

The Texts



Kapparot ceremony prior to *Yom Kippur*: symbolic transfer of sins to a fowl (top). Food preparation (bottom left). *Seder*, *Shabbat*, or festive meal (bottom right, above). Immersion in a *Mikveh* (bottom right, below). From Johannes Pfefferkorn, *The Confession of the Jews* [*Ich heysß eyn buchlijn der iuden beicht*] (Cologne: Johannes Landen, 1508), depicting aspects of Jewish religious practice—with significant inaccuracies.

The Text Selections

Luther's references and allusions to Jews, Judaism, synagogue, rabbis, and so on run into the many thousands. The format of a book such as this requires that numerous difficult decisions be made. The guiding principle throughout has been that the text selections, when taken as a whole, will serve as an orientation for students into a challenging subject matter and as an invitation to further study. In working through the selections, students will gain a strong sense of the breadth as well as something of the depth of the problem. The texts are presented chronologically rather than thematically, from the beginning of Luther's career to just days before his death. This chronological presentation reinforces the reality of the Jew as a persistent element in Luther's thought and by no means restricted to his late treatises against the Jews.

In terms of the actual selection of texts and the respective parts thereof, the attempt has been made to present fundamental aspects of Luther's thinking on the Jews. Rather than seeking to elucidate his familiar theological principles per se, the texts in this volume introduce readers to key aspects of Luther's hermeneutics and theological imagination through a specific albeit disorienting lens: The readings have been chosen with an eye toward highlighting how his thought regarding the Jews is so often anchored in the interpretation of concrete biblical texts.

In so far as possible, enough material is provided for each selection so that readers can follow for themselves Luther's mode of thought on the specific issue at hand. Where we have found it helpful to call attention to Luther's glosses, or to clarify a passage by specifying a verse not included in the original text we have used the distinct bracket. Though selections are made from different genres of Luther's writings, the exegetical works, and especially those relating to the Old Testament, are clearly privileged. These texts, of primary importance to Luther as a believer and a scholar, offer a logical and authentic starting point for observing how he thinks and argues with the "Jewish Question" in mind, be it in terms of his biblical interpretation, his theological reflection, or his pastoral and political advice. The only non-Luther text presented is the letter of Rabbi Josel of Rosheim to the Strasbourg City Council, Text #25.

The issue of the Jew in the context of Luther's sermons is complex and rightfully deserves its own treatment. It is noteworthy, however, that a standard locus for Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric—the Holy Week sermon—is notably absent in Luther.

Especially in the Middle Ages, the Holy Week sermon was an annual opportunity for renewing blame against the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ. Though Luther was clearly capable of referring to Jews as Christ-killers, his own Passion sermons show him moving strongly away from traditional recitations of the sufferings of Christ and the anti-Jewish diatribes that naturally followed therefrom.¹



Dukhan (priestly blessing) ceremony (top). Women's gallery (bottom left). Public flogging (bottom right). From Johannes Pfefferkorn, *The Confession of the Jews* [*Ich heysß eyn buchlijn der iuden beicht*] (Cologne: Johannes Landen, 1508), depicting aspects of Jewish religious practice—with significant inaccuracies.

Text #1

First Psalm Lectures (1513–1515)

Language:	Latin
Critical Edition:	WA 55/1; 55/2 (replaces WA 3; 4)
English translation:	LW 10; 11

As a new professor at the University of Wittenberg, Luther chose the Psalms for his first lectures on the Bible, that is, the book that was his most consistent theological and spiritual companion. Presented in the traditional academic style of Glosses (brief grammatical/philological remarks) and Scholia (expansive interpretive remarks), and utilizing the traditional medieval method of fourfold interpretation (literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogical), the lectures are preserved in Luther's own hand (though they were not published). The reader of these lectures *in toto* will note how pervasive is the polemic directed against either the Jews or the synagogue, so pervasive in fact that it rises to the level of a central characteristic of the lectures. While Luther was both an heir to and a purveyor of an already protracted Christian anti-Jewish rhetorical tradition, nevertheless one can speak here of both an *intensification* of such rhetoric and of the creation of *new polemic* in Psalms interpretation where it had not occurred before.¹ Especially noteworthy, however, is the complete absence of traditional accusations of host desecration, well poisoning, and ritual murder. Luther's battle against the Jews, rather, is exegetically and theologically based, that is, it is driven by his understanding of the christological meaning of actual Psalms texts.² In his Preface to the Glosses, Luther states the exegetical principle that drives his reading of the Old Testament in general and of the Psalms in particular: "If the Old Testament can be interpreted by human wisdom without the New Testament, I should say that the New Testament has been given to no purpose. So Paul concluded that 'Christ died to no purpose' if the Law were sufficient (Gal. 2:21)."³

Because the Jews are the prime example of those who would interpret the Old Testament apart from the New, this principle would set him on a career-long collision course with Jewish interpretation and with those in the Christian community who would read the Old Testament in a "Jewish" manner.

Presented here are excerpts from Psalms 1 and 78. Psalm 1, which Luther regarded as a preface to the entire Psalter, sketches the distinction between the righteous and

the wicked. Key polemical themes that emerge in Luther's treatment are: (1) the twofold (and unforgiveable) sin of the Jews, who not only crucified Christ but refuse to confess the sin of having done so; (2) the Jew as negative example and warning to Christians not to behave likewise; (3) the ongoing Jewish crucifixion of Christ via distorted and treacherous interpretation of Scripture;⁴ (4) the linking of Christians with righteousness and Jews with sinfulness.

Psalm 78 is an historical Psalm that narrates the fidelity of God and the rebelliousness of Israel during the deliverance from Egypt, the years in the Wilderness, and the entry into the Promised Land. Luther regarded the Psalm as a sermon of Christ to the synagogue, and in his "spiritual" reading the plagues against the Egyptians become plagues against the Jews, and the driving out of the Canaanites becomes the driving out of the Jews. Here we encounter a classic displacement theology, with the spiritual church (*verus Israel*, true Israel) trumping the carnal synagogue. The final excerpt is one of the stranger things one will encounter in Luther: an extended scatological description of Jewish malice and treachery.



Psalm 1

{LW 10:11–13}⁵

The first psalm speaks literally concerning Christ thus:

1. *Blessed is the man.* He is the only blessed One and the only Man from whose fullness they have all received (John 1:16) that they might be blessed and men and everything that follows in this psalm. He is "the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29), "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20), so that He might also be the firstfruits of those who are awake, namely, in the Spirit. . . . He is a "man" in a threefold sense: first, because He is a man of manly virtue; second, because He is not a boy to be educated but is manly in grace; third, because He has a bride. This is the Man whom a woman has embraced, because as a bridegroom He went forth not only after but also from His chamber (cf. Ps. 19:6), having His own bride from the beginning. *Who has not walked in the counsel of the ungodly*, that is, He did not consent to the designs of the Jews, who afterwards crucified Him. This is the first stage in which all kinds of sins are included. For in whatever kind of sins one sins, one departs from God into the counsel of the ungodly. Ungodliness is against God and also against His worship, which is godliness. The addition of the word "counsel" denotes the vice of the will, because such people do evil on purpose and willingly, deliberately and advisedly, not out of ignorance. Some indeed act in an ungodly manner advisedly, from an evil will, while others depart into this their counsel by consenting to it ignorantly and because they are led astray. *Nor has stood in the way of sinners.* The way of sinners is the very life of the ungodly, which has already been mentioned,

a way upon which those who become ungodly enter. But this second stage is worse. It commits the first sin twofold, and now they are not simply ungodly, but what is more, they are sinners. The word “sin” is quite frequently used in Scripture for idolatry. But this is a double sin, to stand, to defend, to withstand one who tries to correct and recall, to refuse to agree, like Saul, in 1 Sam. 16{:15}, to turn the heart to words of evil for the purpose of excusing the excuses for sins, to justify oneself after he has sinned, and thus to confirm his iniquity against God and His righteousness, that is, to repudiate God and fashion an idol for oneself, the work of his hands, to refuse confession and glory to God. This is what the Jews did against Christ then and are still doing until now. Therefore they are already not merely ungodly, involved in a simple sin, but they are also sinners in a twofold sense. Thus Jeremiah, Lam. 1{:8}, says: “Jerusalem sinned grievously, therefore she became unstable.” He says she “sinned a sin,” that is, she doubled a simple sin. In chapter 2 of the same prophet (Jer. 2{:13}) we read: “My people have committed two evils.” This is why he said in the following, “I have not sinned” (cf. Jer. 2{:23}), although, of course, the people had sinned. [Prov. 30{:20}): “This (namely, as follows) is the way of an adulteress: she eats, and wipes her mouth, and says (that is, excusing herself), ‘I have done no wrong,’” that is, the synagog.] Hence Is. 55{:7} promises: “Let the wicked forsake his way . . . and the Lord will have mercy on him.” But Amos 2{:6} says concerning them: “For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not convert him.” The “three transgressions” are all sins, namely, sins of weakness against the Father, sins of ignorance against the Son, and sins of evil or concupiscence against the Holy Spirit. But the “four transgressions” means to add to the sins already mentioned excuses with regard to them and to refuse to confess them. These cause the person to “stand in [his own] way” with a very stiff neck. And therefore he is not converted and cannot be converted, because he directly shuts the door of mercy to himself and resists the Holy Spirit and forgiveness for himself. Therefore for three crimes they might well be converted, but not for three and four at the same time. And this second stage is the last in itself, than which none can become worse. Then follows the third which already reaches to others; to others, I say, to corrupt them with the same plague and to draw them along into the same destruction, so that he who in the first stage committed all evils against God in the second rejected all grace of forgiveness and now in the third teaches others to do the same. Upon this follows *nor has sat in the chair of pestilence*. Ungodliness did not have a place to go to within itself, except to set itself up as righteousness. Therefore, behold, it had to go beyond itself now and proceed also to others. So the apostle says, 2 Tim. 3{:13}): “Evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.” This is that horrible thing that Hos. 6{:10} saw in the house of Israel. Therefore the chair is the public ruling office, while pestilence is that death-dealing doctrine by which the Jews corrupted, stained, and killed themselves and their own against Christ. For Christ sits in the chaff of salvation and of costly ointment of spikenard (Mark 14{:3}). This is

therefore truly a spiritual pestilence which kills souls by a continuous slaughter. But the force of this sickness is hidden. And this is what they prophesied about themselves when they said, "And the last fraud will be worse than the first" (Matt. 27:64). For to deny that it is a sin to have crucified the Lord is worse than to have perpetrated the sin itself, that is, to do the crucifying. Therefore the last error and the last sin are unforgivable. Oh, what a horrible example that wrath is for us! Cursed be every pride that imitates that error to the present day!

{LW 10:17-19}

... {2b.} *And on His law he meditates day and night.* Meditating is an exclusive trait of human beings, for even beasts appear to fancy and to think. Therefore the ability to meditate belongs to reason. There is a difference between meditating and thinking. To meditate is to think carefully, deeply, and diligently, and properly it means to muse in the heart. Hence to meditate is, as it were, to stir up in the inside, or to be moved in the innermost self. Therefore one who thinks inwardly and diligently asks, discusses, etc. Such a person meditates. But one does not meditate on the law of the Lord unless his delight was first fixed in it. For what we want and love, on that we reflect inwardly and diligently. But what we hate or despise we pass over lightly and do not desire deeply, diligently, or for long. Therefore let delight be first sent into the heart as the root, and then meditation will come of its own accord. It is for this reason that the ungodly do not meditate on the law of the Lord, since as false plants they did not take root. Yet they meditate on other things, namely, on things in which their delight is rooted, things they themselves desire and love, such as gold, honor, and flesh. But the Jews meditate on vanities and false frenzies according to their own ideas about the Scriptures, as has been prophesied concerning them in a variety of ways. But David prays (Ps. 119:36): "Incline my heart to Thy testimonies and not to gain!" All of the following do not meditate on the Law, but outside the Law: the greedy, the carnal, and the arrogant. Or they meditate on glosses of the Law, or dross and hulls.

....

Here, too, there are some perverted people (as in the first part of the verse) who in a similar way twist and pervert this word of the Holy Spirit. Their meditation is not on the law of the Lord, but rather, to the contrary, the law of the Lord is in their meditation (which is a horrible situation). They are the ones who twist the Scriptures to their own understanding and by their own fixed meditation compel the Scriptures to enter it and agree with it, when it ought to be the other way around. In this way, then, the law of the Lord is in their meditation, and not their meditation on the law of the Lord. They do not want to agree with their adversary on the way (cf. Matt. 5:25), but they want the adversary to agree with them. They do not want to be holy with the holy, but they want the holy to be profane with them.

Such were the heretics. Such are all who seek to approve their own empty opinion by the authority of Scripture, Judaizing with Jewish treachery.

... Hence the Lord complains through Malachi (cf. Mal. 3:8) that evil and perverse interpreters stab Him and do violence to Him. Indeed, their own sayings are like goads and nails, says Eccl. 12{:11}, whereby, when the truth is forbidden, the Lord is pierced, so that the truth may not freely move and be seen. Thence, in line with this image, the Lord remained crucified to the Jews, and He never appeared to them again, except to the remnant of Israel. To this very day they crucify Him within themselves, as the apostle accuses them (Heb. 6:6), because they keep the truth pierced through and continue to stab it with their extremely hard iron lies (which are their goads). Thus to this day they do not know what they are doing, just as they did not know then. They scourge, stone, and kill the prophets and scribes in the same way as did their fathers. And just as the fathers did it literally, the Jews now do the same mystically. For a prophet is killed when his sermons are choked as to the living sense which the Holy Spirit intends. See how much learning there is in this one verse! Therefore we must take the utmost care that we do not quickly believe our own idea and that we must expound Scripture in all humility and reverence, because Scripture is the stone of offense and rock of scandal for those who are in a hurry. But Scripture turns that rock into pools of water (cf. Ps. 114:8) for those who meditate on the law of the Lord. Therefore the Lord also reproves those who seek Him thus, but Is. 65{:1} tells us that those who did not seek Him in that way find Him . . .

{LW 10:24}

5. *Therefore the ungodly will not rise in the judgment.* He did not say “in the day of judgment,” but “in the judgment.” The judgment of the world is going on even now, although it has not yet been revealed what will happen on the day of judgment. Therefore the Lord is already judging the peoples in fairness, by His graces distinguishing the good from the bad, and He transfers them out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9), separating light from darkness. In this judgment a man rises in the first resurrection according to the soul. The image and cause of this resurrection is the resurrection of Christ, as the apostle theologizes in many places. But the Jews do not rise in that judgment. Why not? Because they do not want to, because they excuse themselves for their sins and justify themselves, and thus resist. It is, however, a multiple judgment. (1) It is a passive judgment, in which we are judged by the Lord, namely, by His separating us from the midst of the evil. This takes place according to the body through discipline and chastisement and according to the soul through grace. Thus the apostle says (1 Cor. 11:32): “When we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.” (2) It is a judgment by which we judge ourselves. This takes place when we accuse ourselves and confess our sin, and thereby we acknowledge that we are

worthy of punishment and death. Thus we read Rom. 2{:3, 1}: “You judge those who do such things, etc.,” and again, “You are doing the same things which you condemn,” that is, you acknowledge and discern evil deeds and things not to be done. Therefore, when we acknowledge such things in ourselves and impose punishment on ourselves because of them, we are passing judgment on ourselves. Therefore the ungodly do not rise in the judgment. *Nor sinners in the council of the righteous*, that is, Jews in the church of the Christians. These alone are righteous, made thus by our only righteous Lord Jesus Christ . . .

Psalm 78

{LW 11:78–80}

49–51. *He sent upon them the wrath of His indignation, indignation and wrath and trouble, which He sent in by evil angels. He made a way for the pathway of His anger. He spared not their souls from death, and their cattle He shut up in death. And He smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, the firstfruits of all their labor in the tents of Ham.* (10) Here the last plague is described, and it includes the fifth one reported in Exodus, namely, the death of the cattle. But he pictures it as having been done by the ministry of evil angels. And that he is speaking rather of spiritual death he shows by saying “the death of their souls.” There is a big difference between “wrath” and “wrath of indignation.” For the wrath of indignation is that by which He not only inflicts punishment on the body in a physical sense, but also on the soul in a spiritual sense. Therefore, in order to express the greatness of this evil, he thus repeats and doubles wrath and wrath, etc. This is the last plague, by which the Jews have been destroyed. They were the firstborn, because they had received the Law before the Gentiles. But all this according to the flesh. For the last were made first and the first last. Not

[Firstborn in a twofold way,	{	as flesh before the spirit,	}	thus	{	the synagogue like a carnal people with its ceremonies was there before the church, the spiritual people.	}
		as spirit,				for the synagogue had to come to an end when the church appeared.]	

indeed by the election of grace, but by the sequence of nature they were the first for God’s people.

[Not what was spiritual, but what was physical was first.]⁶ Thus, then, God killed all the firstborn, that He might receive something else to be offered as a firstborn, namely, the spirit. The flesh is before the spirit, and the birth of the flesh in wrath is earlier than the birth of the spirit in grace. And by the latter the former is removed and killed. For now it is not those who are sons of the flesh who are born, but those

who are sons of the faith and the promise. Therefore to kill the firstborn is to reject and cast off the people according to physical birth. And whoever does not agree to this rejection is cast forth with it at the same time, as happened to the Jews. Now, the flesh is firstborn before the spirit. And the carnal people are firstborn before the spiritual people (that is, the old before the new). This, then, is that dreadful wrath of God upon them, for God rejected them altogether according to the flesh and killed the standing of the synagog and put the Law to death, in which they nevertheless think they are living, but they are not alive before God. The fact that their sacrifices and ceremonies and works are dead, this God did with the word alone, for He removed them and determined that they should come to an end. But since they were unwilling, the wrath of indignation was sent upon them. For they were punished with endless plagues and given up to the power of evil angels. As the flesh is born before the spirit, which must be reborn, and the firstborn flesh killed by a mystical death, so the carnal people were born before the spiritual. And they, too, had to be killed by a mystical death so that they might be reborn a spiritual people. Therefore the killing of the firstborn of Egypt is nothing else than that the people of the synagog living in the letter come to an end. The letter lives as long as it binds, but it is killed since it has now been fulfilled by Christ, so that it may not bind. Therefore the killed (letter) kills all who cling to it.]

But where our version has “He made a way for the pathway of His anger,” the Hebrew has “He built a road for His rage.” . . . The sense [of our text] seems to be that He made this a firm policy, and He punishes them permanently without ceasing, not in passing, like the godly, but over and over again. As a road is usually not made by one passing but by incessant footsteps, so by incessant tracks and signs of God’s wrath, which we see in them, He has now, as it were, made a road, a road worn and indeed made firm. Therefore the path of God’s anger is the token and work of the divine wrath which appears in them to us and to them. But for this path He made a way, that is, a persistence and duration and well-worn continuity. The paths of God are the works of God. But the paths of God’s wrath are God’s works of punishment and vengeance. So the prophet threatens. Therefore in this word a perfect and persevering wrath is described.

...

{LW 11:86-88}

54. *And He brought them to the mountain of His sanctuary, the mountain which His right hand had purchased.* Thus Is. 2{:3} says: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.” This is the church, which is the true sanctuary (that is, the mystical temple of God), which His right hand, that is, the Son of God, has acquired. Hence we are called a people of His possession in 1 Peter 2{:9}.

55. *And He drove out the Gentiles before them and by lot divided to them their land by a line of distribution.* This refers particularly to the Jews. They had been made the seed and people of Canaan, and they took possession of the land flowing with milk and honey (that is, Holy Scripture), from which they were cast out. And this land was divided and distributed to the faithful according to the measure of the gift of Christ, as the apostle says. For to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit in Scripture for profit (1 Cor. 12:7).

...

And He made the tribes of Israel dwell in their tabernacles. These are the beautiful tabernacles of Jacob (Num. 24:5), that is, the books of the prophets and Holy Scripture, as above, in which the true Israel dwells now. Then, as I said in the gloss on the text, they are the bodies or cities or souls, in which demons and vices reigned. Now the apostles and saints dwell in them.

56. *Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God.* The Jews did this first, and then our heretics. They were made crooked arrows, aiming themselves at an evil sense and detracting from the truth, and in a bold and foolhardy manner attacking it with their arrows. Indeed, even with those who cling to the truth, like the Arians and other heretics.

But with regard to the plagues which follow, as they befell the synagog, so they also befell the heretics, and even the faithful who were led astray, killed, and troubled by the heretics. For they fell by the sword (their wicked word) and were not lamented (v. 64).

65. *And the Lord was awakened as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that has been surfeited with wine.* The Lord Jesus Christ slept in the grave and arose when He had been roused. And He was drunk with the drained cup of suffering, for He drank the wine in His suffering to the point of total inebriation and extreme excess. But when this wine which had weakened Him had been assimilated, He arose a mighty man.

66. *And He smote His adversaries in the rear and put them to everlasting shame.*⁷ These are the scribes and lawyers with their own, the true Philistines, who at the time of Christ had oppressed the faithful people and led them astray and killed them with false teachings. Besides, they had also captured and killed the ark, that is, the body of Christ, which was then handed over into the hands of the enemy. Or, the ark is Holy Scripture in its own true understanding which they crucified in its words as they crucified Christ in the body], which they place next to their idol, Dagon, that is, twist it to their own meaning, when they ought rather bend their own opinion to conform to Scripture. But the ark causes Dagon to be mutilated with hands, head, and feet cut off. For they see that their own opinion has neither works nor words nor any vital meaning. About this elsewhere.

Therefore the Lord struck them in the rear, when He afflicted them in earthly things, and caused them to trust in what the apostle nevertheless teaches should be

regarded as dung (Phil. 3:8). The rear parts in spirit are, indeed, the body itself, just as the front parts are the souls. Hence the Lord said to Moses, “You will see My back parts” (Ex. 33:23). Second, they are the earthly things to which our rear is turned, namely, the body, and the front parts are the eternal things toward which our forepart is turned, namely, the spirit. But at this place what seems to be more expressly denoted is that their *recta*, their innermost bowels, are sticking out through the rear, because the rear is different from the buttocks on which we sit. And there is trouble before me to recognize this. Is it perhaps because the Jews have no definite seat in the world? They are driven like wanderers from place to place.

But since these are our unseemly parts, which we are accustomed to hide, it seems that it may denote the malice and treachery of the Jews, which they perpetrated against Christ, and which is poured out throughout the world with their grief and indignation, so that by this deed they are in disgrace among all nations and without excuse. Yet they make leather seats for themselves, that is, they draw comfort from their physical paternal descent: or from the literal sense of Scripture], on which they rest, sit, and rely, and thus they excuse themselves to the present, though they are unable to deny what was done openly before all. For their *recta* stick out, that is, the innermost feelings of their heart and their desires in opposition to Christ they display to the present. Through these they have then poured out their excrement. Therefore, the *recta* sticking out means that their will to harm and do evil appears, since they are not able to vomit the feces of evils against Him.

But the fact that they offer five golden hemorrhoids and mice to that God whom they do not worship means that they pay riches from themselves to the Christian Caesar. Or the mystery is still hidden for me.

Or, their rear parts are the reputation of their works, which is now rotting and stinking throughout the world, since the Gospel is being revealed. And their *recta* stick out because the Gospel makes known even the innermost evils of their heart, showing what kind of people they were inwardly. And this is their everlasting reproach.