



Paas, Steven.

Luther on Jews and Judaism. A review of his “Judenschriften”

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Reviewed by Francois Wessels

This book was published in 2017, the year in which the beginning of the Protestant Reformation celebrated its 500th year. Its purpose is to examine, evaluate and contextualise the well-known derogatory statements made by Luther regarding Jews.

In the first part of his book Paas explains Luther’s hermeneutic approach. According to him the key to open any book, poem or letter in the Bible is to read it in light of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. That was true for the New Testament as well as the Old Testament, Luther explained, and that is why for Luther the Old Testament is equally the Book of Christ and the Book of Israel (p 15). The Old Testament has two aspects – “it leads people to Christ and at the same time it is full of Him” (p 15). Luther expected to find the Old Testament full of prophesies and allusions to the future coming of the Messiah, who turned out to be Jesus of Nazareth.

Luther was of the opinion that the Old Testament should not be read for its own story – Gods calling, covenant and grace bestowed to Israel – but for its preparation to understand the New Testament (p 21). This of course, is not how Jewish people read what Christians call the Old Testament. For Jewish people this collection of writings formed the Tenach, the book that tells readers about God’s covenant with the people of Israel. For Luther it was the Old Testament, full of promises regarding the coming Messiah – which were eventually fulfilled in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.

It should be counted to Paas’ credit that he guided his readers to understand that, given the different ways Luther and Jews understood the

Old Testament, there was very little chance that they would understand one another, even less to come to an agreement on what the message of the Old Testament was. It was at this point that, in my opinion, the readers of Paas' book (most of them probably Protestant Christians) should have been made aware of the danger of following Luther's hermeneutic approach uncritically.

What Paas does not emphasize is that Protestant Christians do read the Bible as one book, revealing God's grace eventually in Christ Jesus – but Protestants should also recognise that before the birth of Christ, the Old Testament was already read and interpreted by Jews, attempting to understand what the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was saying to its readers. According to this reading, the Old Testament writers mainly showed how God's grace was revealed in God's election and faithfulness to the people of Israel.

In the light of this view, to enforce an Christological reading on every story the Old Testament tells, means not to respect what the message of a large part of the Bible was. Unfortunately Paas says very little about the neglect of self-criticism in this regard by Luther and his supporters. This neglect paves the way for Paas' conclusion in the last chapter, "A consideration of the facts", namely that Luther was not guilty of anti-Semitism. According to Paas, anti-Semitism occurs when someone is against Jewish people simply because they are Jews. Paas claims that although Luther was very critical of Jews, he was not anti-Semitic, because he was not opposed to Jews because they simply were Jews. "Luther does not turn against the Jews as such, but against the religion of Judaism" (p 69).

That however is a very narrow definition of anti-Semitism: to be against Jews simply because they are Jews. One may wonder: would anyone be classified as anti-Semitic, applying that definition? Not the Nazis – they were anti-Semitic as a result of their own concoction of history in which Jews manipulated historical events world-wide to help them to control markets and through that to control politics, to their own advantage. It seems more helpful to use a simpler definition of anti-Semitism – for example, as a "hostility, prejudice or persecution against Jews" (Penguin English Dictionary, 29), and add to that the element of "extremely harsh". Many people are against the religion and teachings of Buddhism, but their

opposition does not turn into an “extremely harsh hostility, prejudice or persecution against Buddhists”.

Paas rightly mentions the reasons why Luther’s opinion of Jews changed. He is right when he points out that Luther was utterly disappointed that the Jewish community did not embrace the freedom of the gospel. But there are reasons for that, as well – if Luther had a better understanding of Judaism, he would have known that Jews do not think they were saved by keeping the Law. In their understanding, they kept the Law because God, in his grace, had chosen them to be his people.

Certainly one has sympathy with Luther’s utter disappointment when most Jews did not embrace the gospel as Luther re-discovered it. But it was not necessary to turn this disappointment into Luther’s extremely harsh hostility and prejudice, which is what most people today rightly call anti-Semitism.

One can therefore interrogate the statement of Paas that “there is no causality between Luther and the anti-Semitism of the Nazis, who wrongly “... tried to use him” (p 72). The reality is that the Nazis did not *try* to use Luther – they *used* him, easily. Luther’s harsh words that Jewish prayer books, schools, synagogues and houses should be burnt, since Jews are prostitutes, bloodhounds and murderers of Christians, worshipping a God defiled with pig’s excrement were not remembered for 500 years by accident. They were remembered because they were influential words, words which were – at least, in certain circles – repeated, remembered and believed.

This does not mean Christians and Jews cannot learn a lot from Luther. We all can, and should. By the grace of God, we sinners can be, at the same time, justified.