

### *Out of the Depths I Cry to You*

Luther identifies the Christian people with Israel, especially in the concluding verse four of this hymn as it is translated: “I hope as Israel in the Lord” (not a literal translation but a faithful lyrical paraphrase). Like so many of Luther’s hymns, this hymn is a paraphrase of a psalm, namely, Psalm 130. Luther’s at the time path-breaking Hebrew language exegesis and Christian theological interpretation of Old Testament texts combined to make the publication of his studies and commentaries and hymn paraphrases of biblical books and psalms best-sellers. In them the humanity of Israel in its life of yearning for God’s reign and lament over its own sufferings and sorrow over its own sins became vivid and real. The Hebrew Scriptures indeed form the indispensable background of Luther’s reformation theology, forming his Christian “Old Testament.” This particular hymn became a favorite for solemn events and indeed was sung at Luther’s own funeral. It is a fitting Lenten offering.

**Notes on the Text:** LBW # 295; ELW # 600; WA 35: 421-2. In an apparent attempt to avoid masculine pronouns, ELW changes Luther’s third person description of God’s saving work in Christ to a second-person confession of God’s saving work. This leads to a subjectivizing of Luther’s sense, that is, a reduction of what the text means to what the text means for me. Luther certainly thinks that justifying faith is the faith that receives the biblical Christ “for me,” but he does not think that who Christ is depends on my faith or understanding. Thankfully Christ is the friend of sinners for me and all others, whether I understand Him or not! For the history of the composition and reception of this hymn, see Robin A. Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) 142-52.

It is fitting in the Lenten season to reflect critically on one of the cruelest ironies attending the fate of Luther’s reception in recent history: his relation to Jews and Judaism. Since the Nazi mass-murder of Europe’s Jews, all theologically serious Christians have scrutinized their theological traditions to find and root out the spiritual sources of this unprecedented crime. Luther—an iconic figure in German history—is no exception to this necessary scrutiny. On the contrary, the case of Luther demands particular attention, since the Nazi crime occurred on the home soil of Luther’s reformation.

While both supporters and opponents of Hitlerism invoked the Luther image in Germany during the Nazi period, recent scholarship has succeeded in clarifying the ways in which Luther’s theological legacy did, and did not, open paths to the Holocaust. First of all, some historical perspective is demanded here. Luther lived some 400 years prior to Nazism. A lot of water had flowed under the bridge since Luther’s time. Whatever sins we trace to Luther need to be historically contextualized in this fashion. Luther’s own particular theological teaching (as I hope we are learning in these studies) was about as well known to contemporary Germans in the 1930s as is, say, theology of the New England Puritan divine, Jonathan Edwards, to Americans today. An historically more direct and immediate source of religious anti-Judaism and the Fascist world-view, though not of racial anti-Semitism, might be found in the anti-Christian philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, than in Luther. Indeed, Nietzsche’s philosophical anti-Judaism—for him, Moses was the author of the repugnant “slave-morality” of resentment—was a religious source of inspiration for Nazism. The Nazis carried Nietzsche’s philosophical diagnosis of the Jewish “malady” forward with their so-called “racial science.”

Second, as mentioned, Luther's teaching on Judaism contains a cruel irony. Luther loved the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian "Old Testament." He earned his daily bread as a professor of Old Testament, and taught himself Hebrew in order to translate the Scriptures into German from the original language. So profound was his identification with the Old Testament that he regarded the "church" as founded in God's promise of the Messiah to Adam and Eve and he traced the travail of the "church" through Israel's journey with God. This makes a huge difference in reading the Bible. Following Paul, Luther regards promise, not Torah, as the true theme of the Hebrew Scriptures (though this does not cause him to invalidate Torah as God's Word, but rather contextualize it as divine pedagogy till Christ would come, as in Gal. 3:19-26). Luther's exegesis and theological interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures as the Christian Old Testament of promise caused him to criticize the exegesis of the rabbis as he came to know it second-hand through medieval and patristic Christian commentators. He regarded it as confused and equivocal. This judgment was not mere bigotry, but an honest perplexity at rabbinic modes of scriptural reasoning which to Luther obscured the true sense of the sacred text. Luther angrily vented his dislike of rabbinic reasoning in harsh and stereotypical ways that we must reject today. The rabbis must be, in Luther's judgment, blind guides, trope already prefigured in the New Testament, for example in Matthew 22. Yet there is no escaping the root theological fact that Christians and Jews diverge on the sense of the Hebrew Scriptures because Christians see Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Scriptures and hence the key to their clear interpretation and the rabbis do not. Unlike Luther, we today should take most seriously Jewish objections to the Messiahship of Jesus, namely, the question how can crucified Jesus be Messiah when he himself is a victim alongside many others in a world that remains unredeemed. We today should take this objection seriously, not only to make clear to ourselves how reasonably Jews have rejected Jesus as the Christ, but also to make clear to ourselves what believing in Jesus as Messiah really means!

Third, the early Luther in fact saw through the anti-Semitic agitation of the popular papal preachers and rejected it as carnal. Thus he wrote a treatise in 1523, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" (LW 45: 195-230), urging political co-humanity in civil society as the prerequisite of genuine evangelization of the Jews. In today's perspective, this still seems inadequate because it presumes the self-evident superiority of Christianity to Judaism with the goal of converting Jews. Luther's friendliness to the Jews in this early treatise in that case is nothing more than enlightened Christendom -- still a political order in which Christianity is legally normative. These criticisms of even the early Luther are thus valid from today's perspective of American democracy. But they should not prevent us from seeing a subtlety. Up until the time of Nazism the form in which one argued for the co-humanity of Jews was to assert the human capacity of Jews for conversion to Christianity. The alternative historically was to argue that the Jews are irredeemable, accursed, hardened in heart, possessed by the devil. This latter was the specific form of religious anti-Judaism that could morph into Nazi racial anti-Semitism by taking the religious theme of the incorrigible Jew to a new, racial level of some kind of genetic incorrigibility. Luther lapsed in the direction of such evil religious discourse at the end of his life in the notorious 1543 tract, "On the Jews and Their Lies" (LW 47: 137-306), though we should note that this tract was virtually suppressed by Lutherans after Luther's death (Wallmann and Wendebourg). In fact Nazis complained how the Lutheran Church had suppressed Luther's "true" views on the Jews. Luther's late attack on the Jews did not in fact have great historical influence, as it was little known in the intervening centuries.

Finally, we can ask what “sense” Luther’s late in life attack on the Jews had in its own historical context. We ask this question in order to identify a certain “Lutheran” temptation so that we can know it as a temptation and fight against it. That temptation consists in treating the “law,” not as God’s holy Word that exposes and judges sin, but as Jewish legalism, a false human religiosity of works righteousness. We succumb to this temptation when we turn the Biblical metaphors into allegories or symbols of eternal truths, rather than interpret them theologically. In the first case, “the Jew” becomes the fixed image of the self-justifying Pharisee, a “type” known in advance of real experience of living and breathing Jews. In the second case, “the Jew” becomes you and me as in the lyric, “I hope as Israel in the Lord.” As everything written in the *Hebrew* Scriptures was written that we might have hope (Rom. 15:4), we become “the Jews” when the Old Testament is rightly read in Christian perspective, whether grafted into Israel and the covenant of promise or zealously seeking a righteousness of our own. If we follow through on this, we broaden our ecclesiology to think of the Biblical people of God, inclusive of Israel as the church (see Gal. 6:16).

At his best, Luther regularly interpreted the Biblical metaphor theologically and he when he did he was open to real dialogue with real Jews about the “true Israel.” At his worse, Luther indulged in demonizing “the Jew” and refused to continue in the co-humanity of dialogue. This rejection of dialogue too needs to be contextualized by knowledge of Luther’s medieval demonology. Luther was an “equal-opportunity” demonizer. His treatment of the Jews was cut from the same cloth as his treatment of other opponents, like the Pope and the rabble-rousing agitators of the Peasants’ Revolt. He saw the same devil at work in Pope, peasants and the Jews (others too, like the Turks and the spiritualists he called the “Sacramentarians”). Because Luther could make no other sense out of his excommunication by the Pope other than that the Biblical prophecy of the Antichrist had come true, he drew the conclusion that the devil was loosed and the world was about to end. And this dire inference gave license to his violent rhetoric against any and all enemies of the gospel. His verbal attacks were acts of rhetorical warfare to keep the gospel alive in the world’s last, ravaged hour (Obermann).

Two instances of literalism in place of interpretation take place in this. The obvious one is that by the process of “demonization” the devil becomes identified with human opponents. Thus one gives up the patient way of charity in interpretation and persistence in dialogue for warfare, albeit verbal. Second, one takes the ultimate horizon of apocalyptic theology, the “end of the world,” as a calculable chronological future event. Despair over this world thus becomes theologically legitimated. Luther sinned –against his own better judgment, as the late Eric Gritsch put it in his new book on this topic—in both of these ways. True “Lutherans,” I might add, are those who are capable of making just such a self-criticism, since, as the young Luther put it in his Romans commentary, “this is the true people of God who continually bring to bear the judgment of the cross upon themselves.”

But let us return in conclusion to Luther at his best. Luther took the laments expressed in the psalms Christologically: in Israel’s sorrows we taste as well the sorrows of Israel’s Suffering Servant of the Lord, the Crucified Messiah, as the Cry of Dereliction from the Cross, citing Psalm 22:1, illustrates. In this way the Psalms are “Christianized” of course, but at the same time Christian theology is also “Judaized.” For Luther, “Jesus Christ” does not only name the historical figure born of Mary who was crucified under

Pontius Pilate, but includes all of Israel, as made known especially in the Psalms – even the laments to which we join our voices crying out in eager longing for the redemption of our bodies.

### **Four-Week Teaching Plan**

Week One: Read Psalm 130 and compare it to the text of Luther's hymn. Notice how Luther gives a Trinitarian structure to the hymn, the first verse addressed to the Father, the second to the Son and the third to the Holy Spirit, coming together in the final verse to voice one hope in the one God as learned from Israel, the ancient people of promise. Point out that the "depths" for Luther are the disillusionment suffered by all who put their hope in human works and powers. If Luther's theology exposes the false optimism of this self-bootstrapping theology of human self-salvation, it also knows how to comfort those in despair, who have come to see life more truly and without illusions.

Week Two: Take up the Lenten theme of self-examination from the Ash Wednesday liturgy and discuss Luther's principle that the true people of God are those who bring the judgment of the cross upon themselves – not the others! Connect this insight with the Hebrew prophets, for example, Amos 3:2 and 5:18-24. You can point out that the latter was a favorite text of Martin Luther King, Jr. Bring up the principle of *semper reformanda*, the church "always re-forming," that Paul Tillich called the Protestant Principle, but remind that for Luther the one who does the reforming is the Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

Week Three: Discuss the status of the Old Testament Scriptures in our life of faith today. Does the lectionary do justice to Old Testament narrative? Do children learn the stories of God's ancient people in a way that forms, informs and reforms faith today? Use the example of Nathan's confrontation with King David over his adultery and murder of Uriah in 2 Samuel 12:1-25 to illustrate the power of Old Testament narrative to expose sin and work repentance.

Week Four: On the basis of the foregoing studies, introduce Luther's early work in favor of kind and civil treatment of Jews in 1525 and compare it with his hateful outburst against the Jews in 1545. Make it clear that Luther sinned against the Jews but also against his own better knowledge and judgment. Ask how we today can commit the same sin in new guises.

### **Sermon Outline**

The four verses of *Out of the Depths* could structure an Ash Wednesday or Lenten meditation. Verse 1 boldly invokes God as beloved Father in spite of rebelling. Verse 2 acknowledges Jesus Christ as the never-exhausted font of grace. Verse 3 lifts up Spirit-worked hope even when human optimism disappears. Verse 4 reminds Christians that side by side with Israel they yet await the coming of redemption in its fullness, as expressed in the Lenten season of repentance.

### **Select Bibliography for Further Study**

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