

“Therefore, away with them“

Luther’s Fall with regard to the Jews



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Text in italic: Original Luther’s Words

1. Title panel

2. Hope of conversion

The early Luther found friendly words for the Jews, recognizing that the Messiah came from their ethnic community. Accordingly, he wrote a treatise with the title: “That Jesus Christ was born a Jew” (1523). He urged that the Jews be treated with Christian love, that they be integrated into society, that they have open access to craftsmanship professions, which had been denied them in the Middle Ages due to a Papal edict (4th Lateran Council, 1215). However, this friendliness was not entirely altruistic: its intention was to encourage the Jews to be open to the Christian message and to move them to forsake their “unbelief” and their “stubbornness”. Luther put great hopes in his recently published translation of the New Testament, in which the Jews could now, finally, read for themselves that Jesus is the Messiah whom the prophets had promised.

When this appeal was not successful, Luther became reproachful and insulting.

Stefan Meißner, Disappointed Love? Martin Luther and the Jews

I hope that if one treats the Jews with friendliness and instructs them clearly on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, that many will become real Christians and return to the faith of their Fathers, Prophets and Patriarchs. (...)

And however highly we regard ourselves, we are nevertheless heathens, for the Jews belong to the family tree of Christ: we are brothers-in-laws and strangers; they are blood relations, cousins and brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, whoever wants to boast about flesh-and-blood ties has to acknowledge that the Jews are closer to Christ than we are, as St. Paul says in Romans 9 (v. 5). (...)

Thus, my request and my advice is that one should handle them with correctness and instruct them according to the Scriptures, so that some of them would want to join us. But since we deal with them violently and spread lies about them, claiming that since they do not have Christian blood they stink, - and who knows what other nonsense is being propagated! - so that they are treated like dogs, how can we expect to facilitate goodness in them? For example: that we forbid them to work among us, to be occupied and to enjoy human fellowship, has driven them to usury: how is that supposed to improve them?

Whoever wants to help them has to apply the Christian law of love, not the stipulations of the pope, and accept them with friendliness. (...) Though some may be obstinate, what does it matter? Are all of us good Christians? From now on, I will say no more until I have seen the results of my efforts.

Martin Luther, “That Jesus Christ was born a Jew” 1523

3. The unequivocal certainty of Scripture

Not only the recently translated New Testament, but also the entire shared Scripture, must, according to Luther, inevitably lead Jews and Christians to the same interpretation. The Scripture is obvious and unmistakable – he believed unreservedly that Scripture is self-explanatory.