



Luther's Shadow

01.05.2021 | Christian Wiese

Jewish and Protestant Interpretations of the Reformer's Writings on the Jews, 1917–1933[1]

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography on the reception of Martin Luther's writings on Jews and Judaism, his *Judenschriften*, is marked by an ongoing contestation concerning the reformer's religious and political views. Did his reflections on the Jews constitute the core of his theology or were they merely a marginal aspect of his thinking? Was the anti-Jewish obsession that emerged ever more clearly at the later stages of his biography rooted in his theological convictions or was it triggered by contemporary social and political circumstances? The issue of continuity or discontinuity between earlier writings such as *Daß Jesus ein geborener Jude sei* (1523) and the viciously anti-Jewish writings published in 1543, too, remains an open question.

In one well-known view, Luther's initial 'tolerant' attitude underwent a dramatic change in response to crises within the Reformation movement, personal disillusionment in the face of Jewish resistance to his missionary intentions, and the insistence of Jewish scholars on the legitimacy of a distinctively Jewish exegesis that opposed the Christian truth claims. An alternative interpretation, which enjoys wide currency today amongst scholars, assumes a continuity between Luther's underlying theological stance on Jews and Judaism and his understanding of the Christological meaning of the Hebrew Bible and his doctrine of justification.[\[2\]](#)

First and foremost, Luther's *Judenschriften* must be seen in the context of late medieval perceptions of Judaism and the contemporary socio-political practice vis-à-vis the Jewish minority. It is equally critical, however, to consider them against their reception in the following centuries, from the time of Lutheran Orthodoxy via the emergence of Pietism and the Enlightenment up through the nineteenth-century Jewish emancipation and eventually the Weimar Republic and the Nazi period. As the image of "Luther's Shadow" in the title of this essay suggests, Luther's attitude towards Jews and Judaism strongly influenced – and overshadowed – Jewish-Protestant relations, particularly in the German context, and is part of the complex history of modern anti-Semitism. In different historical and cultural contexts this shadow took manifold, partly contradictory forms, reflecting the specific religious and political perspectives from which Luther's writings were viewed. With regard to the impact of these forms on debates concerning the status of Jews and Judaism in German society, it is important to ask whether and how they were discussed among both Protestants and Jews prior to and after the emergence of modern political, cultural, and racial anti-Semitism.[\[3\]](#) This article examines a crucial stage of those debates, mainly the period 1917–1933. Both bracketing years featured highly symbolic Luther celebrations that lend themselves to an analysis of the theological and political readings of the *Judenschriften* among Jewish and Protestant scholars, as well as those that emerged in anti-Semitic circles.

While the topic of Protestant interpretations of Luther's views vis-à-vis anti-Semitic propaganda has received a great deal of scholarly scrutiny, research on corresponding Jewish perspectives is still a desideratum, both with regard to the *Judenschriften* and to Luther's broader thought. It is worth noting that Heinrich Bornkamm (1901–1977), in his seminal study, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (1955), includes Catholic sources but does not even hint at the existence of Jewish readings of Luther. The failure to do so may be related to an inclination of Protestant church historians at that time to elide the very notion of active and creative Jewish participation in German intellectual discourse.[\[4\]](#) The 1970s and 80s witnessed a change in the

perception of Jewish responses to Luther's writings on the Jews.^[5] Nonetheless, a broad approach to Jewish readings of Luther in the modern period is still in its nascence.^[6]

The present article aims neither to present a systematic account nor even to summarize the multifaceted Jewish interpretations of Luther's significance for German intellectual and political culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or to analyse the specifically Jewish character of these readings. Rather, after a brief look at the two dominant trends of that discourse, it will ask to what extent Jewish thinkers took notice of Luther's *Judenschriften*, which strategies they deployed to counter nationalistic and anti-Semitic narratives, and what distinguished these strategies from contemporary Protestant ones. The sources indicate that the Jewish readings contained two main features: a critique of the disastrous consequences of the anti-Jewish elements in Luther's theology, and a passionate attempt to oppose the dramatically increasing tendency among German intellectuals since the 1880s to depict Luther as the crown witness for anti-Semitic discrimination by insisting on an idealized counternarrative: that of Luther as a symbolic embodiment of a tradition of tolerance, freedom of conscience, emancipation, and pluralism. In light of the almost complete absence of positive response to this interpretation on the part of Protestant theologians, however, the question of its illusory nature naturally arises.

Between Idealization and Historical Critique: Jewish Readings

Since the early nineteenth century, Jewish readings of Luther have oscillated between two poles: a critique of the reformer as the forefather of political bondage, deference, and spiritual impoverishment, as presented with satirical poignancy by Ludwig Börne (1786–1837) in 1830 in letters from Paris, and an enthusiastic appraisal of Luther as a harbinger of the Enlightenment, as articulated in Heinrich Heine's (1797–1856) essay *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1834). Jewish intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries favored the latter view, which permitted them to advance the idea that the symbolic figure of Protestant culture in Germany had been a pioneer of religious tolerance, including Jewish emancipation.

Of course, such a reading was far from those that showed Luther as the hero of Germanness, an interpretation that dominated German national historiography in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This tendency to portray Luther as the embodiment of the German national character turned out to be inherently exclusive and – explicitly or implicitly – anti-Jewish. Nationalistic interpretations such as those articulated by the historian Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896) in his 1883 essay "Luther und die deutsche Nation"^[7] clearly demonstrated that Jewish and non-Jewish readings of Luther were developing in clearly opposite directions.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Jewish historians offered a compelling counternarrative, and they did so in two distinct ways. Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), who was in constant critical dialogue with cultural Protestantism,^[8] held that the Reformation and Protestant thinking were not merely constitutive components of Europe's intellectual and political progress but an important link between Jewish tradition and German culture. In a 1917 essay entitled "Zu Martin Luthers Gedächtnis," Cohen referred to the reformer as the "most powerful creator of Germanness" and as a symbol of the intellectual overcoming of the Middle Ages. Luther's translation of the Bible, Cohen argued, had inscribed the Jewish spirit into Western culture, rendering the Hebrew Bible a "tree of life" "for all modern intellectual life, the root from which all the strengths of the newer nations had sprung and have been nourished."^[9]

Cohen was well aware that many aspects of both the historical figure of Luther and the Reformation contradicted his conception. He insisted, however, that it was not each and every utterance of Luther, who was a child of his times, that was decisive, but rather the *idea* of the Reformation, the impetus that idea gave to the development of German thought. With the aid of this conceptual abstraction, Cohen was able to appropriate Luther as part of a Biblical-prophetic

tradition extending from Plato and Maimonides to Kant and onward, including his own neo-Kantian interpretation of Judaism – the guarantor of Judaism's relevance for the "German spirit." The fulfilment of this interpretation, that is, Luther's significance for a future completion of Jewish emancipation and cultural integration by virtue of a synthesis of "Germanness" and Jewishness, would have required a response from the German Protestant side; in effect, an acknowledgment that Judaism was part of German culture. The absence of such a response was the unstated catalyst for the ensuing debates between German Jewish scholars concerning the historical influence of Luther's writings about the Jews.

A much more critical image of Luther was presented by Leo Baeck (1873– 1956), who had emerged as a prominent voice in the polemical controversies between Jewish scholarship and liberal Protestantism about the "essence" of Judaism and Christianity that had taken place since the turn of the century.^[10] In Baeck's essay on "Romantische Religion" (1922), Luther appears as championing an amoral "romantic" religion, one whose emphasis on the Paulinic and Augustinian *sola fide* reduces believers to passivity, fixated on the salvation of their own souls.^[11] Judaism, by contrast, is presented as embodying the "classical" religion that views human beings as subjects of their own moral actions, endowing them with responsibility for worldly justice. In his lecture "Heimgegangene des Krieges," which Baeck delivered in 1918 at the *Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin, he concurred with his Protestant colleague Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) about Luther. According to Troeltsch, Luther, the admirable religious genius, was at the same time a man whose intolerance was rooted in the Middle Ages and whose conservative patriarchal thought had helped to perpetuate both authoritarian rule and political passivity, with disastrous consequences for German political history.^[12] Baeck echoed this view, emphasizing that the "Prussian religion," now fortunately rendered obsolete by the revolution of 1918, had been characterized by a "rigid concept of authority and subservience."^[13] Baeck's hope was that, with the end of the *Kaiserreich*, Luther's "un-Protestant" attitude,^[14] which had moved Lutheranism far from Judaism ("As Jewish as Luther had begun, his subsequent path led him to a point remote from everything Jewish"^[15]) might be finally overcome through a fulfilment of the "spirit of Enlightenment" that was so closely related to the "Jewish spirit."^[16] Only then would a new culture arise in Germany, a culture more conducive both to the country's Jewish minority and to dialogue between Judaism and Christianity.

Strikingly, the question of Luther's anti-Semitism, which dominated Jewish-Christian debates about the reformer after 1945, was more or less neglected by the majority of aforementioned German-Jewish authors. One reason for this may be that in the Protestant domain, Luther's *Judenschriften* were only rediscovered and discussed in more detail with the late nineteenth-century emergence of both modern political anti-Semitism and a corresponding nationalist approach to the reformer.^[17] Additionally, with their focus on integration into German culture, many Jewish intellectuals – at least those following the line from Heinrich Heine to Hermann Cohen – preferred to perceive Luther as a forerunner of Enlightenment and emancipation. Even those, from Ludwig Börne to Leo Baeck, who portrayed him as an embodiment of Protestant servitude to the authoritarian state, refrained from accentuating his attitude towards Jews and Judaism. The early nineteenth-century German-Jewish historians who could not ignore Luther's writing on Judaism and the Jews, because the period of the Reformation played an important role in their representation of Jewish history, tended to sidestep the anti-Jewish dimension of the reformer's theology. In 1828, for example, Isaak Markus Jost's (1793–1860) *Geschichte der Israeliten* mentioned *Daß Jesus Christus ein geborener Jude sei* only, and omitted any reference to the later writings.^[18]

The first Jewish historian to deal explicitly with the topic, thus fundamentally changing Jewish perceptions of Martin Luther, was Heinrich Graetz (1817– 1891). In his eleven-volume *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart* (1853–1876), Graetz tried to explain why Luther, in contrast to the late medieval politics of discrimination and persecution, "so forcefully administered to the Jews' needs in his first flare of reform" and then suddenly repeated "all the

false tales of poisoned wells, the murder of Christian children and the use of human blood” in his later years.^[19] For Graetz, the source of this apparent *volte-face* was Luther's bitterness in view of the failure of the majority of the Jews to embrace the Protestant interpretation of the Christian Gospel, combined with his profound misperception of Judaism's moral character. As a consequence, Graetz argued, the reformer poisoned the Protestant world “with his anti-Semitic testament” for centuries to come.^[20]

Later scholarship has nuanced this picture, concentrating more on Luther's theological motives and less on his personal ones. Ludwig Geiger (1848–1919), who had ample familiarity with the relevant Renaissance, humanistic, and Reformation sources, mentioned Luther's disappointment at failed missionary efforts but foregrounded something else: a gradual realization on the reformer's part of a fundamental Jewish-Christian disagreement regarding how to read the Hebrew Bible.^[21]

It was in the early twentieth century that the question how to understand the discrepancy between Luther's writings from 1523 and 1543 and its significance for contemporary debates on Jewish integration and anti-Semitism came to the fore. At the end of his *Jewish Encyclopedia* article of 1916 on Martin Luther, historian Gotthard Deutsch (1859–1921) observed that “The wholly different attitudes that Luther showed at different times in relation to Jews made him, during the controversies surrounding anti-Semitism at the end of the nineteenth century, an authority who was cited equally by friends and foes of Jews.”^[22]

Paying close attention to Jewish voices in that period reveals that, for the most part, the German Jewish authors writing on Luther favoured a “two periods” or “disappointment” theory over one that posited a theological continuity between his earlier and later attitudes.^[23] In an influential study published in 1911, the historian Reinhold Lewin (1888–1943) concluded that Luther, in his later years, had indeed left his earlier tolerance behind, marking a clear caesura between a ‘pro-Jewish’ and an ‘anti-Jewish’ period in his theological development. Even though Lewin argued that the position of the early Luther ought to be relevant for contemporary Protestantism, he had no doubts regarding the historical impact of his later ideas: “Whoever, for whatever motives, writes against the Jews, believes they have the right to refer triumphantly to Luther.”^[24]

A decade and a half later, the criticism levelled by Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) in his *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes* is considerably sharper. For Dubnow, Luther's early stance on the Jews, rather than being an expression of true tolerance, reflected a desire “to win them for Christianity of the most recent order.” His disillusionment concerning the fulfilment of his naïve missionary hopes then transformed his original goodwill into pathological hatred of Jews and Judaism – a kind of “judeophobia”:

The people of the Bible, from whom Christ and the apostles originated, refuse to join the Lutheran church and thus confirm the divine mission of its founder, so – Luther concluded – they were incorrigible and deserved all the suffering and persecution to which they had been exposed in the Christian countries. This was the logic of the events that caused Luther to swiftly discard the mask of friendliness towards the Jews, and to declare a fight to the death on Judaism.^[25]

In light of Dubnow's argument, it is interesting to note that the notion of a rupture in Luther's position appears to have gained acceptance in proportion to the extent to which – starting at the beginning of the twentieth century and then with increased vehemence in the Weimar period – anti-Semitic representatives of German nationalism adopted Luther's anti-Jewish writings. The more anti-Semites declared the latter the crux of his theology and a basis for the political treatment of the Jewish minority in Germany, the more Jewish intellectuals insisted on the primacy of the reformer's ‘pro-Jewish’ early writings. In his essay “Luther und die Juden,” for instance,

published for the 1917 commemoration of the Reformation, the historian Samuel Krauss (1866–1948), who taught at the *Israelitisch- Theologische Lehranstalt* in Vienna, thus characterized Luther as one of the worst anti-Semites of his age, his “great, unrestrained hate” for the Jews being the result of both theological intolerance and the naïveté with which he anticipated “Judaism merging into Christianity.”^[26] At the same time, Krauss rendered homage to Luther, depicting him as an advocate of integration and equal rights that had become an inexorable force in modern society:

The principles that he [Luther] introduced to the whole world at the start of his career, and which were also purer and more just than those put forward in his old age, distorted as they were by hate and bitterness, principles of enlightenment and of the free development of the human intellect, including the demand that the Jews must not be subject to either psychological or physical compulsion, turned out to be powerful factors of the subsequent period, which could not be banished even by Luther's own faults.^[27]

Protestant Readings in an Age of Völkisch Anti-Semitism

We find an echo of such idealized Jewish interpretations of Luther's early writings in the rare efforts of Weimar Republic Protestant theologians to oppose the usurpation of Luther's anti-Jewish writings in the context of nationalistic and anti-Semitic positions. One such effort was made by the Stuttgart Lutheran theologian Eduard Lamparter (1860 –1945), in an extraordinary text published in 1928 under the title *Evangelische Kirche und Judentum. Ein Beitrag zum christlichen Verständnis von Judentum und Antisemitismus*. Lamparter, who was a leading figure in the *Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus* and a proponent of liberal democracy, here lamented Luther's betrayal of his own “just and truly Protestant attitude to the Jewish question,” a betrayal that had led the Protestant church in a false direction.^[28] He praised the young Luther for his high regard for the “Old Testament” and for having objected out of compassion and a sense of justice to the prevailing late medieval policies towards the Jews. In Lamparter's view, it was “one of the most painful things, that this great German, who previously had found such warm words full of sympathy, justice and love for the Jews,” then “developed a hatred for them so blind” that he condemned them out of hand.^[29] In so doing, Lamparter asserted, Luther had done violence to his own principles of religious freedom and freedom of conscience and had become the “principal witness for modern anti-Semitism.” Contemporary Protestant theology, therefore, needed to be won over for the original and true Luther, “who at the pinnacle of his reforming work for the oppressed, despised and ostracised, stood up for them with such warm words and so urgently commended to Christianity brotherly love as the utmost obligation, including in relation to Jews.”^[30] For Lamparter, this Luther stood aligned with the Lutheran tradition of a ‘mission to the Jews’ characterized by ‘love for Israel’ that had been particularly emphasized by Pietism;^[31] with the Enlightenment; and with other theologians who had battled against anti-Semitism.

Lamparter's plea for a positive reception of the young Luther's position was coupled with a strong censure of modern anti-Semitism, an attempt to lay the theological foundation for an appreciation of postbiblical Judaism's religious, ethical, and cultural achievements, and a call to overcome traditional stereotypes as well as to discover and accentuate shared values. His reflections on the Reformation, more than a mere rejection of anti-Jewish implications of Luther's theology, went far beyond what those calling for a friendly ‘mission to the Jews’ considered possible; and it was certainly beyond what the early Luther had in mind. The wealth of religious and ethical affinities between Judaism and Christianity, Lamparter argued, ought to oblige Christians to maintain a relationship of “peace and mutual respect”: “the duty to acknowledge Judaism as a divinely ordained path towards the solution of the most crucial questions of life” was, therefore, at least as important as the task “to hype Christianity amongst the Jews.” Without explicitly relinquishing the idea of a missionary testimony for Christianity's truth, he acknowledged Judaism's right to be

seen as a valuable religious and cultural tradition and as a legitimate part of a pluralistic German society and culture:

Amongst the nations which have a share in modernity's intellectual culture, foreign hands may not interfere with the sanctuary of personal religious conviction and decision. Judaism is an awe-inspiring phenomenon of cultural and religious history. We will make the deepest impression on our Jewish fellow Germans when we do not withhold this admission. The easiest way to win over their hearts is to refute anti-Semitism as an attitude that contradicts the true spirit of Christianity.[\[32\]](#)

Lamparter's thoughts on Luther, published a few years before the Nazis seized power, can be characterized as an attempt to overcome the increasingly dark shadow of Luther's anti-Semitism through an idealizing evocation of an enlightened tradition of love and religious freedom: qualities the liberal theologian saw as rooted in the Reformation. We now know that Luther never came close to a truly positive theological acknowledgment of Judaism but rather, despite the more benevolent tones of the early Reformation period, he held a negative image of Jews and the Jewish religion throughout his life. Thus, Lamparter, like his Jewish colleagues, strongly idealized the reformer's position. Just as anti-Semites used the later Luther to legitimize their hatred, both Jewish and Protestant advocates of German Jewish emancipation were determined to wrest as benign a *Weltanschauung* as possible from the early Luther's ideas.[\[33\]](#)

Jewish and Liberal Protestant observers were, of course, painfully aware that, since the end of the nineteenth century, a completely different – nationalistic and *völkisch* – interpretation of Luther had emerged. Furthermore, they understood that much of contemporary Protestant theology, due to its inherent anti-Jewish inclinations, could hardly counteract that trend.[\[34\]](#) The immediate context of that development was the amalgamation of modern political anti-Semitism with racist and social Darwinist theories, as well as a critique of modernity rooted in cultural pessimism. More than ever before, the Jewish minority was seen as the embodiment of all the phenomena *völkisch* thinking was fighting against: capitalistic mass society, socialism, liberal democracy, individualism, pluralism, and the notion of humanitarian values. Under the influence of racial theories, anti-Semitic thinking amalgamated into the 'Aryan myth,' including its negative countermyth of a Semitic race.[\[35\]](#) The defining characteristics of this ideology were the conviction that the Jews were a biologically inferior and destructive race, and a dualistic worldview, according to which the course of Western history, including the contemporary social, political, and cultural conflicts of modern society, was to be explained by the profound antagonism between the Germanic and the Jewish race. This radical variant of modern anti-Semitism developed into an ideology that tended to turn also against the Christian religion and her Jewish roots or, as in Houston Stewart Chamberlain's (1855–1927) *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (1899), focused on an "Aryanization" and "dejudaization" of Christianity.[\[36\]](#) Such anti-Semitism drew on an abundance of sources providing political, racial, and religious arguments, including Luther's *Judenschriften*.

A paradigmatic example of this increasingly influential phenomenon is Theodor Fritsch (1852–1933), one of the most important and infamous representatives of radical *völkisch* anti-Semitism during the German *Kaiserreich* and the Weimar Republic.[\[37\]](#) Fritsch sought to systematically undermine the position of the Jews within German society by means of a hateful defamation of their religion, character, and mentality. Already in 1887, Fritsch had published his *Antisemiten-Katechismus*, which was later widely disseminated under the title *Handbuch der Judenfrage*. In this pamphlet, Fritsch compiled copious material depicting the Jewish minority as a dangerous enemy of the German people, and called for a "holy war" against Judaism's "evil spirit" as well as for the preservation of the "highest values of Aryan humanity."[\[38\]](#) The struggle against the Jewish religion played a crucial role in his political agitation. The Jewish emancipation, he claimed, had been granted on the basis of the utterly false assumption "that the Jewish religion had the same moral foundations as the Christian [tradition]."[\[39\]](#) He projected his obsessive anti-

Semitic fantasies of a “Jewish world domination” onto the allegedly secret contents of rabbinical literature, using the accusation that the Talmud denigrated non-Jews as a class and permitted Jews all manner of criminal acts against them, including economic exploitation and ritual murder. The demonization of Judaism by means of traditional Christian stereotypes served to mobilize and reinforce existing anti-Semitic emotions. Fritsch extended his attacks against the concept of God in the Hebrew Bible, construing an animus between the ‘God of Judaism,’ a criminal idol, and the ‘true God of Christianity.’ In his pamphlet, *Der falsche Gott* (1916; first published in 1911 under the title *Beweis-Material gegen Jahwe*), Fritsch referred to Martin Luther, who had “crusaded against the dishonourable strangers with the sharpest weapons,” as a model for an appropriate attitude towards the Jews.^[40] He quoted extensively from Luther’s polemics, emphasizing particularly his insistence on burning the synagogues and expelling the Jews as a means in the battle against the “poisonous, malicious snakes, assassins, and children of the devil.”^[41] Fritsch slandered Jewish citizens as heinous enemies of the German people, praising the “German Luther” as a savior who had bound Christianity and Germanness together and exposed the Christian opposition to Judaism, which had been covered up by the “Judaized” Catholic church.^[42] While he was not in the slightest degree interested in Luther’s actual theological arguments, the anti-Semitic demagogue shamelessly exploited the reformer’s writings for his own tirades of hate.

As an early representative of a *völkisch* appropriation of Luther’s late *Judenschriften*, Fritsch can be seen as a portent of what was to follow. Another anti-Semitic author, Alfred Falb, who published a pamphlet on *Luther und die Juden* in 1921, was clearly influenced by Fritsch as well as by the infamous book, *Die große Täuschung*, published in the same year by the Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch (1850 –1922). “Luther the liberator,” Delitzsch claimed, even though he was not equipped with modern knowledge about Judaism and the nature of the races, had already intuitively – by virtue of the “indignation of his Germanic character” – taken the path towards the insights of anti-Semitism, but unfortunately had stopped halfway through the journey.^[43] However, Falb added, it should be appreciated that Luther had at least developed from a “pronounced friend of the Jews to their sharpest adversary.”^[44] The innocent Luther of 1523 had been too naïve to perceive the intrusion of the “Jewish spirit” into contemporary Christianity and to grasp the racial origins of Jewish usury. He had falsely assumed that it was possible to explain the shameful activities of the Jews as a religious delusion that could be overcome, rather than recognizing “that all our thinking and feeling, doing and acting [emerges from] the deepest foundations of our innate nature, which arises from our blood.”^[45] The reformer had, therefore, held onto the belief in Jesus’ Jewish descent, whereas modern scholarship had now clearly demonstrated his Galilean-Aryan roots.

In the main section of his vitriolic pamphlet that is devoted to the topic, “Luther as an enemy of the Jews,” Falb quotes extensively from Luther’s anti-Jewish writings and links them to contemporary anti-Semitic propaganda. The reformer’s acerbic attacks against the Jews can be explained by his anticipation of the “future Judaization of Christianity”^[46] as well as by his perception of the vindictiveness and bloodthirstiness of the Jewish people. He should have recognized that Israel, rather than being God’s chosen people, was the people of an evil demon.^[47] At least Luther’s followers in the present ought to understand that everything they loved in the “Old Testament” was “in reality merely Luther’s poetic word and Luther’s soul,”^[48] whereas it was in actuality nothing but Jewish idolatry. Despite his naïveté, however, Luther had asked himself why it was even possible that such a “Barbarian people” existed on Earth, and his powerful turning against Judaism was thus highly significant for “Aryan humankind”: “as an innermost outrage and abrupt rebellion against the Jewish-oriental violation of [human] nature, as a first awakening of the Germanic soul to an Aryan knowledge of God and rebirth.”^[49] While Luther had expressed this on an emotional level rather than as a clear political insight, he had at least sensed in his Germanic soul that the “God of the Jews” was not the God of Christian love, but an abominable idol. Contemporary – “Judaized” – Protestant theology, however, had distorted the reformer’s message rather than reinterpreting it in the light of contemporary knowledge. Hence, they had irresponsibly silenced Luther’s true theological legacy – “his fear for the future of the German soul, which, as he

clearly anticipated, was in danger of being suffocated by the claws of the creeping demon of usury.”[\[50\]](#)

Numerous examples of this discourse of hate might be listed: the recurring accusation, for instance in the *völkisch* writings of Mathilde Ludendorff (1877–1966), in Arthur Dinter's (1876–1948) “197 Thesen zur Vollendung der Reformation (1926), and in the abundance of inflammatory anti-Semitic writings which stated that granting Jews equal rights had been a terrible betrayal of Luther. The church, then, had to get back to his late writings, his “unveiling of the secret goals of the Jews,” and his “fiery sermons devoted to the defensive battle against Judaism,” as Ludendorff phrased it in 1928.[\[51\]](#) Since 1917 at the latest, *völkisch* as well as German-Christian circles had adopted Luther's anti-Jewish polemics as an integral part of their agenda. The voices that made him a forerunner of racial anti-Semitism range from the *Bund für deutsche Kirche*, founded in 1921, to the *Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen* that had emerged in 1932.[\[52\]](#) Their sole objection was that Luther's reformation had not been radical enough, stopping short of eliminating all Jewish traces from Christianity, that is, from abandoning the “Old Testament” and discovering the “Aryan Jesus.”[\[53\]](#) During the Nazi period, such attitudes were used to justify anti-Jewish violence; for instance, when the Thuringian bishop Martin Sasse (1890–1942) portrayed the November pogrom in 1938 as a fulfilment of Luther's political suggestions to the Saxonian authorities:

On 10 November 1938, on Luther's birthday, the synagogues are burning in Germany. [...] In this hour the voice of the man needs to be heard, who, as the prophet of the Germans in the 16th century, once started, due to his ignorance, as a friend of the Jews, and who then, driven by his conscience, his experiences, and reality, became the greatest anti-Semite of his age, the warning voice of his people with regard to the Jews.[\[54\]](#)

In this vein, it might be mentioned that Alfred Rosenberg (1892–1946), whose views strongly influenced those of Hitler,[\[55\]](#) took a completely different direction in his infamous book, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1930). In this work, Rosenberg characterized Luther's enterprise and the Reformation as a step towards the “Judaization” of the German people: by translating the Bible, particularly the “Old Testament,” into German and making it a Christian *Volksbuch*, Luther had permeated the German people with the “Jewish spirit.” Thus, in one of the most influential articulations of Nazi ideology, Luther was not depicted as an anti-Semite but as a “friend of the Jews.” By contrast, the German-Christian and *völkisch* circles in the Protestant church were eager to demonstrate the opposite, appropriating Luther's writings for their own anti-Semitic purposes and interpreting the principle of *ecclesia semper reformanda* as a means to “de Judaize” Christianity.

More interesting in this context than the radical racist discourse that instrumentalized Luther in order to justify anti-Semitic slander, demonization, hatred, and violence are the voices of those more moderate Protestant theologians who attempted to offset or limit the radical *völkisch* distortions of Luther's thinking. Most of them, however, did so without refraining from legitimizing their own anti-Semitic thought patterns in theological terms by referring to the reformer's ideas. While they aimed mainly to defend Christianity against the potential anti-Christian implications of anti-Semitism, in only very rare cases was this effort accompanied by genuine solidarity with Jews and Judaism.

How difficult it was for the majority of the German Protestant theologians to dissociate themselves from *völkisch* perspectives can be appreciated by looking at a series of articles the Rostock Lutheran church historian, Wilhelm Walther (1846–1924), published in 1921 under the title “Luther und die Juden” as a response to the aforementioned pamphlet by Alfred Falb. While rejecting the latter's contempt for the “Old Testament,” Walther articulated clearly anti-Semitic views. “The repulsive element of today's anti-Semitism,” he argued, was “that, in order to thoroughly denigrate the Jews, it also relentlessly makes the Old Testament contemptible. That way it only

wreaks havoc, diminishing the victorious power of its legitimate fight.”^[56] According to the theologian, it was wrong to project Luther’s justified accusations against the Talmud and the Jews of his time onto the “Old Testament.” Many Christians were distressed by such attacks as it was undeniable that “the national flaws of the Jewish people” were obvious in the biblical stories, and yet Jesus had been loyal to the “Old Testament” in his message as well as in his deeds.^[57] If the anti-Semites thought that “the weapon of ridiculing the Old Testament was indispensable for their battle against the threat emerging from Judaism,” they should be aware that “the same Luther who so strongly valued the Old Testament, extracting so many blessings from it for our sake, clearly recognized the Jews’ flaws and the threat they represented and warned against them in powerful language.”^[58] For Walther, the reception of Luther’s thinking was supposed to teach Christians to respect the “Old Testament,” but to despise postbiblical and contemporary Judaism as well as the Jews as a social group. Everything else about anti-Semitic prejudice and politics was perfectly justified:

As harshly as the anti-Semites contradict Luther [with regard to his appreciation of the Old Testament], as much they have the right to refer to his sayings as far as their battle against the Jewish spirit is concerned. By referring to Luther they can make a strong impression, particularly since the latter, for a long period, took a much friendlier stance regarding the Jews, i.e. it needed many saddening experiences to prompt his harsh judgment about them.^[59]

In the following passages of his lectures, Walther defended the anti-Jewish polemics of Luther’s later writings while underscoring their contemporary relevance. The reformer, he argued, had no choice but to change course with respect to his position on the Jews: first, the Jews of his time blinded themselves to the truth of the Gospel, and second, his research into rabbinical literature opened his eyes to the rabbis’ acid mockery of Christianity in general and Jesus in particular. This enmity towards Christianity, Walther claimed, was also characteristic of contemporary Jewry. The anti-Semites were right in “pointing to the most recent events as a confirmation of Luther’s assertions, since Jewish leaders of the Revolution, particularly in Russia [...], have unscrupulously shed as much Christian blood as they deemed useful in order to gain and secure their rule.”^[60] Furthermore, Walther implicitly questioned the entire process of Jewish emancipation in the modern period, again pointing to Luther’s negative experiences:

Were the consequences more favourable than those which Luther needed to deal with after having expressed similar thoughts in his writing in 1523 with its positive attitude towards the Jews? He came to the conclusion that the Jews would become the masters, and the Christians their servants.^[61]

Walther thus corroborated anti-Semitic resentments and limited himself to cautioning against an exaggeration of anti-Jewish hatred as well as against the consequences of racist concepts; these would ultimately turn against the “Old Testament,” denigrating it as “a purely Jewish book” and as a tradition stemming from “the evil Jewish spirit.”^[62] In this way, perfidious anti-Semites would themselves do the destructive work of the Jews – a popular argument among Protestant theologians at that time which enabled them to express their affinity to anti-Jewish views without abandoning the “Old Testament.”

Walther’s strategy of making theological and political concessions to anti-Semitic views while trying to prevent them from damaging Christianity’s scriptural foundations was not uncommon among Protestant theologians of his day. In this regard, one popular tactic was to differentiate between the “Old Testament” – understood as the preliminary stage of Christianity – and Judaism, thus asserting a fundamental opposition between the two religions. This move was undergirded by a traditional supersessionist theology, which claimed the “Old Testament” (or rather, its ‘valuable’

parts) for Christianity, and rendered postbiblical Judaism a history of blindness and life under God's curse. Particularly the Luther of the late *Judenschriften* was seen as a guarantor of this anti-Jewish tradition; his early writings were depicted as an irrelevant error made by an inexperienced youth.

1933 and the Failure of a Counternarrative

The effort of Jewish intellectuals to rescue an idealized Luther from anti-Semitic instrumentalization by accentuating the discontinuity between his early and his later writings on the Jews and to create a counternarrative to his appropriation by a nationalistic, anti-Semitic and anti-emancipatory ideology by portraying him as the forerunner and hero of the Enlightenment was doomed to failure. We know this from the reception of Luther's *Judenschriften* at the beginning of the Nazi period. It should be noted that, in the present article, the complex theological context can merely be indicated. Since the late nineteenth century, the "German Luther" had become a figure of German nationalism, and the reformer's later writings on the Jews were drawn on with increased frequency in public discussions of the social position of the Jewish minority in Germany. The 'Luther renaissance,' a programme of renewed historical and theological research on the reformer that had begun shortly before World War I,^[63] had elicited a strong response from young Protestant theologians; the response was now intensified, with the numerous academic events on the occasion of Luther's 450th birthday on 10 November 1933 providing the opportunity to promote him as the herald of a new, *völkisch* Germany and the symbol of a revitalized 'Germanness.' Protestant church historians who were close to the renewal of Luther's theology felt compelled to treat the topic "Luther and the Jews" in one way or another and thus contributed to the widespread impact of the theo-political thought patterns of the reformer's anti-Jewish writings. The Jewish lawyer and publicist Ludwig Feuchtwanger (1885–1947) had a good sense of what the celebrations signified:

This is not an antiquarian curiosity, a peculiar quirk of the dotage of a great man, retold on the occasion of his 450th birthday. The way Martin Luther let loose then against the Jews – that has been heard again and again from the German people for 450 years. In November 1933, we are finding that numerous important representatives of the Protestant church and academia are explicitly adopting this position of Luther, aping him word for word, and insistently citing and recommending his writings on the Jews.^[64]

Prominent Protestant theologians such as Heinrich Bornkamm, Hanns Rückert (1901–1974), Erich Seeberg (1888–1945) and others devoted much attention in their speeches to Luther's late writings; and while they tended to reject the *völkisch* usurpation of these texts, they were not immune to anti-Semitic prejudices, including racist ideas. Bornkamm, for instance, delivered a lecture titled *Volk und Rasse bei Martin Luther*, in which he indicated that Luther was also motivated by an "instinctive racial aversion to the Jews." The strong ambivalence of his position becomes apparent when he insists that, ultimately, the reformer's accusations against the Jews did not arise from racial difference, but then all the more emphasizes religious enmity: "They [Luther's accusations] were directed at a nation that incessantly offended God with their faithlessness and blasphemy." While there can be no doubt about the essentially religious character of Luther's enmity towards the Jews, Bornkamm argued, it is also true that the "crime" of "blasphemy against Christ," of defiance against the Holy Scripture, and of the "Jewish deprivation of God's honor" cannot account fully for Luther's rage. Rather, his response must have been intensified by the economic damage inflicted upon society by the Jews and their habit of "sucking out Germany."^[65] The way in which Bornkamm outlined Luther's position, letting it go completely unchallenged, was more than likely to reinforce anti-Jewish sentiments amongst his audience. As such, it exemplifies the irresponsibility of Protestant theology at that political moment of German history.

Bornkamm is but one among many Protestant theologians who, despite dissociating themselves from blatantly racist readings of Luther, did not refrain from celebrating his hatred of the Jews.^[66] A telling example in this regard is the Königsberg Luther scholar Erich Vogelsang (1904–1944), who presented his views in 1933 in a book dedicated to the Protestant Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller (1883–1945) under the fitting title *Luther's Kampf gegen die Juden*.^[67] While citing an “anti-Semitism that is necessary for the people these days”^[68] and declaring his agreement with the Aryan paragraph, Vogelsang’s main concern was to reject, by way of Luther, any notion of Christian solidarity with Judaism. Rather than eliding the fundamental antagonism between Judaism and Christianity – a tendency he saw at work in liberal theology from the Enlightenment onwards – what was needed in theological terms, he suggested, was an understanding of the fate of the Jews through the categories of “curse and blinding, wrath and the judgement of God” alone.^[69] In this respect, he summarized Luther’s position as follows: “That is the mysterious curse that has hung over the Jewish people for hundreds of years [...], in truth, a self-inflicted curse. On Christ, the bone of contention, they are dashed to pieces, crushed, dispersed.”^[70] The Lutheran theologian went as far as alluding to the myth of the “eternal Jew,” implying that this curse, from which no political emancipation could redeem the Jews, made them a dangerous, demonic element within German society. In theological terms, he was unable to perceive something different in Judaism than a nation damned by God, and even the tradition rooted in Luther’s writings from 1523 and then adopted by the ‘mission to the Jews’, which at least a critical potential against *völkisch* anti-Semitism, played no role whatsoever in his thinking.

Instead, Vogelsang’s interpretation of Luther’s “battle against the Jews” had a clear political dimension and featured a full range of stereotypes from the arsenal of anti-Semitism – from polemics against the “Jewish-rabbinical morality” to the interpretation of the notion of Israel’s chosenness and the faith in the coming of the Messiah as an expression of “Judaism’s enormously tenacious claim to world domination.”^[71] Vogelsang even attributes *völkisch* categories to Luther by asserting that he had an aversion against “everything foreign to the country,” with much of his sentiment against the Jews having a “nationalist tone,” being directed against their “un-German slyness and mendacity.”^[72] Correspondingly, Luther’s real strength, Vogelsang suggested, was the “inner agreement and close fit of Germanness and Christianity.”^[73] He left open – as did many of his Protestant colleagues – the precise nature Luther’s “tough mercy” (*scharfe Barmherzigkeit*) was meant to take in the politics of the present, but his emphasis on Luther’s idea of a “clean separation between Jews and Christians”^[74] demonstrates that what he had in mind was a politics of separation and of a determined revision of the legal emancipation and social integration of German Jewry. It would be difficult not to understand this attitude as a legitimation of the initial Nazi politics against the Jews. In any case, Vogelsang firmly rejected Eduard Lamparter’s liberal position: Luther’s solution for the “Jewish Question” was definitely not “mutual understanding” or “rapprochement,” let alone the amicable acknowledgment “that [quoting Lamparter] the Jewish religion, too, had been granted a divine right to exist *alongside* the Christian [religion], and a special gift and task within humankind’s spiritual life (even today).” Rather, the basic contours of the politics of the church ought to be “separation of the spirits and a determined defensive action against the inner subversion by Jewish ways, against all ‘Judaization’.”^[75]

Vogelsang espoused a classic form of Jew-hatred that combined elements of traditional supersessionist anti-Judaism with obvious socio-cultural enmity towards the Jewish minority and openness to racial concepts^[76] – a widespread Protestant attitude in 1933 and beyond. Vogelsang might have made the same points without recourse to Luther, who simply served as legitimation for a virulent anti-Semitism obviously in debt to Adolf Stoecker (1835–1909), who had influenced an entire generation of Protestant academic theologians and ministers.^[77] The image of the Jews that was disseminated by them was that of an alien and hostile, if not dangerous, race, whose allegedly ‘subversive’ power imperilled Germany and called for action – a tacit consent to the Nazi’s discriminatory measures. The fact that the Lutheran church and Lutheran theologians were also influenced by Luther’s “two kingdoms theory,” which prompted them to concede the

right to act in the political realm completely to the State, further contributed to their policy of leaving the fate of the Jews to the Nazi regime. The same holds true for the Confessing Church, which turned out to be equally impotent and passive – first, because many of its members shared the prevailing anti-Semitic sentiments,^[78] and second, because it could not rely on a theological tradition that would have enabled it to foil the defamation of Judaism and the persecution of the Jews.

This impression is corroborated by a brief look at yet another Protestant statement from the 1930s regarding Luther and the Jews. In 1936 and 1937, Hans Georg Schroth, a member of the Confessing Church, who was close to Karl Barth's "dialectical theology" and, after 1945, was part of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft "Juden und Christen"* at the German Protestant Church Convention, published two pieces, titled "Luther und die Juden" and "Luthers christlicher Antisemitismus". These publications took a courageous stance insofar as the author defended missionary activities amongst the Jews against the views of racial anti-Semitism, insisted on the right of baptized Jews to become Protestant pastors, vigorously rejected the so-called "Aryan paragraph" and repudiated the radical assumptions of *völkisch* theologies. Luther's "Christian anti-Semitism," Schroth argued, clearly contradicted any form of racial thinking; rather, it was based on hope for the salvation of the Jews and aimed for a theological refutation of Judaism. Even though Judaism, from the reformer's view, was part of the diabolical coalition of the Antichrist as it allegedly slandered Christ, Luther knew that the Church, the "new Israel," was continuously threatened by the temptation to deny Christ and thus to become "Judaism" itself. In its essence, Schroth emphasized, Judaism was "anti-Christianity," as was racial anti-Semitism due to its attacks against the Christian tradition: "The Jew is always standing in front of the door, and this would even be the case should there no longer be a racially or politically visible Judaism. And who would deny that today we have to fight such an 'anti-Semitic' battle within the Church?"^[79] In theory, Schroth even wanted to express a positive thought – namely, that Christians should not abandon the Jews to hatred as they shared with them the solidarity of being sinners before God and because Christians, too, were always tempted to turn against Christ. In addition to this thought, which recalls the attitude of the young Luther, he intended to say that in the present, Luther's "Christian anti-Semitism" could be understood as directed not just against the Jews but also against the *völkisch* movement. Thus, if a nation decides to turn against Christ, it becomes "Jewish," "be it what it may in terms of its race and ethnicity, and even if it is Catholic, Protestant or non-religious. And when a nation, by deciding against Christ, has become a people of Judaism, it will share the fate of racial Judaism: rejection by God."^[80] According to Schroth, "the Jew prevails also in anti-Semitism if the latter turns against Christ" – and that is why it is the church's duty to "resist against all forms of anti-Christianity or *völkisch*-national Christianity, as Luther has done with regard to the Jews."^[81]

Schroth was apparently unaware of how dangerous and counterproductive Luther's "salvational anti-Semitism" was and that this rather desperate and convoluted argumentation, a belittlement of Luther's anti-Jewish theology, fostered anti-Semitic patterns of thought even if it tried to turn them critically against Nazism. Here, Judaism becomes the symbol of the "anti-Christ" and of the diabolical, which implies that the diabolical in all of its manifestations is related to Judaism. Jews and Judaism thus appear as a countervailing power poised to undermine what is true and ethically good. It is hardly surprising, then, that while Schroth defended Jews who had converted to Christianity, he had no word of solidarity with the other Jews and did not challenge the regime's right to engage in racial politics. His position is revealing as it demonstrates that – even with the best intentions – it was impossible, on the basis of Luther's theology, to effectively counter the anti-Semitic image of the Jews, let alone the denial of Judaism's theological right to exist. On the contrary, anti-Jewish sentiments were reinforced by such interpretations.

In retrospect, the idealization of Luther on the part of Jewish intellectuals and their belief in the liberating effects of the Reformation on German culture emerges as a tragic illusion, the authors blind to the reformer's true views and the absence of contemporary Protestantism's response to

their dialogical approach. The same might be true for their political faith in the Enlightenment principles they strove to see at work in Luther. Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to note the dignity inherent in the endeavour to invoke – via an idealized Luther – a liberal counter-tradition of freedom of thought, tolerance, and human decency that had, tragically, become widely irrelevant in German politics – and in Protestant theology. By showcasing otherwise hidden implications of Luther's ideas, Jewish scholars protested what they perceived as a catastrophic decline of the liberal tradition that had once guaranteed Jewish emancipation and integration. Ultimately, idealizing Luther in an attempt to offset the inhumane logic of modern anti-Semitism was both a desperate apologetic strategy and an act of intellectual resistance that merits respect.

This seems all the more the case in view of the lack of solidarity on the part of nearly the full gamut of Protestant theologians. Luther's writings on the Jews not only overshadowed Jewish-Christian relations when theologians tolerated or actively promoted the reformer's ideas in order to demonize the Jewish minority or justify anti-Semitic politics. More subtly, even Protestant theologians who rejected the harsh views espoused by Luther in 1543 and tried to oppose anti-Semitism by referring to the more sympathetic elements of his statement in 1523 failed to address the fundamental flaws of the reformer's perception of Judaism and to engage in a radical critique of the inevitable political consequences of his supersessionist theology. Consequently, they did not develop a tradition of respect and dialogue that would have served them in countering the radicalization of anti-Semitic mentalities within the Protestant church and beyond. The handful of hopeful signs for a turn towards an affirmation of Judaism as a valuable religious and cultural force within German society, seen in Eduard Lamparter's rather unique position, were silenced by an overwhelming merging of different anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic convictions that came to the fore in the crucial years which destroyed Weimar democracy.

The challenge in the Jewish discourse on Luther since the Enlightenment, be it characterized by idealization or theo-political critique, remained unheard by German Protestantism before World War II and the Shoah. It was only gradually – and often reluctantly – that Protestant theologians turned their gaze to the shadow Luther's anti-Semitism had cast on Protestant-Jewish relations and on Protestantism itself.^[82] The historical and theological questions with which they were confronted were nothing less than radical: was there a direct connection between Luther's writings on the Jews, a specifically German-Protestant variant of anti-Semitism, and the 'eliminationist' anti-Semitism (Daniel J. Goldhagen) that led to an unprecedented genocide? Whatever the historical answer to that question, Protestant self-reflection after the crimes of the twentieth century must face the destructive theological and political traditions that belong to the legacy of Luther and the Reformation. The theological questions emerging from the historical analysis were no less challenging: was it possible to forge a new tradition of respectful dialogue with Judaism on the basis of Luther's theology by reinterpreting his understanding of the Bible and his doctrine of justification, or was it necessary to jettison constitutive elements of his thought?

Albert H. Friedlander (1927–2004), a German-Jewish emigré scholar in London, offered a personal response to such questions in an essay he published in 1987, titled "Martin Luther und wir Juden". As part of his reflections, he presented a vision of Luther in his *feste Burg* – a solid castle with a treasure chamber full of glimmering gold, but also dark vaults and torture chambers. It is in the latter that the tools for pogroms are to be found – the place where the Jews became the menacing antagonists of his own faith. In an imagined interchange, Friedlander asks Luther to lock the doors of the torture chamber and to walk with him to the treasure chamber – his library, which houses the Bible and where they can engage in a dialogue about their differing understanding of this shared book in an atmosphere of mutual respect. With this vision, Friedlander offered Protestant theology a path towards a critical confrontation with Luther's legacy. In this vision, the dark chamber of Protestant anti-Semitism would be acknowledged and left behind, and a conversation would begin about what unites as well as what separates Judaism and Christianity.^[83]

Christian Wiese holds the Martin Buber Chair in Jewish Thought and Philosophy at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. His publications include *Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany* (2005), and *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions* (2007). He has edited numerous volumes, including *Janusfiguren: "Jüdische Heimstätte", Exil und Nation im deutschen Zionismus* (with Andrea Schatz, 2006); *Redefining Judaism in an Age of Emancipation: Comparative Perspectives on Samuel Holdheim (1806–1860)* (2007); *Modern Judaism and Historical Consciousness: Identities – Encounters – Perspectives* (with Andreas Gotzmann, 2007); *Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life: The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Historical and Philosophical Studies* (with Hava Tirosh-Samuels, 2008); *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies* (with Paul Betts, 2010); *German-Jewish Thought Between Religion and Politics: Festschrift in Honor of Paul Mendes-Flohr on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (with Martina Urban, 2012); *Jüdische Existenz in der Moderne: Abraham Geiger und die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (with Walter Homolka and Thomas Brechenmacher, 2013); *Reappraisals and New Studies of the Modern Jewish Experience: Essays in Honor of Robert M. Seltzer* (with Brian Smollett, 2014).

Source: Jews and Protestants. From the Reformation to the Present. Edited by Irene Aue-Ben-David, Aya Elyada, Moshe Sluhovsky and Christian Wiese, Walter de Gruyter GmbH: 2020, Berlin/Boston. Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).