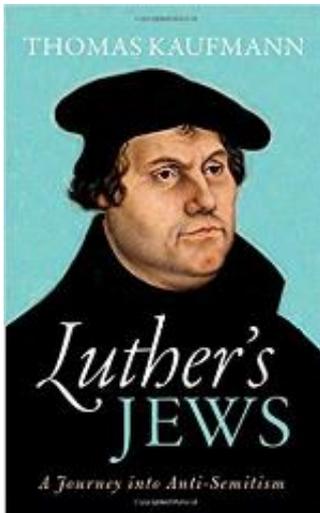


## Protestantism's "Gretchenfrage": What to Do With Martin Luther and the Jews



Book review

David H. Price | 30.06.2018

**Thomas Kaufmann:**  
***Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism.***  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.  
vii + 193 pp. \$30.00 (cloth)

How to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation? The uncertainty does not pertain to a trivial question, such as whether or not Luther actually nailed the *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church on October 31, 1517. After all, the answer to this unsolvable, albeit popular, question would not ultimately matter, since, whether posted or not, the theses were certainly printed, translated, distributed, and, as they say, the rest is history. A difficult and important question is: Does Luther's violent hatred for Jews undermine his legacy or even his theology? Should such a man, whom many Protestants see as a founder of their theology and culture, even be celebrated? However enthusiastic in other respects, many commemorations in 2017 did acknowledge the stain of Luther's anti-Semitism. The Verein für Reformationsgeschichte and the Society for Reformation History appropriately put Luther's intolerance front and center, devoting their 500th anniversary conference to the theme "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Age of Reformation" (Nuremberg, July 2017). From this critical perspective, an especially significant English publication for the quincentenary was Thomas Kaufmann's *Luther's Jews*, an insightful and comprehensive study of the full complexity of the Luther question.

In 1911, Reinhold Lewin concluded his foundational study of Luther and the Jews with this ominous observation: "Luther's hatred of the Jews has not disappeared without a trace, but continues to have an impact through the centuries. Whoever for whatever reason writes against the Jews believes he has the right to refer triumphantly to Luther."<sup>[1]</sup> As Lewin realized, Luther is one of the most influential theologians in all of Christian history who wrote extensively against Jews and Judaism. Although Lewin could not have predicted the horrors of the Holocaust, he would not have been surprised by the widespread use of Luther's anti-Jewish writings by Nazis and other anti-Semites. Since the Holocaust, most Lutheran churches have issued emphatic official repudiations of Luther's

violent writings, and many branches of Christianity have acknowledged their historic failure to oppose Christian anti-Semitism with sufficient determination. Nonetheless, the danger of Luther's prestige persists, for it can bestow an aura of authority on his hateful and inhumane proposals. The American editors of *Luther's Works* agonized about preparing translations of Luther's anti-Jewish writings for fear of putting potent ammunition in the hands of anti-Jewish agitators. Even though, unfortunately, this concern has proven to be justified, the editors had no real choice, for leaving them untranslated would be a profound distortion of Luther and his legacy.

*Luther's Jews*, released for the quincentenary year, is a translation of Thomas Kaufmann's 2014 publication, which in turn was a recasting of his earlier *Luthers Judenschriften* (2011). For the 2014 adaptation, Kaufmann modified his writing style to make his research more accessible to a non-academic reader. While this is a welcome improvement, the revision also removed nearly all direct references to scholarship, sometimes making it impossible to know the precise sources for historical claims. References to Luther's writings, however, are scrupulously provided, although not to the standard English translation, *Luther's Works*. Kaufmann renamed his study *Luthers Juden* in order to emphasize that there is nothing "objective" (p. 10) about Luther's construction of Jews and Judaism, even if the reformer had met several Jews and Jewish converts to Christianity, and was familiar with some Jewish practices and scholarship. Luther derived most of his "knowledge" of Judaism from anti-Jewish polemicists such as Salvagus Porchetus (d. ca. 1315), Paul of Burgos (d. 1435), and especially the contemporary Anthonius Margaritha (d. 1542), the son of the last rabbi of the distinguished Jewish community of Regensburg before its demise in 1519. As is often said, ultimately Luther "knew" what he wanted to know about Judaism.

The book begins dramatically with the end of the story: Luther's death in his birthplace of Eisleben on February 18, 1546. While in the throes of dying, Luther summoned up a last burst of energy to promote his campaign against legal toleration of Jews. In a final letter to his wife (January 28, 1546), he complained that too many Jews were tolerated in Eisleben. After describing the baleful turn in his health, probably a heart attack, he claimed that his wife would have blamed the illness on the malevolence of nearby Jews. More to the point, he informed her that he was determined to support Albrecht of Mansfeld in his effort to expel Jews from the territory against the wishes of Countess Dorothea von Mansfeld. True to his word, his last sermon, preached in Eisleben, was published with an addendum attacking Jews and legal toleration, claiming that rulers who protected Jewish communities shared culpability for Jewish crimes against Christianity (blasphemy) and against Christian society. Although we cannot prove a direct link to Luther's position, the following year witnessed the expulsion of Jews from the territory of Mansfeld.

This is but one side of the Luther biography. As the introduction points out, Luther also published a brief but lively pamphlet in 1523 that excoriated the Catholic Church for its brutal abuse of Jews, expressing tentatively the hope that, with kind treatment and, above all, with indoctrination in the true (i.e., Luther's) Christian theology, some Jews might begin to convert to Christianity. Most historians have acknowledged the benevolent tone of this work, even if they have grappled with ways to integrate its message into a comprehensive interpretation of Luther's anti-Jewish perspectives. As far as I know, however, Kaufmann has gone further than any previous scholar with his contention that the Luther of the 1523 pamphlet "did more than anyone else to further unconditional toleration of Jews" (p. 4). If this is so, which I question, it would be unusual, for no one else at this time favored "unconditional" toleration of Judaism. Wherever it existed, legal toleration had many limits and restrictions. Moreover, there is no evidence that Luther had a positive impact in the 1520s. If we are interested in a positive impact on Christian-Jewish relations, we should revisit Johannes Reuchlin's 1510 defense of Judaism, a major event that receives only passing mention. At most, Luther's tract may have inspired the publication of a few additional missionary pamphlets in the 1520s.

Chapter 1, "Neighbors Yet Strangers," delivers a concise orientation to the legal status of Judaism in the Holy Roman Empire as well as an account of the widespread, mostly successful, efforts to end

legal toleration across western and central Europe. The expulsions were so extensive that by 1550 Jews remained only in parts of Italy, parts of the Holy Roman Empire, and a few areas in France. Thus, it is not surprising that Jews did not live in the places where Luther passed most of his life: Jewish communities were tolerated in Eisleben and Mansfeld, but not in Magdeburg, Erfurt, or Wittenberg, and as of 1536-39, nowhere in Electoral Saxony. The chapter also provides a comprehensive overview of the minimal contacts Luther had with Jews, all of which made a bad impression, it seems. On several occasions, Luther recounted a visit from two or three Jews (the number varies in the tellings) in the mid-1520s. This story features a vintage Luther performance: the professor of the Bible subjected his visitors to a extemporaneous lecture on how the Hebrew Bible proves Jesus's messiahship (with reference to Isaiah 7:14 and Jeremiah 23:6). His Jewish callers, alas, not only rejected the exegesis but also cursed Jesus in the presence of Matthäus Aurogallus as they departed, calling him "Thola" (a hanged criminal; p. 30). That Jews would have cursed Jesus in the presence of Luther's Hebraist colleague is so unlikely that we would be wise to view this anecdote of Luther, an irrepressible dinner-table raconteur, as highly embellished, if not mostly fabricated. It nonetheless demonstrates Luther's basic outlook: Jews were incapable of proper (i.e., Christological) understanding of their scriptures and Jews habitually committed the capital offense of blasphemy. Kaufmann concludes the chapter on a biographical note. After relating a 1525 rumor that a Polish Jew had been dispatched on a mission to assassinate Luther, Kaufmann surmises, without further evidence, that "presumably from the early 1520s onwards until the end of his life, Luther lived in existential fear of Jewish murderers" (p. 38). Whatever we might think about Luther's character, he was not a man given to fearing excessively for his life.

Chapter 2 explores the theological anti-Judaism in Luther's Christological exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. As Heiko Oberman and others have argued, the evidence from Luther's early exegetical works indicates there is no real theological difference in the status of Judaism throughout his lifetime. In all cases, Luther saw no future for the survival of Judaism; the failure to recognize prophecies of Christ's messiahship in Hebrew scriptures condemned Jews eternally. Luther, however, also argued that the Old Testament articulated not only Christ's messiahship but also his Gospel message of justification by faith alone. The inability or refusal to acknowledge this was an error that Jews and Catholics shared. Nonetheless, in his early exegetical works of the late 1510s and the 1520s, Luther did not advocate violent or even harsh treatment of actual Jews, although he decried the religious rituals (ceremonies) and the works righteousness of Judaism and Catholicism as being cut from the same theological cloth. It is true that for a brief period "Jews are actually judged more leniently than Catholics" (p. 45), although we should also observe that Luther was not yet committed to eradicating Judaism from the empire. Luther even stated in his 1519 *Sermon on the Contemplation of the Holy Passion of Christ* that Christians should focus their emotions less on blaming Jews for Jesus's death and more on mitigating their own sinfulness (p. 47).

The title to chapter 3, devoted to an analysis of *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, asks the question, was the early Luther "the Jews' Friend"? The question mark is important, for, as Kaufmann emphasizes, if Luther was a friend to Jewish interests, his friendliness was solely directed at fostering conversion—in other words, to overcoming Judaism. The greater portion of the brief pamphlet is a biblical exegesis of the virgin birth of Christ as well as a rehearsal of Christological interpretations of prophetic statements in the Hebrew Bible (especially Genesis 3:15, which Luther claimed, in agreement with medieval approaches, was a prophecy of Christ, and Genesis 49:10, which Luther and others used to support the contention that the Messiah would come when the Jews lost their scepter, i.e., their political authority, which happened definitively with the end of the Second Temple). Although Luther may have intended the tract to be a guide to proselytizing Jews, a major aspect is the polemic against Catholicism. In his inimitable way, Luther claimed that, if he were a Jew, he would rather metamorphose into a hog than convert to Roman Catholicism. It is not just the faulty and corrupt theology of Catholics that impeded conversion but also the abusive treatment of Jews in Catholic Europe. The tract cautiously expresses the possibility that the rediscovery of the true Gospel now will attract a few Jews.

Chapter 4, “Hopes Disappointed,” documents Luther’s harsh condemnations of Jews and Judaism after 1523. As early as his 1526 interpretation of Psalm 109, Luther shifted to an open attack against Jews, who, he now believed, were incapable of becoming genuine Christians: “Jews are impossible to convert” (p. 87). Probably echoing the polemics of Johannes Pfefferkorn (overlooked by Kaufmann), Luther also formally accused Jews of blasphemous cursing of Jesus, again claiming that Jews call him a hanged criminal (“Thola”). In 1537, Luther published *Against the Sabbatarians*, ostensibly to oppose radical Christians in Moravia reported to have been adopting Jewish Sabbath observance and other customs such as circumcision. Most of the pamphlet unfolds as an explication of how Old Testament passages prove that the covenant of Israel has been superseded with the appearance of Jesus as the Messiah. Despite evidence that Luther had heard rumors about Judaizing Christians in Bohemia and Moravia, Kaufmann asserts that Luther’s framing of the pamphlet as an answer to a Christian concerned about sabbatarianism was a fabrication.

Chapter 5, “The Final Battle for the Bible,” deals mostly with Luther’s notorious *On the Jews and Their Lies* (published at beginning of 1543), which amplifies, sometimes with searing rage, nearly every vile innuendo of early modern anti-Jewish agitators. According to Luther, Jews corrupt Christian society with their usury, blaspheme and curse Jesus, commit ritual murder of Christian children, and poison wells. Luther insists that governments should violently abrogate legal toleration throughout the German empire. Christians must “set fire to their synagogues ... so that God might see that we are Christian,”<sup>[2]</sup> burn the Talmud and other Jewish books, outlaw Jewish banking and trading, and destroy Jewish homes. A significant feature of *On the Jews and Their Lies*, one that Kaufmann does not pursue, is that Luther addressed parts of the book to ministers in an effort to enlist them in a campaign to end toleration of Judaism, especially by preaching against tolerant princes. Kaufmann frames his analysis with an empathetic portrayal of the 1542 death of Luther’s daughter, Magdalena, proposing that this familial tragedy may partially explain why Luther composed such a violent book. Kaufmann concedes that this perspective cannot really “exonerate” him but that it nonetheless elucidates what “gave rise to such vicious writings” (p. 96). This is not a new approach to Luther’s late works and it has been challenged before, as, most recently, in an abridged English edition of *On the Jews and their Lies*: “Though often characterized as the ravings of a sick old man, the treatise is a rhetorical tour-de-force and coheres as well with Luther’s overall body of work concerning the Jews.”<sup>[3]</sup> After all, most people have mourned the passing of a loved one without resorting to vitriolic attacks on Jews or other people. Kaufmann may gotten carried away by his empathetic imagination when he wrote: “With this text (*On the Jews and Their Lies*), he killed off his fatherly feelings and, to dry his tears, he directed his rage and hatred at the same target at which people in Christendom had been accustomed to direct them since the time of the crusades” (p. 99). The chapter closes with a similarly speculative—one might say fictional—reference to Magdalena: “Had his daughter been taken from him because of this sin?” (i.e., the sin of having written more favorably about Judaism in 1523; p. 124). Obviously, these musings are intended to humanize the author of *On the Jews and Their Lies*, and, in so doing, prefigure the final chapter on “A Fallible Human Being.” One problem with the approach is that there is no connection anywhere in the historical record suggesting that sadness over Magdalena’s death informed this or any other invective. In any event, Luther never associated his grief with his determination to eradicate Judaism.

Kaufmann also proposes that *On the Jews and Their Lies* was directed against Protestant Hebraists, specifically Sebastian Münster: “It was only when he had a two-pronged attack to lead—against the Jews and against Christian Hebrew scholarship that in his view did not sufficiently Christianize the Old Testament—that a dynamic was created that was capable of igniting the passion that burst forth in his writings of 1543” (p. 124). This refers to Luther’s well-known objections to Münster’s use of Jewish exegesis, especially Rashi, in his breakthrough edition of the Hebrew Bible with new Latin translation (1535). One problem with Kaufmann’s interpretation is that, while Luther on occasion did cavil about the literalism of Münster elsewhere, he did not do so in any of his anti-Jewish texts. Luther even cites Münster’s own anti-Jewish perspectives at least once in *On the Jews and Their Lies*, claiming that Münster attacked Jews in his 1535 Bible edition for blaspheming Mary (“Maria”) as excrement (“Haria”).<sup>[4]</sup> Kaufmann thinks that the extensive examples of Christological readings of

the Hebrew Bible are a veiled criticism of Münster's focus on literal meaning. Luther, however, obviously framed these as routine proofs for the willful blindness of the Jews and nowhere implies that they are challenges to Münster's literal philology. After all, during the last decade of his life, Luther used Münster for the careful and systematic revision to his Bible translation. All subsequent Christian Bible translators in the sixteenth century consulted Münster. It is also worth mentioning that Münster himself produced an anti-Jewish missionizing tract in the form of an edition of a Hebrew translation of the Gospel of Matthew (1537), equipped with a prefatory attack on Judaism. On balance, the rage that pulsates in every sentence of *On the Jews and Their Lies* is unquestionably directed against Jews and Judaism and not against Münster and Christian-Hebrew scholarship.

The final chapter, "Mixed Results," surveys Luther's impact during his lifetime and thereafter. The chapter concisely recounts the well-known history of the substantial use of Luther by German anti-Semitic propagandists. The most significant reception of Luther before the Nazi movement was Theodor Fritsch's *Antisemiten-Katechismus*, which went through some forty-four printings between 1887 and 1944. In a similarly popular work (over a hundred thousand imprints) titled *Martin Luther über die Juden: Weg mit ihnen!* (1938), Lutheran bishop Martin Sasse approved the massive destruction of Jewish properties during Reichskristallnacht as a fulfillment of Luther's 1543 call for Christians to burn down all synagogues. In his discussion of this material, Kaufmann emphasizes an absence of racist ideology in Luther and also contends that Nazis distorted Luther's anti-Semitism by leaving out Luther's evangelical focus on biblical-theological "proofs" of Jesus's messiahship in the Hebrew Bible. Unlike the German, the English translation concludes with the statement, "Today, neo-Nazis are disseminating garbled selections from Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies* via the internet" (p. 152). This perspective is slightly problematic because Luther, alas, does not need to be garbled in order to be used as an authority for promoting hatred of Jews. Perhaps there is a measure of consolation in the perception that Nazis and neo-Nazis ignored the Christian aspects of Luther's anti-Judaism. But in the final analysis, we may be chasing a red herring, if we follow Kaufmann's insistence that the association of Luther's views with those of the Nazi genocide is inappropriate because Luther never conceptualized the creation of a "racially pure state" (p. 9). This is obviously true. Yet, even if the reformer saw the banishment of Judaism in terms of creating a "religiously homogenous" society, Luther still envisioned, as did the Nazis, a Germany free of Jews. Despite quibbling over these issues, Kaufmann also acknowledges that "they (Luther's perspectives) were certainly a factor in making the Holocaust possible" (p. 143).

*Luther's Jews* is a rich, comprehensive, and thought-provoking survey of Luther's tragic promotion of anti-Semitism. Even if Kaufmann occasionally exhibits an apologetic reflex to qualify Luther's hatred as part of larger forces in his society and as an expression of the gloomy outlook of Luther's final years, he nonetheless unflinchingly recounts all significant aspects of Luther's murderous rhetoric and reception. Ultimately, Kaufmann helps us understand that Luther always sought to be a transformative figure and that part of his transformative vision of Christian society was, tragically, the violent end of legal toleration of Judaism everywhere in the German empire.

#### Footnotes

[1] Reinhold Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden* (Berlin: Trowitzsch und Sohn, 1911), 110.

[2] *Luther's Works: The American Edition* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955-), 47: 268 (*On the Jews and their Lies*).

[3] Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna, eds., *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 164.

[4] Martin Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1920), 53: 517.

Editorial remarks

**David H. Price**, Professor of Religious Studies, specializes in the history of the Renaissance and Reformation. He has written or edited some ten books on a variety of topics, including early modern theater, Neo-Latin poetry, Renaissance visual art, the English Bible, and the history of Christian-Jewish relations. He served as a professor at Yale University, the University of Texas at Austin, Southern Methodist University, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, before joining the Vanderbilt faculty in 2016.

Source: [H-Net Reviews](#); this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).