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# The Protestant Reformers and the Jews: Excavating Contexts, Unearthing Logic

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**Abstract:** This article highlights the important initial tasks of excavating the pertinent contexts of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers and discerning what is at stake for them (i.e., “unearthing logic”) in order to analyze their views of and teachings about Jews and Judaism. Pertinent contexts include the immediate contexts to which Luther and Calvin responded (e.g., Jewish “blasphemy” and/or Christian Hebraism), as well as attending to the significant theological frameworks in which they each operated. Equally important is activity of sifting through the discrepancies in the secondary literature’s depictions of Luther and Calvin’s place in the history of Christian-Jewish relations. The article highlights biblical interpretation—particularly the defense of Scripture’s perspicuity—as the distinctive locus of the reformers’ angst concerning Jews and Judaism. In conclusion, the author offers some lessons from church history for discerning what Christian faithfulness might look like in response to this troubling history.

**Keywords:** Luther; Calvin; reformers; Jews; Judaism; anti-Semitism; Jewish-Christian relations; biblical interpretation; Scripture; context; perspicuity; Christian Hebraism

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## 1. Introduction

The topic of the Protestant reformers and the Jews is both an ethical and personal topic because it involves actual persons and actual bodies, as well as real consequences for those persons and bodies. Yet the temptation to move immediately to ethical judgments too often succumbs to the temptation of mere dismissal and fails to seize the opportunity for critical self-reflection. Such difficult topics reveal the key strengths of the historian’s task, for it is incumbent on the historian to unearth the logic that drives any given person or group, regardless of the moral judgments one might feel compelled to make. In order to do this well, the historian must identify and excavate the pertinent contexts necessary to understand a subject both in its original setting and in its wider historical and intellectual landscapes. Only then can one more judiciously draw implications for then and now. We begin with this act of excavation—with a focus on Martin Luther and John Calvin—in order to unearth aspects of their logic concerning Jews. I will demonstrate that biblical interpretation was a particular locus of the reformers’ angst concerning Jews and Judaism and explore what was at stake for them. We will return to ethical questions toward the end and, in a manner, read the Protestant reformers “against themselves” in the hope of exemplifying critical appropriation of Christian tradition on even this most difficult of topics.

## 2. Excavating Contexts, Unearthing Logic

There are several contexts crucial to an analysis of the Protestant reformers’ views of and actions toward Jews in the sixteenth century. First, situating the reformers within a larger history, one might ask, “Did the Protestant reformers contribute anything new to the history of Jewish-Christian relations?” There is not time to recount the troubling history of forced baptisms, forced conversions, forced disputations, and forced sermon attendance of Jews by Christians. It is a history that contains

accusations of Jews intending Christians harm, as well as instances of Christians killing Jews as a direct consequence of these accusations [1–3]. Yet, it is also a history that cycled through times of peaceful coexistence, intellectual collaboration, outright persecution, and allowance of basic rights of Jews while establishing public policies that restrained their flourishing. The key point of tension in this history for Christians was the fact that the vast majority of the Jews, to whom the promises of the Old Testament were made, rejected Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah, for such rejection threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the Christian faith. Hence, Christians found in Scripture explanations and prophecies of this rejection, such as depictions of the Jews as a blind, carnal, stiff-necked, and disobedient people rejected by God and replaced by the church, the “True Israel.” Some Jewish scholars on this topic, such as Jeremy Cohen ([4], p. 98) and Salo Baron ([5], pp. 383–88), conclude that the Protestant reformers added nothing new to the history of Christian-Jewish relations. Indeed, Luther and Calvin furthered the depictions of Jews as blind, stubborn, and disobedient, and insisted that only those who believe in Christ are the True Israel who inherit the promises of God ([6], pp. 357, 359; [7], p. 140).

### 2.1. Luther and His Contexts

The Protestant reformers operated within a larger, prior tradition of Christian anti-Jewish teachings and actions—a point that should neither be lost upon us nor excuse the reformers. The need to situate the Protestant reformers within a prior historical context becomes immediately evident when one looks at the secondary literature on Luther and the Jews, which reveals opposing assertions concerning Luther’s legacy. Some have presented Luther as the father of anti-Semitism, drawing a direct line from Luther to the Third Reich ([8,9]; [10], p. 8; [11], p. xi). Others assert that Luther should not be singled out any more than any other ([7], pp. 121–24, 145; [12]). To the former, from a strictly historical perspective, the charge of anti-Semitism is at least technically inaccurate and anachronistic. Most scholars agree that Luther’s statements against Jews and Judaism were primarily theological in content and not racial per se ([12], p. 50; [6], pp. 367–71; [7], p. 126; [13], pp. 96–97; [14], pp. 375–76). Yet, there are undeniable parallels between the actions of the Third Reich and Luther’s recommendations on how to treat Jews in his 1543 *On the Jews and Their Lies* ([15], p. 690; [7], p. 123; [16], pp. 73–74).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Johannes Wallmann highlights two opposite assertions concerning the reception history of Luther’s anti-Jewish writings—one group maintaining a direct tie from Luther’s anti-Jewish writings to the rise of modern anti-Semitism and the other contending that Luther’s prior and more positive 1523 treatise *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* was far more influential than his negative treatises. Wallmann convincingly demonstrates that the reality is much more of a mixed bag, with times when the positive treatise was more popular and other times when the republishing of his negative treatises indicated their popularity ([16], pp. 72–87). The conclusion here is simple and mundane, and yet secondary scholarship has too often forgotten it—namely, that history is always more complicated and messier than the dichotomies we seek to impose. Luther and Calvin were medieval men deeply shaped by prior Christian tradition, and their anti-Jewish teachings contributed to what came after them.

It is also necessary to examine the immediate contexts to which Luther’s writings on Jews responded. Luther wrote five treatises dedicated to the topic of Jews and Judaism: the 1523 *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, the 1538 *Against the Sabbatarians*, and three treatises in 1543—*On the Jews and Their Lies*, *On the Ineffable Name and the Genealogy of Christ*, and *Treatise on the Last Words of David*. There is a significant change in tone between Luther’s 1523 treatise and later 1543 writings. In 1523, Luther expressed hope for Jewish conversion and refuted such hope in 1543; in 1523 he advocated friendly contact between Christians and Jews, but in 1543 sharply warned Christians to avoid all contact with Jews. In 1523 Luther urged Christians to treat Jews kindly and rebuffed prior medieval accusations of ritual murder and host desecration ([17], LW 45:200, 201; 47:172, 213, 241, 268, 274–75).

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Wallmann notes that Nazis complained that Luther’s anti-Jewish writings were unknown in their time ([16], pp. 73–74).

In 1543, Luther reiterated these medieval accusations and recommended such things as burning their synagogues and books, forbidding Jews from any public teaching or prayer, abolishing any safe-conduct of Jews on the roads, and putting them to manual labor ([17], LW 47:217, 264, 277, 268–72, 288). Scholars debate the causes of this change. Some point to Luther's disillusionment that Jews did not convert even though Protestantism had purified the message of the Gospel, while others point to health ailments in Luther's old age that could have contributed to an increasingly bitter and hostile demeanor ([18], pp. 132–37; [19], p. 199; [20], pp. 6–19, 214). Yet, most find a deep theological consistency across Luther's lifetime concerning his teachings on Jews and Judaism ([12,14,21]; [7], pp. 124–28). Consequently, many view these changes between 1523 and 1543 not as theological changes but as responding to specific social-political events. Luther wrote his 1538 *Against the Sabbatarians* in response to the news that some Jews in Bohemia and Moravia not only were persuading Christians to be circumcised and to follow Jewish law, but also were convincing Christians that the Messiah had not yet come. Luther wrote *On the Jews and Their Lies* after learning that Jews were publicly slandering Jesus and the Virgin Mary in their writings, teachings, and prayers ([17], LW 47:65, 137). Hence, Wilhelm Maurer, Gerhard Forde, and Thomas Kaufman argue that the change in Luther was due to the immediate problem of Jewish public blasphemy, of which Luther had not been previously aware ([14], pp. 388–89, 397–400, 407, 416, 427; [18], p. 128; [13], p. 92).

Such immediate social-political contexts convincingly contributed to the specific changes in Luther's position on Jews and Judaism. Yet, naming these changes simply as contextual is misleading. It is precisely the ways in which contexts shape theology that is illuminating here. Indeed, we see a theological change in response to a particular set of events. The theological change most defensibly evident is the change from a hope in Jewish conversion to rejection of any such hope.<sup>2</sup> This is not simply a theological change in the view of the character of the Jew from being potentially receptive to God to being irreparably blind and disobedient; it is also a theological change in the view of the character of God and God's covenant. It points to God's rejection of the Jews for all time rather than a rejection that retained the possibility of a future Jewish conversion. It emphasizes the judging God over the God of grace and mercy. As a consequence, Luther increasingly read biblical Jews in the light of not only the Jews' rejection of Christ but also in the light of contemporary Jewish blasphemy.

## 2.2. Calvin and His Contexts

Specific contexts equally matter in the case of John Calvin. Unlike Luther, Calvin did not write treatises explicitly devoted to the issue of Jews and Judaism, except for a dialogue he wrote between a Christian and a Jew that he never published [22]. Scholarship on Calvin on the Jews ranges from presenting him as a firm antagonist ([5], pp. 383–88; [14], pp. 443–45; [23], p. 2) to arguing that he was no different from his contemporaries ([24,25]) to hailing him as one of the least anti-Judaic figures of his time ([26–28]; [29], pp. 102–3). Others, such as Alice Eckardt, Mary Potter Engel, and Achim Detmers, point to the complex ambiguities in Calvin's thought on Jews and Judaism. Eckardt observes that on the one hand Calvin held a high view of Mosaic Law; on the other hand, he frequently attacked Jewish exegesis. Engel demonstrates that Calvin both asserted that the Jews abrogated the divine covenant and that the one covenant remains eternal and unabrogated from the standpoint of God. Detmers and my own work point to the ambiguities of Calvin's largely positive treatment of Old Testament Jews in contrast to his mostly negative statements about New Testament and contemporary Jews, as well as Jewish exegesis ([30], pp. 120–21; [31]; [32], pp. 210–11; [33], pp. 11, 92–94, 131–32, 146, n. 23, 177, n. 66, 177–78, n. 72, 185, n. 68, 189, n. 23; [34]).

<sup>2</sup> Luther clearly expressed a hope for Jewish conversion in his 1523 *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* ([17], LW 45:200) and his 1524 lectures on Hosea ([17], LW 18:16). By his 1528 lectures on Isaiah, Luther's portrayal of the Jews as cut off because of unbelief became more pronounced ([17], LW 16:236, 300, 17:413). By his 1543 treatises and his later lectures on Genesis, Luther more strongly stated that the Jews have ceased to be the people of God ([17], LW 47:139, 262; 2:359, 360, 361, 3:151, 4:32, 6:283).

Such ambiguities indicate the necessity of carefully attending to context. For example, Detmers contends that the polemical context of the Anabaptist devaluation of the Old Testament shaped Calvin's emphasis upon the profound unity of the Old and New Testaments ([32], p. 212). In response to the Anabaptists' elevation of the New Testament at the cost of its unity with the Old, Calvin insisted in his *Institutes* that the old and new covenants are "actually one and the same" because they share Christ as their substance ([35], 2.10.1–2). Hence, the Anabaptists were incorrect to say that the Jews of the Old Testament expected only earthly fulfilments of the covenantal promises; rather, the Jews of the Old Testament knew the fulfilment of the covenantal promises were spiritual and not earthly and ultimately dependent on God's grace, for "they had Christ as pledge of their covenant and put in him all trust of future blessedness" ([35], 2.10.17, 23). Calvin asserted Christ as the substantive unity of both testaments; they differ only in mode of delivery ([35], 2.11.1).

Calvin's theology of the unity of the testaments held direct consequences, particularly for his readings of Old Testament Jews. In contrast to Luther, who tended to read biblical Jewry in the light of Jewish rejection of Christ, Calvin emphasized Old Testament Jews as participants in God's covenant and receptors of God's providential care, even when the Old Testament prophets rebuked the Jews for their disobedience. Contrary to traditional Christian readings of several Old Testament passages (such as Ps 8, 16, 22, 59, Is 63:1–4) that depicted the Jews as the crucifiers of Christ, as a nation of depraved character, or as a people condemned by God, Calvin explicitly affirmed the Jews (albeit biblical Jews) as the people of God who exemplify God's providential care of the church ([33], pp. 77–101; [34], pp. 9–15; [36]). Yet, Calvin explicitly employed the terminology of "church" as another expression of the unity of the two Testaments centered in Christ, for when Calvin read "Israel," "Judah," or the "Jews" in the Old Testament, he equated this with the "church" of the New. Consequently, Detmers clarifies that Calvin's positive treatment of biblical Jews in no way entailed an affirmation of Jews and Judaism per se ([32], p. 212). Rather, Calvin employed Old Testament remnant theology to argue that only those Jews who believed in Christ continued in the covenant. Consequently, Detmers concludes that Calvin exhibited a form of "complete substitution of the Jewish people by the Christian Church" ([32], p. 201). Indeed, Calvin viewed the church as the faithful remnant comprising the True Israel.

Yet, I quibble with Detmer's argument that Anabaptist pressures "forced" Calvin to maintain the unity of the covenant so that only insofar as "Calvin emphasized God's fidelity to the Jewish people in the covenant could he theologically maintain the unity of the covenant" ([32], p. 212). On the contrary, Calvin grounded this unity in the conviction of a sovereign and immutable God.<sup>3</sup> Calvin's doctrine of God required him to maintain that God's purposes cannot be thwarted, including God's promises to the Jewish people. The unity of the covenant and his corresponding readings of Old Testament Jewry as continuing in this covenant are the necessary corollaries of his doctrine of God. Opposing Anabaptist beliefs created a context in which his arguments for the unity of the covenant needed louder voicing, but they did not "force" the concepts; his doctrine of God did that.

Even as he argued that only a remnant of the Jews (i.e., those Jews who believe in Christ as the Messiah) continue in faithful keeping of the covenant, Calvin affirmed that a full vision of God's sovereignty must always allow for the possibility that God could still at any time fulfill God's promises to the Jews. For example, in his comments on Romans 11, Calvin rejected the view that "the covenant that had formerly been made with Abraham was abrogated or that God had so forgotten it that the Jews are now completely estranged from his kingdom" ([37], p. 238). He asserted on the basis of the immutability of God and God's promises that while currently the Jews who have rejected Christ have fallen into ruin, "the nation itself, however, has not so fallen that one who is a Jew must necessarily perish or be estranged from God" ([37], p. 246). Instead, Calvin retained a clear hope of Jewish conversion, for the counsel of God "stands firm and immutable" ([37], p. 257). Moreover, Calvin noted

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<sup>3</sup> See Calvin's comments on Ps 102:12, Ps 102:24, Hos 2:14, Jon 3:10, Mic 2:7, Mic 7:15, Hab 2:8, Hab 3:6–9, and Hab 3:13.

Paul's appeal to Israel's history in Romans 9–11: "Paul assumes as axiomatic that God has punished the unbelief of His people, but not, however, in such a way as to have forgotten His mercy, just as [God] has often at other times restored the Jews after He had apparently banished them from His kingdom" ([37], p. 254).<sup>4</sup> In sum, Calvin's doctrine of God's sovereignty and immutable purposes demanded that Calvin retain the possibility of the fulfilment of God's covenant with the Jews not merely through a remnant of the Jews but a possible full restoration—yet, a restoration Calvin could only conceive of in christological terms.

I have highlighted mostly theological contexts—unity of the covenant and doctrine of God—that shaped the logic of Calvin's teachings on Jews and Judaism. This is because Calvin intentionally operated within a theological system that he meticulously expressed in a particular order and arrangement, as seen in his *Institutes*. Theological frameworks mattered a great deal to Calvin. Yet, they also emanated from and functioned within particular contexts. Prior to Calvin, the teachings of Huldrych Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich and Martin Bucer in Strasbourg already espoused a strong unity of the covenant and an emphasis upon the sovereignty of God that deeply shaped Calvin's theology ([32], p. 201; [39–41]; [42], pp. 81–82). Moreover, both Zurich and Strasbourg were centers of Christian Hebraism, in which Christian exegetes emphasized knowledge of Hebrew and employed Jewish exegesis to enhance knowledge of the historical contexts of the Old Testament. At the very least, Calvin's focus upon God's historical interactions with the Old Testament Jews reflected Christian Hebraists' emphases upon the original history of the Old Testament and the historical sense as a primary site of meaning [43–48].

### 3. What Is at Stake: Clarity of Biblical Interpretation

There are a couple of other crucial contexts to consider. First, by the time of Luther and Calvin, there were no substantial Jewish populations living in Germany and Switzerland. Jews had been expelled from Saxony in the century prior to Luther's lifetime, and a 1432 law forbid Jews to reside in Saxony. Jews conducting business and trade, however, could obtain permission for temporary residence. Yet, in 1536 the elector of Saxony passed a law forbidding Jews even to do this. Hence, Luther had to travel beyond his homeland for any direct contact with Jews. Such direct contact, as Thomas Kaufman points out, often resulted from certain Jews seeking him out ([13], pp. 73–75; [49], p. 322). For example, Luther recounted that three Jews visited him in Wittenberg (prior to the 1536 mandate) and argued with his messianic interpretation of certain Old Testament passages ([50], WATr 3:3512b, 4:5026, 4:4795; [51], WA 53:461, 50:515). After the passing of a 1536 mandate prohibiting Jews to travel for commerce, the prominent Jewish leader Josel of Rosheim wrote to Luther requesting a letter of safe conduct to travel in Saxony, which Luther denied ([17], LW 54:239).

Similarly, there were no Jewish populations in Calvin's homeland of France or in Geneva. France expelled its Jews in 1394. When Calvin converted to Protestantism and traveled to Basel, he entered a town that had expelled its Jews in 1397. According to Detmers, the first place Calvin might have had direct contact with Jews and Judaism was during his brief 1536 stay in the northern Italian city of Ferrara, where about 3000 Jews lived. Yet, Calvin never mentioned any contact with Jews at this time. Likewise, contact in Geneva was unlikely, as Geneva and its surrounding territories expelled the Jews in 1491. Yet, Detmers argues that Calvin must have been aware of the small Jewish population in Frankfurt am Main during his visit in 1539. Likewise, while Strasbourg did not allow Jews permanent residence, Jews traveled through the city for commerce. Calvin was likely privy to the debates of the Strasbourg leaders Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito concerning toleration of Jews and Judaism during his years in Strasbourg and his later continued contacts with the city's leaders ([32], pp. 203–6).

With the exception of a handful of possible encounters, the fact remains that Luther and Calvin wrote concerning Jews and Judaism within contexts in which very few actual Jews resided, let

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Calvin's reading of Romans 9 to 11, see ([34], pp. 18–21; [38], pp. 189–91).

alone traveled. Hence, one might ask, “What is going on? Why do Jews appear so frequently in their writings?” Concerning Luther, one could point to the specific incidences of public Jewish blasphemy, but this does not account for the fact that Luther wrote about Jews and Judaism consistently across his lifetime. Scholars frequently observe that Luther ([14], pp. 375–76; [12], p. 50; [6], pp. 367–71; [20], pp. 140–41; [13], pp. 96–97; [7], p. 126) and Calvin’s ([30], p. 121; [31], pp. 108–19; [32], pp. 215–17) engagement with Jews and Judaism overwhelming centered upon biblical interpretation. Yet surprisingly, scholars fail to connect this focus with the larger issues at stake for the Protestant reformers. In a world in which Protestant reformers such as Luther and Calvin set forth Scripture as the prime authority for Christian belief and practice, issues of biblical interpretation were of paramount importance. Specifically, Luther and Calvin insisted upon the perspicuity of Scripture—perspicuity defined by Scripture’s clear revelation of Jesus Christ, justification by faith alone, and God’s providential purposes for the church revealed in Christ [52–55]). Any challenge to Scripture’s perspicuity, stability, and authority threatened to undermine their reforming efforts and central teachings. Hence, biblical interpretation and the perspicuity of Scripture, in particular, served as important contexts in which to understand Luther and Calvin’s engagement with Jews and Judaism, for their negative statements concerning Jews and Judaism often focused upon matters pertaining to biblical interpretation. The fact that very few Jews lived among them did not deter them, for Jewish exegesis—made available by the growth of Christian Hebraism in the sixteenth century—posed a very real threat to the perspicuity, stability, and authority of Scripture. Hence, sixteenth-century Christian Hebraism is another crucial context in which to understand Protestant reformers’ teachings on Jews and Judaism.

### 3.1. Centrality of Biblical Interpretation for Luther

Luther’s negative appraisal of Jewish exegesis was prominent across his lifetime. As early as his first lectures on the Psalms (1513–15), Luther expressed his enduring concern to defend christological interpretation of the Old Testament ([12], p. 50; [7], pp. 126–28; [6], pp. 353, 363, 367–69, 371; [13], pp. 72, 96–98). In the preface, he wrote, “Every prophecy and every prophet must be understood as referring to Christ the Lord . . . For thus He Himself says: ‘Search the Scriptures; it is they that bear witness to Me’ (Jn 5:39). Otherwise it is most certain that the searchers will not find that for which they are searching. For that reason some explain very many psalms not prophetically but historically, following certain Hebrew rabbis who are falsifiers and inventors of Jewish vanities” ([17], LW 10:7). For Luther, prophecies of Christ’s incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension are the primary content of Old Testament prophecy. Moreover, he insisted that all Scripture points to Christ. The fact that the Jews have rejected Christ means that they cannot by definition be right readers of Scripture, for, according to Luther, they completely miss the key subject matter ([17], LW 10:3, 7; 33:26; 34:112; 35:122, 236; [33], pp. 38–44).<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, Luther argued that the Jews not only fail to see Christ as the true content of Scripture, but they also lack knowledge of the chief theological loci revealed in Scripture—namely, right understandings of faith and works, law and gospel, and justification by faith alone.<sup>6</sup> Instead, asserted Luther, Jews trust in their lineage, glory in the law, boast in their circumcision, cling to their works, and expect a carnal fulfilment of God’s promises. Hence, they read Scripture “carnally” and actively promote works righteousness. Indeed, the Jews exemplify the works righteousness and trust in the wrong things that Luther’s whole career stood against. He then employed Jews as an

<sup>5</sup> Luther wrote, “Moreover, it is certain that after the Jews had denied Christ, they lost the subject matter. For this reason they are incapable of teaching anything sound and torture themselves in vain with matters of grammar” ([17], LW 3:358).

<sup>6</sup> In his 1532 comments on Ps 51, Luther wrote, “The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside of this subject is error and poison. All Scripture points to this, that God commends his kindness to us and his Son restores to righteousness and life the nature that has fallen into sin and condemnation” ([17], LW 12:311).

interpretive tool to unveil such wrong teachings within Roman Catholicism, for Luther frequently paralleled the Jews and the Roman Catholics. Just as the Jews trust in works, the Roman Catholics cling to their masses, sacrament of penance, and works of satisfaction. Just as the Jews trust in their physical lineage, the priests trust in their titles and vows. Just as the Jews read Scripture carnally, so do the Roman Catholics.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Luther's use of the Jews as a trope to attack his opponents points to a larger antipathy toward Jews and Judaism extant in late-medieval and sixteenth-century Christian culture. In the end, Luther positioned Jews and Judaism directly contrary to Christ and the gospel and, therefore, directly contrary to his central teachings ([13], pp. 72–73). They threatened to thwart the very perspicuity of Scripture that Luther defined precisely in terms of these key teachings.

For Luther, the Jews in Scripture provided ample evidence of their blindness toward the true subject matter of God's Word. Luther's readings of medieval Jewish exegesis furthered this negative appraisal. In his condemnations of Jewish exegesis, Luther frequently pointed to the ways in which Jews corrupt or distort Scripture's meaning ([17], LW 3:115, 296, 337, 353; 4:187, 263; 6:136, 181–82, 291–92). His larger concern to preserve the clarity of Scripture quickly emerges, for he frequently lamented the ways Jews obscure the true meaning of Scripture. For example, commenting on Gen 33:18, Luther wrote, "The Jews obscure the genuine sense by their ambiguities, drawing words into varied and manifold meanings, and they do this with the set purpose of contriving questions and errors of every kind" ([17], LW 6:181–82).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, he commented on Gen 24:12–14, "The Jews deserve our disgust; for they obscure the proper force of words, weaken it, as it were, and make the words ambiguous" ([17], LW 4:263). Upon later awareness of public Jewish blasphemy, Luther's rhetoric expanded from viewing the Jews as blind and unable to grasp Scripture's true content to depicting the Jews increasingly as actively lying and perverting Scripture. For example, in his later lectures on Genesis (1535–45), Luther exclaimed, "[The Jews] are the most accursed people and are held captive and possessed by Satan . . . I violently hate the comments of the rabbis, in which they wickedly corrupt Holy Scripture by their lies" ([17], LW 6:292).<sup>9</sup>

The Jews, however, were not the only target of Luther's criticisms of Jewish exegesis. Luther aimed them equally at sixteenth-century Christian Hebraists, whom he also viewed as in danger of losing Scripture's prime subject matter through their dependence on Jewish exegesis—specifically in the priority many Christian Hebraists gave to the original, historical sense of the Old Testament text ([13], p. 97; [6], p. 362). For example, the Christian Hebraist Sebastian Münster tended to follow a historical reading of the Old Testament, often neglecting traditional christological exegesis. Such concerns against Christian Hebraists acquired a sharper tone in Luther's later years, as seen in his lectures on Genesis and 1543 anti-Jewish treatises. For example, in *On the Ineffable Name*, Luther explicitly warned sixteenth-century Christian-Hebraists, "If a Christian seeks understanding in the Scriptures from Jews despite such damnation and judgment, what else does he do but that he seeks the face of a blind man, cleverness from a madman, death from life, and grace and truth from the Devil?" ([56], p. 222). For Luther, the threat to the clarity of Scripture from the Jews was very real, for he believed many of his fellow Christians had already been deceived.

In sum, Jews and Judaism were a central concern for Luther across his lifetime. Jews failed to see Christ as the true subject matter of Scripture and justification by faith alone as the key to its perspicuity. For Luther, biblical and contemporary Jews precisely exemplified wrong dependence on the Law, wrong trust in works for their salvation, and carnal rather than spiritual understandings of God's promises—all of which threatened to undermine clear teachings of Scripture. Moreover, the Jews'

<sup>7</sup> For examples, see ([33], pp. 42–44; [17], LW 3:76, 81, 89, 97, 113, 251, 343; 4:27, 32, 366; 5:104, 141; 7:36, 196; 8:168, 176; 10:3, 39, 58, 61, 155, 377, 512; 11: 13, 39, 208, 512; 16:27; 17:55; 20:71, 268; 22:42, 244–45, 275, 366, 457, 510; 24:259; 26:10, 80, 246–47, 251; 29:49; 30:29, 34, 58; 34:20).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly he wrote on Gen 32:24, "The Jews by their ambiguous interpretations have introduced many perversions, especially darkening the passages concerning the Messiah" ([17], LW 6:136), and on Gen 35:17, "For when the Jews have doubts about a word, they resort to equivocation and multiply meanings and make it more obscure by their glosses" ([17], LW 6:266).

<sup>9</sup> See also ([17], LW 3:115, 296, 337, 353; 4:187, 263; 6:136, 181–82, 291–92; 22:244–45, 245, 465; 47:215, 244).

threat to the perspicuity of Scripture—particularly to christological reading of the Old Testament—was made all the more real and close to home through sixteenth-century Christian Hebraists' appropriation of Jewish exegesis and Jewish exegetical principles. For Luther, christological exegesis of the Old Testament and key reformational teachings that he genuinely believed were the perspicuous content of Scripture were at stake and demanded defense.

### 3.2. Centrality of Biblical Interpretation for Calvin

Biblical interpretation was equally central in Calvin's engagement with Jews and Judaism, with several similarities and some important differences. Like Luther, Calvin asserted that Christ is the content and goal of all Scripture ([57], p. 70). Hence, in rejecting Christ, Jews cannot read Scripture rightly ([58], pp. 70, 101). Like Luther, Calvin's defense of christological readings of many Old Testament passages against Jewish counter-readings exhibited the central concern for Scripture's perspicuity. A classic case is Ps 22:16, in which Christian and Jewish interpreters argue over whether a particular Hebrew word ends in a *yod* or a *vav*. Jewish interpreters opt for the *yod* with the literal reading "like a lion," while the Christian interpreters assert the *vav* with the meaning "they have pierced" to refer to the piercing of Christ's hands and feet in the crucifixion. Calvin commented, "The Jews prate much about the literal sense being purposely and deliberately overthrown by our rendering the original word as 'they have pierced' . . . Very great suspicion of falsehood, however, attaches to them, seeing it is the uppermost desire of their hearts to despoil the crucified Jesus and to divest him of his character as the Messiah and Redeemer. If we receive this reading as they would have us to do, the sense would be enveloped in marvelous obscurity" ([59], vol. 1, pp. 373–74). Similarly, Calvin contended that Jews deliberately obscured Ps 109:8 in order to undermine Peter's application of this verse to Judas's betrayal of Christ (Acts 1:20). Calvin wrote, "There is good reason to believe that, in [expounding this passage] the Jewish interpreters are actuated by pure malice. What purpose can it serve to pervert the sense of a word, the meaning of which is so pointed and plain, unless that under the influence of a malignant spirit they endeavor to obscure the passage to make it appear not to be properly quoted by Peter?" ([59], vol. 4, p. 278). Calvin saw this same malicious intent in the Jews' rejection of the Gospel writers placing the words of Ps. 118:26 on the tongues of those who celebrated Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Matt 21:9, Mk 11:9, Lk 19:38). Likewise, asserted Calvin, the Jews aimed to "mystify" the prediction of Christ in the figure of Melchizedek in Ps 110:4 ([59], vol. 4, pp. 304, 395). In sum, Calvin sought to defend against the Jews' "malevolent" attempts to obscure the clarity of the christological content of Scripture.

Calvin's concern for the "simple and plain" sense of Scripture was a second aspect that led him to criticize Jewish exegesis. For Calvin, the "simple" sense of Scripture preserved and made accessible its perspicuity. In his Old Testament exegesis, Calvin repudiated what he viewed as Jewish "fables," "fanciful foolishness," "frivolous stories," or "trifling conjectures."<sup>10</sup> In each case, he pointed to the "simple" meaning or "plain" sense of the text and warned the reader to avoid "Jewish subtleties." He was keenly aware of the benefits and pitfalls of the use of Jewish exegesis in his day, especially its frequent use among close Christian Hebraist colleagues—Martin Bucer foremost among them. Calvin, however, more often explicitly referred to Jewish exegesis when criticizing it. Yet, he silently employed Jewish exegesis when he believed it clarified the "simple, plain" sense of the text and buttressed the key practices of attention to historical and literary contexts, scope, and authorial intention [60]. Conversely, Calvin repudiated Jewish and Christian interpreters alike if they strayed from these exegetical principles.<sup>11</sup> Yet, he accused Jews of deliberate malice, such as his comments on Ps 136:13, "We may well laugh at such fooleries, yet we hold them at the same time in detestation; for there

<sup>10</sup> See Calvin's comments on Ps 36:7, Ps 103:4, Ps 136:13, Ex 4:24, Ex 12:12, Ex 23:20, Lev 12:2, Lev 21:2, Deut 4:19, Deut 5:26, and Deut 21:10.

<sup>11</sup> See, for examples, his sharp criticisms of the traditional Christian exegesis of Is 63:1, Hos 13:14, Mic 4:13, Mic 5:2, and Zech 13:7, in which Calvin appealed to these same exegetical principles of plain sense, context, and authorial intention.

can be no doubt that the rabbinical writers were led to this [wrong reading] by the devil, as an artful way of discrediting the Scriptures" ([59], vol. 5, p. 186). Calvin was—much like Luther—concerned to preserve the authority and perspicuity of Scripture against what he viewed as deliberate, even malicious, attempts by Jews to obscure it.

Yet, Calvin differed from Luther in a couple of crucial ways. First, Calvin was significantly less inclined in his Old Testament exegesis to deploy the Jews as an interpretive tool in which to highlight wrong trust in carnal things, dependence on the law, and works righteousness. Rather, the Jews served as a pedagogical tool to teach about God's beneficence and providential care of God's people—the church—across all ages.<sup>12</sup> Hence, in contrast to Luther's employment of Old Testament Jews to emphasize the distinctions between the old and new covenants, Calvin employed the stories of the Old Testament Jews as vivid depictions of the unity of the covenant across time. Preserving the unity of the covenant was distinctive to Calvin's treatment of not only biblical Jews, but also contemporary Jews. The unbelief of contemporary Jewry precisely threatened the very assertion of this unity, as seen in Calvin's closing statement in the very section of the *Institutes* where he addresses the unity of the Old and New Testaments:

Nor would the obtuseness of the whole Jewish nation today in awaiting the Messiah's earthly kingdom be less monstrous had the Scriptures not foretold long before that they would receive this punishment for having rejected the gospel. For it so pleased God in righteous judgment to strike blind the minds of those who by refusing the offered light of heaven voluntarily brought darkness upon themselves. Therefore, they read Moses and continually ponder his writings, but they are hampered by a veil from seeing the light shining in his face. Thus, Moses's face will remain covered and hidden from them until it be turned to Christ, from whom they now strive to separate and withdraw as much as they can ([35], 2.10.23).

Here Calvin argued that Jews could not see the true goal and content of Moses' writings until they turned to Christ. The crucial problem, in other words, is that the Jews do not see the unity of the covenant who is Christ, the telos of the law. Likewise, in his unpublished dialogue between a Christian and a Jew, Calvin built the demonstration of the unity of the two Testaments into the structure of the dialogue itself by having the Jew cite New Testament passages and the Christian respond with Old Testament passages ([22]; [34], pp. 23–26).

In strong affirmation of the unity of the covenant, Calvin read Jews of the Old Testament as participants in God's eternal covenant. Thus, Calvin employed the Jews as a pedagogical tool to illustrate the experiences of Old Testament Jews as part of the one story of God's providential activity with God's people; they become the stories of the church. Hence, though Calvin offered a more positive reading of Old Testament Jews, he clearly adhered to Christ as the fulfilment of the old covenant and the church as the True Israel. Contemporary Jews threatened to undermine the unity of the covenant and endanger the very exegetical principles that Calvin maintained for the preservation of the perspicuity of Scripture.

#### 4. Drawing Lessons from Church History

We started with the question, "Did the Protestant reformers contribute anything new to the history of Christian-Jewish relations?" On a certain level, they simply continued traditional Christian teachings. Yet Luther and Calvin's prominent focus on biblical interpretation carried an exigency particular to their time and circumstances. There was an urgency in their defense of the perspicuity and authority of Scripture against Jewish corruption and obfuscation, despite the fact that very few Jews

<sup>12</sup> See Calvin's comments on Joel 2:30–31, Joel 3:9–11, Amos 5:19–20, Obadiah 18, Mic 5:7–8, Mic 5:10–15, Mic 7:9, Mic 7:16–17, preface to Nahum, Nah 1:15, Hab 3:6, Hab 3:13, Zeph 2:9–10, Hagg 2:6–9, Hagg 2:20–23, Zech 2:5, Zech 3:10, Zech 6:1–3, Zech 9:8, and Zech 12:4.

lived in Western Europe. For Luther, this took the distinct form of clarifying the differences between law and gospel and faith and works, and setting forth the clear teaching of justification by faith alone apart from (and even through) the examples of Jewish wrongful trust in their physical heritage, law, and works. For Calvin, this meant upholding the unity of the covenant found in Christ alone and advocating exegetical principles that elucidate the plain sense of Scripture. For both Luther and Calvin, Jews and Judaism posed specific threats to distinct Protestant teachings, such as justification by faith alone, the authority and perspicuity of Scripture, and, for Calvin, the unity of the covenant.

We began by saying that we cannot deal with this difficult topic responsibly without revisiting ethical issues, but a responsible engagement also entails first excavating the contexts and unearthing the logic—some of which this paper has aimed to provide. Just as the reformers accentuated biblical interpretation, I begin with a focus on exegesis. In a provocative article, Andrew Gow argues that Luther's exegesis of Scripture is a form of Christian colonialism. He contends that "in Luther's case, Christ-centered readings had a directly polemical function that colonized and appropriated Hebrew Bible texts" ([61], p. 243). Employing an example of Luther's reading of Isaiah, Gow concludes, "Luther insists on knowing the meaning of the Isaiah passage in a way that excludes Jewish readings, thus appropriating it for Christian truth and denying any other meaning it might have" ([61], p. 245). Indeed, Luther often interpreted Old Testament passages in this manner. The question Gow's article raises for me is, "What makes exegesis colonizing?" With Gow's definition, Calvin's exegesis was equally colonizing, for he interpreted all the stories of Old Testament Jewry as the stories of the church and insisted that they culminate in Christ. If one defines a colonizing exegesis by its appropriation and reconfiguration of the Hebrew Scriptures in order to make Christian truth claims, then Luther and Calvin are not the only ones guilty of a colonizing exegesis; pretty much all of Christianity is guilty of this at one point or another. I contend that such appropriation and reconfiguration for specific truth claims are not in themselves what makes something colonizing—or more precisely, they are not what is ethically questionable. Ethical problems arise when such actions are combined with the denigration of the other and the denial of the other's claim to these texts to define their own identity. Luther and Calvin not only interpreted Scripture to make distinct Christian claims and to buttress Christian identity, but they also vilified Jews, Judaism, and Jewish exegesis. I contend that the former is a necessary aspect of distinct religious identities, and I contend that the latter is where Christians have sinned and acted in ways contrary to the very principles of the Christian faith. History repeatedly shows that denigrating another too often leads to oppressive and violent acts that I, at least, cannot accept as consistent with the principles of the Christian faith. This is not intended to promote a form of relativism; rather, it advocates for real and competing truth claims with the plea for Christians to learn much better how to make such truth claims in a more ethical and faithful fashion.

Hence, such issues around exegesis translate out to broader issues of Christian identity and the ways in which it negotiates that identity, especially when Christianity's truth claims impinge upon the identity of another—whether Jews or multiple "others." Luther and Calvin's examples demonstrate what can happen when Christians care more about the content of their defense than whether their method is ethical and faithful. This does not mean that one has to hold a belief with any less conviction. It does mean that one should be able to do so without disparaging the other. When I teach about the history of Christian-Jewish relations, I often identify it as the "fall" of Christianity, for it serves as a lens for the temptations Christianity faces in many subsequent interactions with the "other" in history. It serves as a mirror for what happens when self-protection, security, or the necessity to be right at any cost becomes Christianity's primary focus rather than the call to humility, goodness, godliness, peace, and putting others before ourselves. This history asks Christians penetrating questions about how one holds truth claims faithfully—how one holds them with conviction while also holding them in a manner consistent with the belief in a God who would die on a cross and take the sin and violence of the world onto God's very own Self, precisely to end all violence and oppression.

Thus, taking a close and painful look at the history of Christian-Jewish relations also calls Christians to read Christianity "against itself." I end with a few examples specific to reading Luther

and Calvin “against themselves.” Luther and Calvin’s profound doctrine of sin and human depravity at the very least should warn Christians that sinful inclinations toward self-protection still powerfully tempt us toward trust in the wrong things (such as articulations of the truth) rather than in the God in whom there is always mystery that finite human constructions could never fully apprehend. Moreover, Luther and Calvin’s powerful teachings of the agency of God’s Word, in which the Word is the true actor in any human transformation, exhorts Christians to the humble recognition of themselves as the mere vessels of this Word. It clarifies the crucial distinction between the verbs “to convert” and “to witness.” No Christian can convert another; only God can do that. Hence, coercive actions on the part of Christians are an abuse of God’s Word. Rather, Christians are called to bear witness of the truth they know in Jesus Christ and let God do what God may with that witness. Furthermore, Luther and Calvin viewed all humanity as having the image of God and repeatedly warned that no one person can possess the whole truth; likewise, no one person possesses full knowledge of a right reading of Scripture ([37], p. 4; [17], LW 34:285–86). This calls for profound humility and calls for the necessity of negotiating truth communally with an openness to the image of God in even the “other.” Lastly, the practice of reading of Scripture “against ourselves” calls for the reading of Christian history “against ourselves” to illuminate the circumstances under which one becomes a “persecuting society” [62] in contrast to the circumstances under which one becomes a cruciform people shaped by the crucified Christ who laid down his life that others might see the love of God.

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