

Luther and the Blessing of Judah

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In memory of Heiko A. Oberman

Luther's writings against the Jews were prompted primarily by controversies among Christians.¹ Luther's earliest treatise on Jews and Judaism, »Daß Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei«, is a case in point.² It was provoked by the Catholic charge, repeated at the Diet of Nuremberg (1522) by no less a personage than the Archduke Ferdinand (1503-1564) himself, that Luther had attacked the perpetual virginity of Mary.³ Luther was alleged by his enemies to have taught that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus, that Mary was not a virgin at the time of the birth of Jesus, and that, indeed, she later gave birth to several other children of whom Joseph was the father. Had Luther taught such a thing it would have rightly been regarded at the time as a scandalous assault on ancient Christian tradition and a relapse into a form of Jewish exegesis.

While Luther was willing to take the blame for views he did hold, he was unwilling to be condemned for views he did not. The charges leveled against Luther by Ferdinand seemed to him to have been trumped up by his enemies. In fact Luther had no quarrel with the old Christian tradition that affirmed the perpetual virginity of Mary and embraced the teaching that Mary was a virgin ante partum, in partu, and post partum. He agreed with his Roman Catholic opponents that the fact that Jesus was born a Jew and a descendent of both Abraham and David did not mean that his birth was any the less miraculous. It was through Mary by a special act of God and not through Joseph by normal sexual relations that Jesus descended from the tribe of Judah.

¹ For a brief historical introduction to many of the issues involved in the question of Luther and the Jews, see Hans J. HILLERBRAND: *Martin Luther and the Jews*. In: *Jews and Christians: exploring the past, present, and future*/ ed. by James H. Charlesworth. NY 1990, 127-150, and Mark U. EDWARDS, JR.: *Luther's last battles: politics and polemics 1531-46*. Ithaca 1983, 115-142. Still useful for its survey of older literature is Johannes BROSEDER: *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten*. M 1972; Heiko A. OBERMAN: *The roots of anti-Semitism in the age of Renaissance and Reformation*. Phil 1981 - 2nd edit. 1984 - emphasizes the importance of apocalyptic expectations for Luther.

² WA 11, (307) 314-336.

³ Edwards: *Luther's last battles*, 121-123.

While Luther was primarily concerned to affirm his orthodoxy on the question of Mary's virginity, he devoted some time in his essay to the question of the Jews. He chided his fellow Christians for their abuse of Jews and urged them to treat Jews more gently in order to win them by their kindness and moderation to faith in Christ. To that end he laid out what he regarded as a substantial case for the messianic claims of Jesus based on a Christian reading of the Old Testament. His aim was to persuade Jews that Jesus Christ was indeed the Messiah for whom they waited. The tone of the treatise is, on the whole, moderate, especially when one compares it with Luther's later writings against the Jews, but the arguments are uncompromisingly opposed to a Jewish reading of the Old Testament.

In 1538 Luther published the first of a series of his more overtly anti-Jewish tracts, »Wider die Sabbather an einen guten Freund«. ⁴ Graf Wolfgang Schlick zu Falkenau († ca 1555) had reported to Luther that certain Moravian Christians were displaying Judaizing tendencies, especially in their return to the keeping of the Sabbath. Luther seemed to assume that the Christians in question had been misled into Judaizing practices by Jews in Moravia, who, he surmised, were actively proselytizing Christians and thereby undercutting the Reformation. Once again Luther feared that the Reformation was being threatened by its enemies, this time by Jews rather than by Roman Catholics or radical Protestants. ⁵

Luther responded to the Christian Sabbatarians by repeating a series of arguments against Judaism drawn from Scripture, theology, and history. To his arsenal of theological and exegetical arguments he added what was missing in his early tract on Judaism; namely, a sharp polemic directed against the Jews themselves. The polemic attempted to discredit the ideas of the Jews by discrediting their persons. How can you trust the ideas of the Jews, if you cannot have full confidence in their character? It was not a new rhetorical technique either in the sixteenth century generally or for Luther specifically. Luther had certainly had the tactic used against him by a long string of Roman Catholic apologists, who attempted to discredit his ideas by portraying his character as morally reprehensible. Luther had used the technique himself when he wrote against the »goat Emser« or the so-called »heavenly prophets«. However, in his later writings against the Jews, Luther used the technique so ferociously that many of his non-Jewish contemporaries like Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) were genuinely shocked.

⁴ WA 50, (309) 312-337.

⁵ Edwards: Luther's last battles, 125-127.

In 1543 Luther issued in rapid succession three treatises against the Jews: »Von den Juden und ihren Lügen«,⁶ »Von Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi«,⁷ and »Von den letzten Worten Davids«.⁸ Because the tone of these treatises is so unrelentingly and immoderately negative, many historians have, quite understandably, been reluctant to devote time to them. There is, after all, so much in Luther to admire that it is not always easy to persuade oneself to study writings that seemed even to his contemporaries to reflect his darker side. But both Luther's harsh polemic against the Jews and the extended exegetical arguments he offered to support his case against them were part of the furniture of his mind, even if both were largely traditional and had been used before by other Christian interpreters. Any picture of Luther that does not take his anti-Jewish writings into account will, unfortunately, be incomplete.

In this essay I want to focus on Luther's biblical exegesis in his anti-Jewish writings by taking one important instance of his messianic reading of the Old Testament, his interpretation of Gn 49, 8-12. In this complex and problematic text the patriarch Jacob blesses Judah and utters prophecies about the future of his descendents. I want to examine Luther's exegesis of this passage, beginning with his early interpretation of Gn 49 in »Daß Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei« and ending with his later anti-Jewish writings.

In order to provide a broader context for Luther's exegesis I want to compare it with the work of two other Christian interpreters, one late medieval commentator and one interpreter contemporary with Luther.⁹ The late medieval commentator I have chosen is the fifteenth-century German theologian, Denis [Dionysius Rickel] the Carthusian (1402/3-1471), whom Luther apparently did not read but who shared with Luther a scholastic education and a hearty respect for the work of Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1340). The sixteenth-century commentator I selected is Luther's younger French contemporary, John Calvin (1509-1564), who subscribed to the »Augsburg Confession« – as the Zurich theologians did not –, but who was not a Lutheran in any sense of the term. Tilman Heshusius (1527-1588) or Joachim Westphal (1510-1574) would have accepted. At the same time Gordon Rupp's (1910-1968) useful term »Martinian« may be too loose to describe accurately their relationship. How-

⁶ WA 53, (412) 417-552.

⁷ WA 53, (573) 379-648.

⁸ WA 54, (16) 28-100.

⁹ I previously compared Denis, Luther, and Calvin on Gn 32 in David C. STEINMETZ: Luther und Calvin am Jabbokufer. *EvTh* 57 (1997), 522-536.

ever, I am not interested in this essay in trying to establish lines of influence between Denis, Luther, and Calvin, important as such lines may be, but only in making clear a framework for understanding Luther's exegesis. How was Gn 49 understood by prominent Christian commentators in Luther's own world? Only when historians know the answer to this question do they have the possibility of making an historically appropriate assessment of Luther's exegesis.

I Denis as an Interpreter of Genesis 49

The text of Gn 49, 8-12 runs as follows:

Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
Your father's sons shall bow down before you.
Judah is a lion's whelp;
From the prey, my son, you have gone up,
He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion,
Like a lioness – who dares rouse him up?
The scepter shall not depart from Judah.
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes;
And the obedience of the peoples is his.
Binding his foal to the vine
And his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
He washes his garments in wine
And his robe in the blood of grapes;
His eyes are darker than wine,
And his teeth whiter than milk.

For the pre-modern reader the text fairly bristles with difficulties. Why is Judah given precedence over all his brothers, including his three elder brothers, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi? What is the meaning of the extended comparison of Judah with a lion? Is it not the case, as some Jewish rabbis have already pointed out, that the scepter departed from Judah during the Babylonian captivity, a time long before the birth of Jesus? What does the word »Shiloh« mean and on what Hebrew verb does it rest? Is Shiloh a person or a place? Who in his right mind would wash his clothing in wine or tie his donkey to a grape arbor? Donkeys, after all, are not noted for their love of grapes. And what is the point of claiming that the coming ruler from the line of Judah will have red eyes and white teeth? Surely there must be more important characteristics than these to mention for such an important figure.

Denis the Carthusian offered two expositions of this passage, a brief one he labeled »spiritual« and a longer one called an »enarratio« devoted to the details of the story. The spiritual exposition focuses on the name »Judah«, which Denis took to mean »praise« or »confession«, and on the words »Judah, your brothers shall praise you«.¹⁰ In this reading Judah is a type of Christ, who from the first moment of the creation of his soul never ceased to praise God. The brothers who shall in their turn praise Christ are the holy apostles, among whom Denis counted as the most fervent »brother« the woman Mary Magdalene. As Jacob had predicted – »Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies« – Christ defeated his enemies, the spiritual principalities and powers ranged against God. But he also achieved a somewhat lesser victory over the »obstinate Jews« at the hands of the Roman armies.

In the enarratio Denis devoted himself to the interpretation of the literal sense of Gn 49. He was not concerned solely with the literal-historical sense of this passage; i. e., what he regarded as its meaning for the past in the unfolding narrative of Jacob's life. He was equally concerned with its literal-prophetic sense; i. e., what he took to be its meaning for the future in the unfolding drama of human redemption. On one level Jacob prophesied about David and the Davidic kingdom; on another he pointed like John the Baptist toward Christ. Although Denis never referred by name to the distinction between the literal-historical and the literal-prophetic senses in his exposition of Gn 49, 8-12, he nevertheless assumed the importance of this distinction throughout his interpretation.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) had distinguished the literal from the spiritual sense of the Bible by indicating that the literal sense is concerned with the meaning of words while the spiritual sense is concerned with the meaning of things.¹¹ Readers engage the literal sense of the biblical text when they focus their attention on the significative power of language. For example, the word »lion« signifies as its »thing« a large member of the cat family native to Africa. Readers, however, can unlock the spiritual sense of the text when they

¹⁰ DIONYSIUS CARTUSIANUS: *Enarrationes piae ac eruditae in quinque Mosaicae legis libros*, ... Coloniae: Petrus Quentel, 1534; VERZEICHNIS DER IM DEUTSCHEN SPRACHBEREICH ERSCHIENENEN DRUCKE DES XVI. JAHRHUNDERTS: VD 16. Bd. 4. S 1985, 400 (D 1887). Citations are taken from the critical edition, Doctor Ecstaticus D. DIONYSIUS CARTUSIANUS: *Opera omnia*. Vol. 1. Monstrolii 1896. The spiritual exposition is found on page 461 and the literal on pages 441-446.

¹¹ THOMAS AQUINAS: *Summa theologiae* lib. 1, qu. 1, art. 10; THOMAS AQUINAS: *Opera omnia*/iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita. Vol. 4. Romae 1888, 25.

shift their attention from the significative power of language to the significative power of things. In this case, the thing, the lion itself, may suggest still other things to the careful reader; e. g., Christ as the »lion of Judah« or Satan who like a lion looks for prey to devour.

Denis accepted the distinction but applied the significative meaning of both words and things to the literal sense.¹² Denis did not spell out in detail his hermeneutic in the context of Jacob's blessing of Judah. But it is clear that he accepted an historical-literal reading of the text that ascribes aspects of Jacob's blessing to the first »lion of Judah«, David, son of Jesse, second king of an undivided Israel. But what had been fulfilled on the literal-historical level in David was fulfilled on the literal-prophetic level »verius«, »aptius«, »apertius«, »clarius«, and »potius« in Christ.¹³ Denis had no need to appeal to a spiritual sense of the text to find scattered allusions to Christ in the blessing of Judah since the literal sense itself, read as the literal-prophetic sense, contained explicit references to Christ throughout.

The movement from David to Christ is consistent throughout the exegesis of Gn 49 by Denis. In his view the text did refer at certain points to David and to that extent the Jewish reading was correct. However, the more important reference was to the descendant of both Jacob and David; namely, Christ in whom the prophecy of Jacob was fulfilled in a more fitting and fuller way than it could ever have been fulfilled in David. Both senses were for Denis the literal sense of the text, that fundamental sense in which doctrine could be grounded.

For example, the oracle, »your father's sons shall bow down before you«, was fulfilled in David when he was made the second king of Israel and adored with »dulia« as a sublime person. It was fulfilled more completely in Christ when on the day of Pentecost Jews from the scattered tribes of Israel were converted to the Christian gospel. David was the »whelp of a lion« who laid Goliath low; Christ was the stronger – indeed, the strongest – »whelp of a lion« who defeated invisible enemies, especially the prince of darkness himself. As a lion's cub sleeps for three days before waking up to vital activity, so Christ rested for three days in the tomb, though his rest was the death through which he conquered death. His sleep was not a sign of weakness but of strength. No one took his life from him; he voluntarily gave it up. »Who dares rouse him

¹² Dionysius Cartusianus: *Opera omnia* 1, 444.

¹³ Dionysius Cartusianus: *Opera omnia* 1, 441. 443 f.

up?« Only God was powerful enough to »rouse him up« from the sleep of death. Like a lion who is powerful and respected, the risen Christ is the powerful and respected king of kings. No one except God is strong enough to take his everlasting kingdom from him, a fact not invalidated by the temporary rule of tyrants over the Church. Denis did not deny that some of this was true of David, who like a lion was roused up to warfare. But the literal sense of the text fulfilled in David was partial and incomplete, serving only to foreshadow the more complete embodiment in Christ.¹⁴

The problematic prophecy for Denis, however, was Jacob's assertion that »the scepter shall not depart from Judah ... until Shiloh comes«. In point of fact the scepter seems to have departed from Judah on several occasions. According to some Jewish commentators cited by Denis the prophecy might have been fulfilled on one of three occasions: (1) when Saul was made king in Shiloh, (2) when Jereboam I (927-907) was made king of the ten tribes who seceded from the united kingdom ruled by Judah, or (3) when Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and drove the southern kingdom of Judah into a forced exile.¹⁵

Denis rejected the first suggestion out of hand. There were no kings from the tribe of Judah prior to the death of Saul. It was only after Saul died that the kingdom passed to David and so was transferred from Benjamin to Judah. The second suggestion struck Denis as no better. Jereboam I was made king, not in Shiloh but in Shechem. Moreover, the ruling house of David was not displaced by the revolt of the northern tribes but remained in charge of a diminished but nevertheless politically viable southern kingdom. Even Nebuchadnezzar, though he terminated the active rule of a king from the tribe of Judah, did not exterminate the royal line. When the Babylonian captivity ended, the Jews reinstated a kingly succession from the house of Judah. Indeed, the Jews always had a prince from Judah throughout the period of the second temple, even when ruled by alien royal lines. It was not until the time of Herod, the first Gentile king, that the prophecy was fulfilled.¹⁶

Crucial to the reading offered by Denis was the meaning of the Hebrew term »Shiloh«. In his view Jacob was not making a geographical reference to a northern shrine when he mentioned Shiloh. Shiloh was clearly not a place in Israel but a person, »qui mittendus est«. ¹⁷ Denis reaffirmed the Christian ex-

¹⁴ Dionysius Cartusianus: *Opera omnia* I, 442.

¹⁵ Dionysius Cartusianus: *Opera omnia* I, 443.

¹⁶ Dionysius Cartusianus: *Opera omnia* I, 443.

¹⁷ Dionysius Cartusianus: *Opera omnia* I, 443.

egetical tradition that read »Shiloh« in Gn 49 as a messianic reference, a reading bolstered by the ancient Chaldean translation, which also thought it messianic. In this reading the scepter of Judah passed in the reign of Herod to »great David's greater son«, to the messiah of whose kingdom there would be no end. The reference to Shiloh should therefore be understood as a reference to Christ, who had been born from the tribe of Judah through his mother Mary.

Denis differed with Nicholas of Lyra over the meaning of the last part of the blessing of Judah.

Binding his foal to the vine
And his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
He washes his garments in wine
And his robe in the blood of grapes;
His eyes are darker than wine,
And his teeth whiter than milk.

Lyra had argued that these words indicated that the extreme fertility of the earth was part of the promise of God. So great will be the abundance that one can even wash one's clothing in wine. He rejected all traditional Christian explanations as spiritual rather than literal.¹⁸

For example, Jerome (347/48-420) and Origen (185-254) had argued that »binding his ... colt to the choice vine« meant that the Gentiles were now bound to the Apostles, who themselves came from the Jews. On the other hand, the »Glossa ordinaria« had argued »clarius« that Christ himself was bound by the chain of love and discipline to the vine, the congregation of the Apostles, the primitive Church gathered from Jews and Gentiles. Denis rejected the notion of Lyra that either of these readings were »spiritual« and embraced rather the exegetical argument of Paul of Burgos (1351-1435).¹⁹ Paul had maintained against Lyra that the traditional Christian readings of Jerome, Origen and the »Glossa ordinaria« were in fact literal and not spiritual. After all, Jacob had spoken metaphorically in Gn 49 and one ought not therefore be surprised that the literal sense of this text is fairly expansive. Moreover and even more importantly, the traditional readings recognized – as Lyra did not – that what is important in Gn 49 is not what is signified by the words but by the things evoked by the words. In short, Paul of Burgos appealed to the double-literal sense. By doing so, he was able to read the traditional Christian exegesis

18 Dionysius Cartusianus: Opera omnia 1, 444.

19 Dionysius Cartusianus: Opera omnia 1, 444f.

of the latter part of the oracle as its literal-prophetic sense. Denis hailed the answer of Paul of Burgos as the true and proper Catholic approach to the text. To find Christ in the text for Denis was to read the text »ad literam«.

Authorized by the double-literal hermeneutic, Denis made quick work of the remaining details of Jacob's blessing.²⁰ The reference to a donkey recalls the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The suggestion that Jesus might wash his clothes in wine is a veiled reference to his suffering and death. Christ's pallium is his mystical body, the Church, which he washed with his own blood. The reference to the eyes of Christ in this passage recalls the role of the apostles and evangelists, while the reference to his teeth reminds the reader of the preachers who masticate spiritual food for the Church. An earlier generation might have regarded such exegesis as allegorical, but Denis was convinced it should all be regarded as literal.

II Luther as an Interpreter of Genesis 49

In his early treatise, »Daß Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei«, Luther attacked what he regarded as the weird and preposterous Jewish exegesis of Gn 49.²¹ He was particularly annoyed with the Jewish insistence that the scepter had departed from Judah prior to the reign of Herod. Luther had no doubt that the Shiloh whose coming was predicted by Jacob was the Messiah and that the predicted Messiah was Jesus Christ. It was therefore obvious to him that the scepter could not have departed from Judah until the birth of Jesus and that its departure was less a loss than a transformation. The kings of Judah had reigned over a temporal kingdom that they bequeathed to their successors. The kingdom over which the Shiloh currently reigns is a spiritual kingdom and therefore eternal. Judah had many kings; the messianic kingdom has only one. Yet the messianic king like all the kings who preceded him was a descendant of David.

Like Denis, Luther rejected the Jewish argument that the scepter had departed from Judah at the time of the Babylonian captivity.²² The royal line continued unbroken from Jechoniah to Zerubbabel, though an unbroken royal line was not the most important point for Luther. »Scepter« could as easily

20 Dionysius Cartusianus: *Opera omnia* I, 445 f.

21 See, for example, WA II, 327, 4-22.

22 WA II, 326, 3-6.

refer to a »hegemony« as a kingdom.²³ It was therefore not necessary for a king to be enthroned in Jerusalem for the hegemony of Judah to remain intact. Furthermore, the Jews could not deny that this hegemonic continuity was broken in the first century and that no temporal kingdom under the leadership of Judah had been in place for 1500 years. Considered as a temporal kingship the scepter had undoubtedly departed from Judah.

Luther was disinclined to argue with Jewish interpreters over the meaning of the Hebrew word, »Shiloh«. »Shiloh« might mean a lord or at least someone well-to-do or prosperous. Possibly the word »Wollfart« might serve as a useful translation.²⁴ But whether the word meant a lord or a prosperous person was much less important to Luther than that it referred to the Messiah. Luther was concerned »not with the name, but with the person«. The scepter would not depart until the Messiah – namely, Jesus of Nazareth – appeared. Jacob's blessing of Judah described the temporal kingdom of the Jews from David to the coming of the Shiloh and the eternal and spiritual kingdom of Christ thereafter.

Precisely because the kingdom of Christ is a spiritual kingdom, it was necessary for Christ to die and rise again from the dead.²⁵ This is a point not argued by Denis, but important for Luther. In order to be a king it was necessary for Jesus to be a mortal man from the house of Judah. But in order to reign over an immortal kingdom, it was necessary for him to put off his mortality and clothe himself with immortality. Therefore the blessing of Judah is also by its very nature a proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When pressed by Jewish interpreters – or at least by hypothetical Jewish interpreters – concerning the relevance for Jesus Christ of the oracle about washing one's clothing in wine, Luther replied that a »simpleton« might infer from this passage that the Shiloh would be so rich a king that wine would be as common as water. But the Shiloh is no ordinary king who will bequeath his kingdom to his heirs. He is the sole king of an eternal kingdom. Since the kingdom is spiritual, the oracle must be spiritual, too. Binding the colt and washing one's garments in wine meant to Luther that Christ governs consciences through his gospel and »drowns sinners in God« with the comfort of his infinite mercy. Luther justified this reading, not by an appeal to the double-literal sense, but by an appeal to the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom. Only a »simpleton« would read the text in a woodenly literal sense.²⁶

²³ WA 11, 326, 9: »... nicht alleyn konigreich, sondern auch furstenthum, ...«

²⁴ WA 11, 327, 15-22.

²⁵ WA 11, 328, 9-20.

Luther was particularly interested in the words of the blessing that suggested that the Shiloh could command »the obedience of the peoples«. ²⁷ This is a prophecy that was fulfilled neither in David nor in Solomon. Both the Davidic and Solomonic kingdoms were restricted to a small corner of the Middle East. Jesus, on the contrary, is accepted as lord and king throughout the world. Never has any Jew, certainly no Jew from the house of Judah, commanded the respect and obedience of the Gentiles like Jesus of Nazareth. Even Jews who were important men in Gentile kingdoms, like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, or Mordecai in Persia, did not command the loyalty and obedience of Gentiles like Jesus. He is the only person from the house of Judah to whom the Gentiles have ever accorded such nearly universal respect. Luther could find only one compelling explanation for the role of Jesus among the Gentiles; namely, that God has by a miracle opened their hearts to this Jew, because this Jew and no other is the true Messiah promised by Jacob.

Luther returned to Gn 49 in 1543 in »Von den Juden und ihren Lügen,« one of the more vitriolic of his anti-Jewish writings. In Luther's view rabbinic Judaism competed with Christianity for the right to be thought the true heir of ancient Israel and the correct interpreter of its Scriptures. It was a competition that rabbinic Judaism lost. Nowhere is its failure more apparent than in its interpretation of the blessing of Judah, where its glosses and traditions deflect the reader away from the true meaning of the text. In this respect the rabbis are as bad as the papists who privilege tradition over the actual words of the biblical text. How far the rabbis deviated from the meaning of the text can be demonstrated when one considers the ancient Chaldean translation of Gn 49 and then carefully dissects the specific rabbinic arguments proposed against a Christian reading. Luther was satisfied that such deliberations would persuade the fair-minded reader that the Christian reading and the ancient Jewish meaning were one and the same. ²⁸

As Luther understood matters, the Chaldean version – which is Jewish and not Christian in origin – translates »scepter« as »shultan« or »prince« and »rod« as »saphra« or »sage«. Furthermore, the Chaldean version understands »Shiloh« to be a messianic title. Therefore the Chaldean version of the text reads the words, »the scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes«, as »the prince shall not depart from Judah,

²⁶ WA II, 328, 21-27.

²⁷ WA II, 330, 23 - 331, 22.

²⁸ WA 53, 450, 19 - 451, 8.

nor the learned counselor from between his feet [possibly a reference to the Sanhedrin], until the Messiah comes«. What clearer statement could there be – and that from a Jewish source – of the situation during the reign of Herod I (ca 73, 37-4 BC)? The Romans ended the hegemony of Judah and the kingdom passed forever to Jesus Christ.

Luther then made quick work of the alternative rabbinical interpretations of this passage, some of which we have encountered already.²⁹ »Shiloh« could not be a reference to a place where Saul was anointed king since he was anointed in Ramath and Judah had no hegemony during the tumultuous period of the judges. Indeed, of all the judges only Othniel may have been from the tribe of Judah, though his exact lineage is uncertain. In short, there was no scepter for Judah to lose.

Judah did, of course, lose the loyalty of ten tribes of Israel when Jereboam I was crowned king of the northern kingdom. But Jereboam I was crowned in Shechem rather than Shiloh and Judah did not lose the loyalty of the southern kingdom. Furthermore, there were members of the ten tribes who lived in cities controlled by Judah and Benjamin. Even in the case of this remnant of an undivided Israel the scepter had not departed from Judah.

Nor did »Shiloh« refer to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, who was sent by God to lead Judah into captivity. The king of Babylon was no Messiah, as the Jews know only too well. The captivity was a time of punishment, but it was also a time of great prophets. Furthermore, Jehoiachin was treated like a king in Babylon and was succeeded by a king from the Davidic line. Therefore the Babylonian Captivity can only be looked upon as a »light flogging« and not as a loss of scepter.³⁰

Nor did Luther buy the interpretation that the »rod« was the rod of punishment which the Jews suffered in exile. With that same rod, argued some rabbis, the Messiah will come and slay the Gentiles, an interpretation Luther regarded as pure humbug. Explanations must explain and a rabbinic interpretation that read »rod« as »rod of punishment« did not account for the details of the text. Luther was also not enamored of the Jewish reading that made the coming of the Messiah the reason why the scepter could not depart. It might have departed had the Messiah not come. But in Luther's view this reading simply turned the text on its head. The text did not say that the scepter will

²⁹ WA 53, 457, 31 - 461, 15.

³⁰ WA 53, 458, 37 - 459, 16.

remain because the Messiah has come, but that the coming of the Messiah will coincide with the loss of the scepter. The crucial word in the text is »until«, not »because«.

Luther also found the rabbinic argument absurd that read the verb »come« as the verb »set«. In this reading the text would read, »the scepter will not depart from Judah until the city of Shiloh sets, i. e., goes down«. Luther regarded such a reading as obviously forced and so asked the inevitable question why? In his view the answer was equally obvious. The rabbinic readings were constructions designed to evade the thrust of Gn 49. The plain meaning of the text was evident in the Chaldean translation – as Lyra had already pointed out and Luther repeated – the Messiah came when the hegemony of Judah ended. That loss of hegemony took place in the first century during the reign of Herod, when Jesus of Nazareth was born to the tribe of Judah through his mother Mary. Judah's hegemony in the sense of a temporal kingdom has been lost for 1500 years and never been restored.

Luther was also not much impressed by the argument – on the face of it so appealing in its disarming humility – that the coming of the Messiah had been delayed by the sins of the Jewish people.³¹ The fact is that all human beings, whether Jew or Gentile, are sinful. If God cannot act until human beings are righteous, God will not act at all. While it is undoubtedly true that God sometimes makes conditional promises – if you do this, I will do that – there are also promises that he makes absolutely and unconditionally. The promise of a coming Messiah was just such an unconditional and absolute promise. The coming of the Messiah is neither hastened by human goodness nor retarded by human wickedness. The Shiloh comes whether human beings are ready for him or not. God cannot be held hostage to human virtue or rendered impotent by human sin.

Luther was convinced that the Jews of his own day were not misled or simply in error. They were willfully and obstinately denying a truth as plain and obvious as the words of Gn 1, 1 »in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth«. If the rabbis applied to Gn 1 the hermeneutic they applied to Gn 49, they would »prattle that these are not the heaven and earth mentioned in Gn 1, or that they were not heaven and earth at all, but were called something else«. Luther had already established in his early »Dictata super Psalterium« that a liar is anyone who contradicts God's self revelation, turning his

31 WA 53, 456, 20 - 457, 22.

yes into a no and his no into a yes. »Omnis homo mendax« describes the universal human condition.³² What was plain to Luther was that Jacob prophesied that the Messiah would come when Judah lost its scepter. Rabbinical Judaism denied the obvious meaning of that oracle and so treated God as a liar. Jewish exegesis of Gn 49 is a parade example of the particular and deadly form of mendaciousness embraced by modern Jews, who deny the import of the sayings of ancient Jews and so refuse to justify God in his Word.³³

III Calvin as an Interpreter of Genesis 49

On the subject of the Jewish exegesis of Gn 49, Calvin did not seem to have had an opinion at great variance with Luther. He remarked, for example, in his »Comentarius in Genesin« (1554) that »though this passage is obscure, it would not have been very difficult to elicit its genuine sense, if the Jews, with their accustomed malignity, had not endeavored to envelop it in clouds.«³⁴ The text states clearly that the Messiah will spring from the tribe of Judah. But Jewish interpreters »purposely catch at every possible subterfuge, by which they may lead themselves and others far astray in tortuous by-paths«. The Jews have been blinded by »bitterness«, »obstinacy«, and the »lust of contention«. No wonder they »dissent entirely from the meaning of the patriarch« in their reading of Jacob's oracle. Although Calvin did not recommend anything like the harsh treatment of the Jews proposed by Luther and confessed that he did »not willingly glory in their calamity«, he nevertheless did suggest that the 1500-year-old resistance of the Jews to Jesus as the Messiah was evidence that they were »worthy to perish a thousand times without remedy«.³⁵

If Calvin was opposed to Jewish exegesis of Gn 49, he was uneasy about certain forms of Christian exegesis. He agreed with traditional exegesis that Jacob served as a prophet when he blessed Judah. He served in this context as the mouth of God himself. Calvin was particularly impressed with Jacob's ability to lay out with great precision the boundaries of the lands that would be occupied by the various Israelite tribes. Such knowledge was impressive

32 See, for example, David C. STEINMETZ: *Luther and Staupitz: an essay in the intellectual origins of the Protestant Reformation*. Durham, NC 1980, 78-95.

33 WA 50, 316, 13 - 317, 39.

34 Johannes CALVIN: *Opera, quae supersunt omnia*. Vol. 23/ ed. by Gulielmus Baum; Eduardus Cunitz; Eduardus Reuss. = *Corpus reformatorum*. Bd. 51. Brunsvigae 1882, 598 [misprint: 958] f.

35 *Corpus reformatorum* 51, 602.

evidence that Jacob was under the influence of the Holy Spirit. But high regard for Jacob's oracle did not comport well in Calvin's mind with an appeal to allegory or an overemphasis on certain words that could serve in the end only to make Christian exegesis look ridiculous to Jews. Calvin declared that he did not intend to »depreciate the literal sense, as if it did not contain speculations sufficiently profound« that would without allegorical elaboration provide for the »solid edification of the pious«. What responsible Christian interpreters needed to lay bare was the »design of the Holy Spirit« embedded in that literal sense.³⁶

However, the literal sense for Calvin was not restricted to the past, but embraced the remote future as well. Indeed, a good deal of what Denis had regarded as the literal-prophetic sense and what Luther had dubbed merely »spiritual« was treated by Calvin as its simple literal or plain sense. The literal sense embraced far more in its scope than the political hegemony of Judah or the establishment of the Davidic kingdom. As Calvin understood Gn 49, the Davidic kingdom »was a kind of prelude, and shadowy representation of that greater grace which was delayed, and held in suspense, until the advent of the Messiah«. ³⁷ The movement from David to Christ and from a temporal kingdom to an eternal one was a movement from shadow to substance but not from the literal sense to allegory. Both shadow and substance belonged to the literal sense of the text.

Calvin rejected the Jewish theories that the scepter had either departed from Judah at the secession of the Northern Kingdom or at the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. He repeated against those views the general argument found also in Denis and Luther that the scepter did not require a reigning king in Jerusalem in order to remain in the hands of Judah. Indeed, Calvin quoted with some approbation the view put forward by various rabbis that »the *right* of government (*ius regnandi*) was given to the tribe of Judah, because it was unlawful for it to be transferred elsewhere, but that it was not necessary that the *glory* of crown (*gloria coronis*) once given should be perpetuated«. ³⁸ This argument had been used to defend the notion that the »right« of the scepter had not yet passed from Judah, even after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans. Calvin, needless to say, rejected the Jewish position, but applied the distinction of »right« and »glory« to Second Temple Judaism. The royal

³⁶ Corpus reformatorum 51, 598.

³⁷ Corpus reformatorum 51, 598.

³⁸ Corpus reformatorum 51, 601.

power of Judah was exercised during this period by princes or by the Seventy. But whether exercised by king or by council, the right of the scepter, if not its glory, did not depart from Judah until the Messiah came.

Calvin's reluctance to embrace any form of allegorical exegesis led him to differ with Denis and Luther over the meaning of the reference to donkeys tethered to vines and to clothes washed in wine. Denis read the references as »literal-prophetic« and Luther as »spiritual«. Both believed that Jacob was referring to the eternal kingdom of the Messiah. Calvin, on the other hand, preferred to avoid a spiritual reading of the text and referred it rather to the earthly kingdom of Judah. Jacob's language was a metaphorical description of the prosperity of that kingdom, not of course to be taken literally, but also not to be read allegorically. Allegory in the wrong place could weaken rather than strengthen the Christian reading of Gn 49.

IV Conclusions

Some things seem reasonably clear from this brief comparison of the old Luther with the young – or at least the younger – Luther and of both Luthers with Denis and Calvin:

1. Even though we have only considered in detail three Christian interpreters of Gn 49, those three interpreters offer important evidence that there was in Luther's day a well-established tradition for a Christian reading of this text. Denis, Luther, and Calvin agreed, for example, that Gn 49 was a messianic prophecy and that the term »Shiloh« was a messianic title. All three assigned the text both a near and a remote referent; namely, the Davidic kingdom – the near referent – and the eternal kingdom of Christ – the remote referent – they differed only in their hermeneutical justification for such a conclusion. Denis rested his hermeneutic on the distinction between the literal-historical and literal-prophetic senses of scripture, Luther on the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom, and Calvin on the shadowy nature of the Davidic kingdom. Their differing approaches, however, led to the same conclusion. Jacob had in mind not only the glory of the kings of Judah but also a messianic kingdom.

The form of their arguments is strikingly similar. All three interpreters were careful to list the principal rabbinic interpretations against a Christian reading of Gn 49. They countered what they regarded as the wholly unsatisfactory rabbinic exegesis with arguments that were more or less the same. Contrary to what some rabbis thought, the scepter did not depart from Judah

with the anointing of Saul or the revolt of Jereboam I or the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. Only the establishment of a spiritual and eternal kingdom in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth met the conditions of Jacob's oracle. Calvin alone failed to mention the anointing of Saul, though he did add, and contest, the rabbinic objection that the right of the scepter had never departed from Judah. Still one can say that the similarities in their exegesis extend not merely to the substance of their arguments but also to their form.

2. Of the three interpreters Denis had the least to say about modern Jews, aside from the fact that he regarded them as »obstinate«. Luther and Calvin, on the other hand, offered a long series of complaints against rabbinic Judaism. The rabbis seemed to them willing to accept any reading of the blessing of Judah, however farfetched and fanciful, that did not compel them to identify the Shiloh with Jesus of Nazareth or the departure of the scepter with the end of Second Temple Judaism. Rabbinic exegesis was therefore not merely in error. It was in the view of Luther and Calvin a willfully and culpably false construct that did not adequately account for the details of Gn 49.

3. There seems to be no essential difference between Luther's exegesis of Gn 49 in his earlier and later writings. To be sure, Luther spent more time in »Von den Juden und ihren Lügen« on the Hebrew text, emphasized the importance of the Chaldean translation which gave the text a messianic reading, and attempted to refute additional Jewish interpretations not mentioned in his earlier treatise. But the heart of his argument remained unchanged. The blessing of Judah referred to both the Davidic and the eternal kingdom of Christ. In his view all of the details of the text supported and illustrated that point, including such details as washing one's clothes in wine. Although the tone of »Das Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei« and »Von den Juden und ihren Lügen« differed considerably, the exegetical arguments followed almost without any variation the same trajectory.

4. It is difficult to understand how anyone could ever have accused Luther of Marcionite tendencies. The anti-Jewish writings are themselves fierce testimony that Luther regarded the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture and as essential to the faith and life of the Church as the New Testament. Luther had made the point in »Wider die Sabbather ...« that no one could practice Judaism as it had been practiced in ancient Israel without a temple.³⁹ The temple, priesthood, and sacrifices were essential to Judaism. Loss of the temple meant in

³⁹ WA 50, 323, 20-35.

essence that rabbinic Judaism was supercessionist, since it attempted to replace the Judaism of ancient Israel with something new. The new Judaism of the rabbis interpreted the Bible with the aid of the Talmud and other traditions unknown to the patriarchs and prophets. How helpful were the traditions of this new Judaism? Did such rabbinic traditions unlock or obscure the mysteries of the Old Testament? Who better understood the mind of the ancient Jews, Christian interpreters informed by the New Testament or rabbis informed by post-biblical Jewish traditions? For Luther the unsatisfactory Jewish exegesis of the blessing of Judah was itself impressive evidence how firmly the Church, at least the Church now being reformed by the Word of God, stood in intellectual continuity with ancient Israel and how far from ancient Judaism the newer Judaism of the rabbis had fallen. Luther could even see a parallel between rabbinic Judaism and the Catholic defenders of the papacy. Both valued their traditions more than the text of Scripture. But evangelical Christians and the »ancient true Jews« belonged to the one true Church that had existed since Adam.⁴⁰

The issues raised by Denis, Luther, and Calvin have not all disappeared with time. If anything, some of them have intensified. What is the relation of the Church to ancient Israel or to rabbinic Judaism? Is it possible to speak of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture? If so, how? If not, what are the consequences for the teaching of the Church, especially for a Church more than a little inclined in practice toward the views of Marcion (ca 85-160)? Historians cannot solve these questions – at least not while they are acting as historians. Even theologians may be reluctant to tackle all of them. But historians can at least point out the shining and obvious fact that Luther's anti-Jewish writings do contain substantial exegetical arguments that were important to him and that it would be a serious mistake for anyone attempting to understand Luther to overlook them.

40 WA 53, 450, 33: »... die alten rechten Jüden ...«

Diskussionsthesen

Luthers Bibelauslegung in seinen Spätschriften gegen die Juden läßt sich am besten verstehen, wenn man sie im weiteren Kontext der Geschichte christlicher Bibelauslegung betrachtet. Luthers Exegese von Gn 49, 8-12 bietet sich dafür als ein Paradebeispiel an. Wenn man Luthers Spätexegese von Gn 49 mit seiner früheren Auslegung desselben Textes in »Daß Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei« vergleicht und beide Auslegungen im Kontext der Exegese von Dionysius Cartusianus (1402/3-1471) und Johannes Calvin (1509-1564) wahrnimmt, so lassen sich eine Reihe von diskussionswürdigen Thesen gewinnen:

1. Zur Zeit Luthers gab es eine klare christliche Auslegungstradition dieses Textes, welche die Form wie den Inhalt von Luthers Exegese geprägt hat. Alle drei Ausleger – Luther, Dionysius und Calvin – versuchten, rabbinische Exegese ebenso deutlich zu erklären wie ihr vehement zu widersprechen. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit rabbinischer Exegese wurde offenbar von diesen Theologen als ein wesentlicher Teil der Auslegungsaufgabe angesehen.
2. Alle drei Ausleger waren fest davon überzeugt, daß der Text beides bedeutet, das Königtum Davids und das Reich Christi. Trotzdem gingen die Exegeten von verschiedenen, wenn auch ähnlichen hermeneutischen Voraussetzungen aus. Wichtig für Dionysius war die mittelalterliche Hermeneutik des duplex sensus literalis, für Luther die geistliche Natur des Königreiches Christi, und für Calvin die schattenhafte Natur des Königtums Davids.
3. Luthers Früh- und Spätexegese von Gn 49 blieben sich nahezu gleich. Die wenigen variierenden Einzelheiten scheinen von nur geringer Bedeutung zu sein.
4. Luther glaubte, daß das rabbinische Judentum in Diskontinuität mit dem rechten Judentum des Alten Testaments stehe. Infolgedessen mißverstehen rabbinische Exegeten die Aussagen und Vorhersagen der »alten rechten« Juden. Genau wie die Papisten haben die Rabbiner ihre eigene Traditionen vorangestellt und das Wort Gottes starrsinnig verachtet.
5. Luther glaubte, daß die wahre Kirche Christi in Kontinuität mit dem rechten Judentum des Alten Testaments stehe. Infolgedessen verstehen christliche Exegeten, die das Wort Gottes verehren, die Aussagen und Vorhersagen der »alten rechten« Juden.

Luther's interpretation of the Bible in his late writings against the Jews can best be understood if one considers it in the broader context of the history of the Christian interpretation of the Bible. Luther's exegesis of Gn 49, 8-12 offers an outstanding example of this phenomenon. If one compares Luther's late exegesis of Gn 49 with his earlier interpretation of the same text in »That Jesus Christ was born a Jew« and considers both interpretations in the context of the exegesis of Denis the Carthusian (1402/3-1471) and John Calvin (1509-1564), one can gain through such a comparison a series of theses worthy of discussion:

1. In Luther's time there was a clear Christian tradition of the interpretation of this text that shaped Luther's exegesis in form and content. All three interpreters – Luther, Denis, and Calvin – attempted to explain rabbinic exegesis clearly and to contradict it vigorously. An argument with rabbinic exegesis was evidently regarded by these theologians as an essential part of the task of interpretation.
2. All three interpreters were firmly convinced that the text signifies both the kingdom of David and the kingdom of Christ. Nevertheless the exegetes held different, even if similar, hermeneutical presuppositions. Important for Denis was the medieval hermeneutic of the double literal sense, for Luther the spiritual nature of the kingdom of Christ, and for Calvin the shadowy nature of the kingdom of David.
3. Luther's early and late exegesis of Gn 49 remained almost the same over time. The few details that are somewhat different appear to be of no great significance.
4. Luther believed that rabbinic Judaism stands in discontinuity with the authentic Judaism of the Old Testament. Consequently rabbinic exegetes misunderstand the sayings and prophecies of the »old authentic« Jews. Just like the Papists the Rabbis have given preference to their own traditions and obstinately despised the Word of God.
5. Luther believed that the true Church of Christ stands in continuity with the authentic Judaism of the Old Testament. Consequently Christian exegetes, who revere the Word of God, understand the sayings and prophecies of the »old authentic« Jews.