mind (Gal 3:19–25; Rom 3:20), it does not represent the whole biblical truth. Psalms like Psalm 19 and 119 praise God and rejoice in the good gift of the Torah. Psalm 1 states: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked . . . but his delight is in the law of the LORD and on his law he meditates day and night.” In this context, I recall the words of Orthodox Rabbi Ehrenberg of Berlin, who said to me with brightly shining eyes: “Oh, the Torah has such a wonderful power.” Who would dare contradict him or see reason to correct him on a biblical basis?⁷

Luther often appears to have regarded Moses as the personal enemy of the Christian faith, an opponent of grace and justification—and thus synonymous with God’s curse and wrath. Rather than being an antinomian, however, Paul does not speak against the Law (Rom 3:31). He is proud of his Jewish heritage, often quoting the Torah, and living—in Jewish contexts at least—according to it (cf. Acts 21:17–26; 1 Cor 9:20). We are all familiar with Rom 9:1–5 and his list of the privileges of the Jewish people, especially the covenant and the Torah. His critical arguments against the Torah are motivated more by its use by those who demanded circumcision a necessity of salvation for Gentiles. For Jews, however, the covenant and Torah are twins—as Paul also maintains. If you remove the Torah, you destroy the covenant and the whole history of the Jewish people.⁸

3. “A damned people”

Unfortunately, this is precisely what Luther did, employing a very striking logic: If the Torah—the Law—transpires to be a curse yet lies at the heart of the Jewish faith, then, living “under the law,” Jews must be accursed. He thus claims that the Jews as a people are the living example of God’s wrath and curse. He underlines this with what he regards as historical

⁷ Cf. Ps. 119:105: “Thy word (the law!) is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

⁸ Taking Paul’s criticism of the Torah out of its historical context and making it into an absolute turns him into an anti-Jewish commentator. For an excellent outline of Pauline teaching and practice, see Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 71ff, and Klaus Haacker, Paulus und das Judentum im Galaterbrief, in Klaus Haacker, *Versöhnung mit Israel. Exegetische Beiträge* (Wuppertal: foedus; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 2002), 127–145

proof: they have lost their Temple; they have lived in exile for almost 1,500 years; no one wants them; everybody is against them. Do we need any further proof that this punishment for a terrible sin—namely our Lord’s crucifixion?⁹ From calling them a “poor people” in his first treatise (1523), he then goes on to designate them in his late writings as “damned.”

Whether as “poor” or “damned,” however, they remain for him the corporative manifestation of God’s wrath and curse. Only by forsaking Judaism and converting to Christianity can they be saved from this deplorable state. Those who refuse to do remain under God’s wrath, requiring the authorities to adopt measures of “sharp mercy” (what a strange expression!) towards them. In other words: none!

4. Disinheritance

Luther was not a Marcionite, however, but a biblical scholar who interpreted the whole Bible. Much of his biblical exegesis, especially on the Psalms, is wonderful and beautiful. The Christological lenses through which he read the “Old Testament,” however, led him to interpret everything good he found there to be for the Church’s benefit. All the bad things thus related solely to the Jews, or served as a warning for the Christians not to get judged like the Jews. Not only did he thus disinherit them but he also stole the Tanach from them. A fundamental biblical insight got lost in this process—the validity of the covenant of the people of Israel from Abraham up until their final salvation (Rom 11:26). In the face of this covenantal history, we must acknowledge: This covenant, with all its dramatic history until the end, stands and will stand as the mark of God’s faithfulness—not His wrath. While there *is* a broken covenant, judgement, and wrath, as Paul elaborates in such moving words in Romans 9–11, mercy prevails over judgement (Rom 11:25ff, 32f). Luther thus not only “paganizes” the Jewish people by denying them all their prerogatives but also demonizes them to promote the Church. This is blatant supersessionism.

5. The effects upon contemporary theology

The Lutheran concept of “Law and Gospel”—which in Lutheran thought implies Jewish disinheritance—was influential right through the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Adolf von Harnack, Emanuel Hirsch, and Paul Althaus. It thus affected virtually all Protestant

⁹ See Luther’s introduction to *On the Jews and Their Lies*, 4f. Unfortunately, he fails to perceive that in making this argument he falls back upon a *theologia gloriae* that he firmly elsewhere denied, forsaking the *theologia crucis* that he so fiercely advocated in general.

Christianity. In a more radical, Marcionite form—i.e., the complete rejection of the “Old Testament”—it became the theology of the “Deutsche Christen” in Nazi Germany.¹⁰

Yet it can also be presented in a much more “innocent” and subtle fashion. On visiting a Lutheran church once, the pastor proudly pointed out its windows to me. “On the left-hand side,” he told me, “on the northern side, there are the windows with the stories of the Old Testament. But on the southern side, to the right, where the light comes in, you see the New Testament stories.” Needless to say, the left-hand side windows were in the shadow most of the day.¹¹ I took a deep breath. What was he telling me? That Israel was and is without light, without any insight of who God is and what Israel and the Jewish faith stand for?

Does not our inheritance as Christians come from what God has done on the “left-hand side”—the Hebrew Bible? Is not salvation “from the Jews” (John 4:22)? Do our basic ethical principles not derive from that side, too—the Ten Commandments? Do we not find sheer grace and justification by faith also on the left-hand side—God’s eternal love, mercy, and forgiveness: “Bless the LORD who forgives all iniquity, who heals all your diseases who redeems you, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy” (Ps 103:4)? Do we not get deeply-moving examples of prayer that we use in our services with joy and thankfulness from that “side”? Do we not learn from them the language of grief and lament in affliction as much as that of gratitude and praise? Millions of people find comfort in the words of Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me.”

We must never forget that the Psalms first constituted the prayer book of the Jewish people before they became also a Christian book. The Jewish people endured the atrocities of the Middle Ages with the words of these psalms on their lips and, later, on the way to the gas chambers. Some of my Messianic friends sometimes call those Jews “unbelievers” because they do not believe in Yeshua. I think this is not only hurtful but simply untrue. Adopting this view disinherits the Jews anew by adopting an unjustified attitude of superiority.

III. The Reformed branch of the Reformation

Finally, let me take a look at the Reformed branch of the Reformation. The French Christians who were persecuted by the Catholic Church—Calvin and the Huguenots—adopted a very different attitude towards the Jewish people. While the Lutheran Reformation came about

¹⁰ A Lutheran theologian at the theological faculty of the Humboldt-University in Berlin recently also caused a great uproar when he suggested that the Church should remove the “Old Testament” from the biblical canon: see www.theologie.hu-berlin.de/de/professuren/professuren/st/AT.

¹¹ The biblical metaphors in Rom 11:13ff are not “shadow” and “light”—platonic concepts—but “root,” “trunk,” and “branches”—organic images.

with the help of the State authorities, thereby creating a “marriage between throne and altar”—an intimacy that frequently compromised clear witness to the Gospel—those who suffered expulsion regarded themselves as sharing a common destiny with the wandering and homeless Jewish people. Calvin knew that such suffering was a sign of election rather than rejection. He refused to separate the Jewish people from Jesus Christ and thus the Jewish people from the other “wandering people of God”—the Church. For him, the Jewish people remained the “first born” in the *familia Dei*. He also clearly saw that Jer 31:31–34 refers to the “house of Israel” and the “house of Judah,” the “new covenant” therefore not being the sole inheritance of the Church.¹² As Hans-Joachim Kraus notes, Calvin is here the “voice of one crying in the wilderness”—a lone yet vigorous objector to mainstream theological tradition, in line with his oft-expressed view that God’s covenant with Israel is eternal persistence and will never be annulled.¹³ While Calvin’s Israelology remained within the classical superior/inferior framework, he knew better than Luther that the two peoples—the Jews and the Church—are theologically one in God’s household despite their historical separation.¹⁴

V. Final remarks

Mark Kinzer, a prominent American Messianic Jew, draws a striking Christological conclusion from this “togetherness.” Isaiah 40ff speaks of the people of Israel as the “Servant of God.” In the New Testament, the “Servant of God” is Yeshua. Does this not suggest a union in which both—Israel and “their” (as well as our) Yeshua—belong together in the inseparable, mysterious way at which Marc Chagall intimates in his famous painting “White Crucifixion”?¹⁵ I believe these facts point to the need to continue our theological investigation and exploration into how the two people of God belong together and what separates them from each other. Above all, we must seek out what they testify and witness of one another in the light of the One God who is theirs and has become ours. This is even more true, as Mark Kinzer observes, in light of the fact that “the (apparent) Jewish no to Yeshua has

¹² See Kraus, *Rückkehr zu Israel*, 189–99.

¹³ *Ibid*, 193.

¹⁴ See Calvin’s astonishing statement: “Who, then, will presume to represent the Jews as destitute of Christ, when we know that they were parties to the Gospel covenant, which has its only foundation in Christ? Who will presume to make them aliens to the benefit of gratuitous salvation, when we know that they were instructed in the doctrine of justification by faith?” [German: “Wer will sich aber erkühnen, die Kenntnis Christi den Juden abzusprechen, mit denen doch der Bund des Evangeliums geschlossen worden ist, dessen einziger Grund Christus ist? Wer will sie von der Wohltat des uns aus Gnaden zukommenden Heils ausschließen, da ihnen doch die Lehre von der Glaubensgerechtigkeit zuteil geworden ist?”] (*Institutio* II, 10,4):

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/calvin-institutes-christianity/book2/chapter-10.html>.

¹⁵ Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 228f.

not expelled his Messianic presence from Israel, and the (actual) Christian no to the Jewish people and Judaism has not expelled Israel's presence from the church's inner sanctum."¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid, 233.