

REVIEW

Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna
*Martin Luther, the Bible,
and the Jewish People: A Reader*
(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012)

Eric W. Gritsch
*Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism:
Against His Better Judgment*
(Grand Rapids, Michigan and
Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2012)

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In their new book, Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna give clear evidence that Martin Luther's anti-Jewish animus is not something that developed only in his later years, as is often thought, but rather was a life-long theme. They present selections from 27 Luther texts containing comments on the Jews and Judaism, ranging from his early Lectures on the Psalms (1513-15), which were never published in Luther's lifetime but survived in manuscript, to his "Admonition Against the Jews," delivered just days before his death in 1546. The dominant theme throughout is that of the Jews as a reprobate, disobedient, blind, and stubborn people who are condemned to lives of wandering and desolation, and who deserve no aid from the Christian population; indeed, Luther is incensed that they have not yet been driven completely out of Germany. The notable exception is his treatise of 1523, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," but even this can be seen as largely tactical in nature, with Luther urging that the Jews be treated with kindness rather than scorn "in order that we might convert some of them."

The authors, who are a married couple, are both on the faculty of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, PA, Schramm as Professor of Biblical Studies and Stjerna as

Professor of Reformation Church History and Director of the Institute of Luther Studies. The book originated in a seminar they taught jointly, and involved research in major libraries in Europe as well as the United States. Schramm contributes an introductory overview of “Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People,” while Stjerna provides an extensive, historically nuanced essay on “The Jew in Luther’s World.” They provide theological and contextual introductions to each selection, as well as a jointly-authored Afterword devoted to a plea to contemporary Christians, including Lutherans, to dissociate themselves from Luther’s views. Appropriately, they include as an appendix the statement in which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America does just that, its 1994 “Declaration to the Jewish Community.”

What were the sources of Luther’s information or misinformation about Jews and Judaism? He relied chiefly on treatises by converted Jews, who were eager to cast their former faith in an unfavorable light, as well as popular superstitions and caricatures. As Schramm and Stjerna poignantly write:

Martin Luther never danced at a Jewish wedding. He never broke bread at Passover. He never shared a cup of Sabbath wine. He never studied Torah with a rabbi. He never held in his arms a newly circumcised Jewish boy. He never saw the anguish of expelled Jewish families vandalized at the hands of an irate Christian mob. He never smelled the smoke of burning Jewish martyrs (p. 203).

What was active in Luther’s mind was a phantasm of the Jew, a concoction of all the negatives drawn from late medieval culture, and also from the Bible. Luther loved the Old Testament, in which by dint of creative exegesis he found Christ and the gospel everywhere. But he practiced too often the exegetical trick of applying the prophets’ critiques of their own people and the psalmists’ confessions of guilt to the Jews, while applying the promises of grace and forgiveness to the Christians. Schramm and Stjerna maintain, indeed, that the

image of the Jews as practitioners of works-righteousness, self-justification, and empty ceremonies is the essential mirror-opposite to Luther's most central doctrine, that of justification by faith.

The authors provide a lengthy classified bibliography and a very useful chronology, including not only the events of Luther's lifetime but also an overview of the major expulsions and pogroms against the Jewish people throughout Europe from the 12th century onward. The book is further enriched by the inclusion of a number of woodcuts from Luther's time, which show only too clearly what the image of the Jew was for his contemporaries. Valuable, too, is the inclusion of the letter of the famous Rabbi Josel of Rosheim protesting against Luther's outbursts. It is tragic, as the authors note, that Luther refused Rabbi Josel's request to meet with him for a personal discussion of the issues.

An unavoidable weakness of the book is that since most of the selections are brief excerpts from longer works, the reader does not get the full impact of the relentless, pounding nature of Luther's arguments and accusations against the Jews—in one case (“On the Jews and Their Lies,” 1543), going on for 169 pages in the English translation. The authors themselves acknowledge that their approach is more calculated to display the “breadth” than the “depth” of the problem (p. 39). In a class or seminar, the solution would be to assign a longer reading from one of the treatises together with some or all of the selections in this volume.

By a remarkable coincidence, a book on Luther and the Jews was also published in 2012 by the noted historian Eric W. Gritsch, who for more than a generation had held the same chair in Reformation History at Gettysburg now held by Kirsi Stjerna. Gritsch, who after his retirement from Gettysburg taught at St. Mary's University in Baltimore and the Melancthon Institute in Houston, died in December, 2012; thus this would be his last publication.

Gritsch fully agrees with Schramm and Stjerna that Luther's anti-Jewishness was a lifelong phenomenon. He periodizes Luther's career in this respect as follows: "Traditional Polemics" (1513-21); "An Interlude of Pastoral Evangelism" (1521-37); "A Tragic Conclusion" (1538); and "Demonizing Attacks" (1539-46). The citations Gritsch presents, however, indicate that the second, benign period—centered on the 1523 treatise "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew"—lasted much less than the 16 years he suggests; see, for example, the anti-Jewish polemic in Luther's 1526 letter to the Queen of Hungary (pp. 57f.). As to 1538, which Gritsch identifies as a pivotal date, that was the year that Luther, in response to reports of Christians in Moravia being converted to a kind of 16th-century version of Seventh-Day Adventism (worship on Saturday, etc.), wrote his treatise "Against the Sabbatarians," condemning these "Judaizing" tendencies, and announcing, in effect, that he had "given up" on the Jews, and would leave them to God's judgment. It remained only for Luther to become all too specific, in his final treatises and utterances of 1543-46, regarding how that judgment should be carried out by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

Gritsch's citations from Luther nicely supplement those of Schramm and Stjerna, since the latter focus particularly (though not exclusively) on Luther's exegetical works, whereas Gritsch quotes extensively also from his sermons and treatises. The result, putting the two together, is an overwhelming impression of both the intensity and the extent of Luther's antisemitism. As to that term, despite the fact that it is of 19th-century origin, Gritsch maintains that it is fully appropriate to apply it to Luther, rather than the more innocuous term "anti-Judaism." If anti-Judaism is seen as merely theological—a disagreement about doctrine and exegesis—whereas antisemitism implies a hostility or hatred toward the Jewish people as such, it is clear that Martin Luther crossed into the latter, and forcefully so.

In his final chapter, Gritsch surveys the complex after-history of Luther's anti-Jewish writings. For long periods they were

unknown or ignored, then surfaced again on the initiative of one or another antisemitic individual or movement. As Gritsch indicates, they played no small part in the organized antisemitism that led up to and was tragically consummated under Nazism. In the course of his exposition, Gritsch passes in review the comments on this topic of numerous other Luther scholars, vigorously rejecting any attempt to excuse Luther's views or exonerate him from any blame for their effects. Luther's antisemitism, says Gritsch, represents "the dark underside of his life and work," a reality that must not be obscured (p. 141).