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# Boekresensies/Book reviews

**Steven Paas: *Luther on Jews and Judaism. A review of his "Judenschriften"***. Zürich: LIT (Verlag) pp 99 (ISBN 978-3-643-90947-3) (PDF 978-3-643-95947-3) (Series: Theological Orientations 32)

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The reviewer would like to start with a passage in chapter 2 called "Luther questioned". After World War II scholars and lay people believe that Luther has provided a breeding ground to Hitler and the Nazis for their racist ideology. People base the idea on Luther's vehement anti-Jewish polemic. The author correctly draws our attention to Luther's hermeneutical key that Jesus Christ is central in the interpretation of the Bible. The nucleus of salvation is the justification of sinners in Christ by faith and grace through Him. The author stresses that this is no new doctrine. Already the Early Church and the Church of the Middle Ages had the same hermeneutical view as Luther. In the perception of many Christians (perhaps nominal Christians) changes have taken place. After Auschwitz or the massmurder of the Holocaust objections have arisen against the traditional Christian dogma. The Church would have 'stolen' the Tanakh (the Jewish Holy Book) which is equivalent to the Christian Old Testament and which would have been christianized into a witness for Jesus against Judaism. Among faithful Christians of Puritan and Pietistic traditions and of the Further Reformation, especially those who proclaim post-millennial expectations for Israel/the Jews and preach the negative view on Paul.

Many desire an overall revision of theology. The object to classical hermeneutical thought can be stated as follows: Seasoned Christian Zionists or supporters of Israelism have deprecated Luther because of his gross attacks on the religion of Judaism which is often presented as identical to hatred of Jews. In their minds the image of Luther is frequently a prototype of antisemitism. Many Christians are baffled by the modern critique of Paul

and by the sometimes biased information about Luther's negativity towards the Jews.

The work discusses what Luther wrote about the Jews and their religion. The author would like to give a balanced exposition on Luther and his statements on the Jews. The first chapter discusses Luther's hermeneutics of the Scriptures. To him the Bible is God's self-revelation. Jesus Christ takes a central position in the whole Bible. For Luther Christ is present in both Old and New Testaments. In the latter He is present either as the Angel of the Lord, or as a type or as direct prophecy. His presence causes the Bible to be a unity. Through the Holy Spirit Christ guarantees that He is the Truth and the Head of all true believers, i.e. "the Israel of God or the Church". In the suffering, death and resurrection of the Redeemer, Biblical Israel has come to its fulfilment. Through election and in surrender in faith to Christ a part (rest) of Israel and the world will be saved. As far as the way of salvation is concerned, there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. The exclusive position of Biblical Israel has been widened and extended to all peoples.

For Luther the Bible clearly indicates how it wants to be read and understood. It contains the whole counsel of God. The author stresses two decisive concepts: love and understanding of Scripture. Both are intertwined in Christ. They could be restated as: Christ and his Word of Love. Scripture has to be read and interpreted from its centre, Christ. Luther emphasizes that one needs faith in Him to get access to understanding God's Word. This hermeneutical principle functions in the whole of Luther's theology, and therefore in Luther's view of Israel and the Jews. As a side remark one can note that the Reformation contributed to an improvement in relations between the movement and the Jews, because it created a rebirth of interest in the Hebrew language and culture as theological tools.

In chapter 2 with the heading "Luther and Judaism" the author puts the question: How did Luther, in the interpretation of Scripture, apply his rediscovery of the theme of Christ's central position in salvation to his attitude towards the Jews and their religion of Judaism?

A further question is: "What is Luther's perspective of the place of Israel and the Jews in God's plan of salvation?"

According to the Book of Israel the function of Biblical Israel has been completely fulfilled and widened in Christ. As the Book of Christ the Old Testament has kept its lasting function as the Word of the Triune God. Luther stresses that in Christ the Old Testament meaning of Israel has been broadened to all peoples.

This chapter would pay attention to the implication of Luther's understanding of Scripture with regard to ethnic Israel in the New Testament dispensation. Christ is present in such a way in the whole Bible that even the Jews cannot ignore Him. They too can only be justified through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the way in which the "joyful exchange" takes place. Jesus gives to the believer the righteousness which God demands from all fallen human beings and at the same time He takes on Himself the sin and guilt of the believer. As far as the offer of the Gospel and of God's electing love is concerned, there is no distinction between Jews and other people. Just as the Jews, the Gentiles also receive salvation in Christ, for the exclusive position of Biblical Israel has come to an end.

Luther and his contemporaries looked back on a period of more than 1300 years in which discrimination and violence against the Jews often occurred. In those years the anti-Jewish climate was part and parcel of Christianity. That led to an extensive *Adversus Judaeus* literature in the early stage. In the context of combatting heretics to keep the *Corpus Christianum* Europe pure the Jews were considered as belonging to the antitrinitarians and fell prey to the Inquisition of the Church in Rome. The notorious reputation of the Crusades (1095-1271) included murder of the Jews and led to the expulsion of the Jews from different countries, even from the German Empire of Luther's time. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries Jews had even been killed or driven out to the German countryside or abroad. The Reformation did not end the anti-Jewish climate. Some tolerance for the Jews came, however, from the Emperor and the princes of the German Empire. There was an ambiguous relationship from the side of the Reformers towards the Jews. On the one hand they spoke particularly negative of the Jews; on the other hand cognisance was taken of the role of the Hebrew language and culture in theology.

Luther is, according to the author, consistent with regard to his view on the Jews, although three stages (the author says aspects) should be distinguished. The missionary stage was prominent up to 1523 in his writings. From 1523 up to 1536 he was apologetical and his comments become sharper. Since then up to his death it was the time of the polemical stage that confronted the Jews. The terms are more abusive. His missionary practice was focused on his European environment. Unfortunately for Luther he experienced it more difficult than what he had expected. His irritation with the Jews can be noted, for example, when he applied the curses from Psalm 109 against them. The core of Luther's defence against the Jews is a theological issue, viz. their opinion that the Messiah is not Jesus, and that the real Messiah has not yet come.

The third chapter "A Consideration of the facts" provides a balanced discussion of the facts relating to his relation to the Jews. The offensive and polemical language raised the question whether Luther's evangelical integrity was sound. His christocentric interpretation of Scripture should be linked to the love of God in Christ. How does this relate to his harsh accusations and incrimination of his fellow human beings? Is there any chance that Luther's writings has at least helped to prepare a breeding ground for the pogroms and ultimately for the shoah under the Nazis? This is the question. Everybody must agree that it should be considered whether an affirmative answer to this question gives a right view of Luther, as is presented by the following scholars:

1. René Süß decided that there is an indirect line from Luther with his anti-Jewish remarks to Hitler. He sees a structural unity between the anti-Judaism of Luther and the antisemitism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, he sees Luther as a fellow human being with noble traits.
2. Bol finds something positive in Luther, although Luther represents a fundamentally wrong theological tradition of anti-Jewish propaganda.
3. Lamm and Vanbeckevoort join the attack against the 'dejudification' of church history. The accusation of antisemitism includes Luther's anti-Judaism, but they give credit to Luther for his desire to convert the Jews.

To be objective towards Luther one must not ignore the coarse polemics of hurtful terms and popular suspicions against the Jews, but one must also look at how the Reformer waged his spiritual battle. The speech usage of his time was not different from and was part of the academic debating methods of the time. It should also be recognised that Luther often wrote "in the language of the peasants and the miners", the people of the region where he grew up and should not express personal hatred and resentment *per se*.

A Further question is: What is Luther's perspective of the place of Israel and the Jews in Christ's plan of salvation? One may rephrase: Does the fulfilment of Israel in Christ signify an absolute end of Israel's exclusive position as the unique people of the covenant? Or is there continuity? Important for Luther is that the Old Testament as the Book of Israel, implies that the function of Biblical Israel has been fulfilled, absorbed and widened in Christ.

However, as the Book of Christ the Old Testament has kept its lasting function as the Word of the Triune God. Luther stressed that in Christ the meaning of the Old Testament is now extended to all peoples.

His criticism was fundamentally directed towards the Jewish religion. In no way could he look differently at their religion, called Judaism by him. "His christological view of Scripture and his christocentric hermeneutics exclude any positive appreciation" thereof as religion of which "he was an irreconcilable opponent". His criterion that salvation is only through Christ, who is the Redeemer, excludes any other religion (including Judaism) as acceptable and Luther called upon the authorities to protect their people against such dangerous religions. Any deviation from the core beliefs of Christianity was punishable. Luther did not oppose the Jews as such, but he was against their religion (Judaism).

In the post-World War II period Luther's opposition to the religion (Judaism) has been considered the same as his alleged antisemitism. This idea appears in two ways. Firstly the whole church history was considered "a breeding ground for the violent antisemitism" of the Nazis and facism. Secondly, Christianity together with all the world religions have become respected as parallel roads of salvation. Closely linked with the two ideas there are two assumptions: no. 1 "that all anti-Jewish statements made by Luther are antisemitic and witness hatred of Jews", and no. 2 "that criticism of the religion of Judaism by him and after him has led to antisemitism".

What about the accusation that he was racist? One should consider the following: Firstly, pseudo-scientific proclaimers of the racist "blood and soil" theories emerge only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, "Luther emphatically rejects any kind of racial prejudice", e.g. his exposition of Gen. 38:1-5 and 9:27. Biblical history focused on joining Jews and Gentiles together in one Church. Thirdly, "Luther's statements about the Jews were in line with the cultural and political views of his time" – non-racist. Fourthly, "the pacifist undertones in Luther's political attitude forbid any compassion with the Hitler regime". Never did his missionary intention changed to an intention of destruction of Jews.

Luther's indignation was not directed against Jews as an ethnic group, but against the Jews who, in his view, adhere to a false and God-degrading religion and against the related Jewish culture. Unfortunately "Luther allowed his indignation against the Jews to run free in a horrible way".

Moreover, the terms 'Jews' and 'Israel' are not always used consistently. The term 'Israel' denotes the faithful Israelites whose history has been fulfilled in Christ and Gentiles who have come to accept Christ. The other unbelieving Israelites and unbelieving Gentiles he often denotes as 'Jews'.

These two terms are in such cases disconnected from time and ethnicity for believers and unbelievers respectively of all times and places in general. 'Israel' prefigures the Church, Christian theology and personal faith in Christ in general. Judaism, the religion of the Jews, denies this and must therefore be combatted. The "promising missionary possibilities" which Luther foresaw created positive expectations. The disobedience of the Jews against the covenant and infidelity brought forth negative expectations.

In religion studies one should always strive to a balanced and objective view of the religion of somebody, especially if there is some contact. Therefore, there was no reason for Luther's abusive language in regard to the Jews and "his proposals to apply 'sharp mercy'" which "are unacceptable and unworthy of a Christian, especially of a gifted and blessed Church Reformer as he was". The author rightly expresses his being ashamed of Luther for these acts, but his feeling of shame extends even to a Christian tradition which made it possible that the anti-Jewish heritage was misused in a false racist ideology of unscrupulous murderers.

Positive evaluation for Luther is the fact that he restored "Christ to the centre of faith, theology and the Church". He was therefore "a tool in God's hand". Therefore Luther's consistent christo-centrism leads us to distinguish between on the one hand "his objectional expressions of dislike of Jewish fellow human beings who had refused his outstretched hand; and on the other "his unmasking of the religion of Judaism, and his apologetics against it". Anyone who does not give Christ the centre position does not receive a place of honour in Luther's writings. Therefore one should realize that his abusive statements on the Jews was not isolated from the rest of his work. For the author it is nevertheless inexcusable. Without that distinction one can easily and mistakenly draw a line from Luther to Hitler. The theological legacy of Luther, though imbued with human weakness and sin has nothing to do with the murderous campaigns driven by ideological racism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or with the re-emerging antisemitism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The author draws our attention to several events/aspects that change our way of thinking. Firstly, "we should realize that the climate of thinking in Luther's time differs from ours". Unlike Luther we live after the turning point in thinking in the Western world, caused by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. These movements in principle put an end to the social acceptance of the authority of the Word of God in Western culture.

We experience the collapse of Christianity which no more has “the support of political power”. That would be ‘inconceivable’ for Luther. Therefore, we should have caution in judging Luther and realize that we would have difficulty in understanding him.

Secondly, “the Medieval climate of thinking co-determined Luther’s views of the relationship between love and faith”. Luther considers faith and love in union with the hope (1 Cor. 13:13), but love “is not without limits”. Klaas Exalto discusses “the antithetic character of Luther’s theology”. Luther did not overcome the Medieval way of thinking about the relationship between love and faith. He would like to convert the Jews, but their reaction causes him to limit his love towards them. The “Law of God’s judgement” clashes with “the Gospel of God’s grace”. In Luther’s theology the “Christian is and remains justified and sinner at the same time”.

Thirdly, Luther reflects on one-sidedness. He pronounced his judgments of God’s wrath against the adherents of the religion of Judaism but not against the haters of the Jews. Luther’s apologetics and polemics made it for the Jews difficult to see “the Gospel of love of God in Jesus Christ”.

Fourthly, Luther insufficiently distanced himself from the anti-Jewish climate of his time. Despite his wide and great visions as a theologian and a Reformer, he was a child of his time, and as such his view was limited. He did not escape from a kind of naivety regarding the deep religious and cultural gap that had formed over centuries between the Jews and others.

Fifthly, one must unfortunately admit that “Luther was not immune to disappointment” like all human beings. “He was personally hurt by the negative and hostile comments of the Jews.” He was even hurt more by Christians who “converted to the Jewish faith”.

Sixthly, one must unfortunately note that in judging the Jewish rejection of the Gospel-offer, he has failed to take sufficient account of the consequences of his own valuable christocentric principle. Outside of Christ a Bible reader is blind. The Rabbis read the Tanakh, that is the Old Testament, in such a way that the genuine meaning of Messianic prophecies was missed by them. They refused to accept the New Testament and to accept Jesus Christ as the key to its interpretation. From his own christocentric understanding of Scripture, Luther knew that the Jewish scholars would remain blind and hardened as long as they insisted on keeping the Old Testament outside the circle of the light of Christ.

The greatest probability was that Luther did not realize that from his christocentric starting point he creates an unjust criminalizing image of the Jewish people. In real fact they could not see “the truth that Luther had learnt from the Word and the Spirit”. This should have mitigated his judgement on the Jews and their religion.

The reviewer has noted a few typing errors:

p. 35 pesecution – persecution

p. 47 N49 an extra en which should be deleted

p. 58 N76 bij (Dutch y) → by

p. 60 suporter → supporter

p. 61 to the convert → to convert (delete the the)

p. 90 faith According → faith. According (full stop has fallen out)  
regrd → regard

p. 97 Bibliographical information on

(Luther, Martin) Luther's Works LW [American Edition], vols 1-30 ... 1955-1076 ... The date 1955-1076 does not make sense for me, perhaps 1995-1976?

It also appears on p. 32 N8

p. 7 N3

If one has an interest in the Reformational period and especially Luther and his relationship with the Jews, the book is highly recommended. It includes the broader Church history and the treatment of Jews in the Western culture and for people who ponder whether Luther has a link with Hitler.