The Reformation in Alien Eyes: Jewish Perceptions of Christian Troubles
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Despite the importance of the Reformation to European history and the significance of the religious issues to Christians involved in this schism within Christendom, Jewish observers in the sixteenth century judged the nature of this conflict according to standards peculiarly their own. Yet there was no single “Jewish” point of view but a variety of sentiments and opinions selectively favoring different groups according to the issue in question. In this article I hope to clarify several of the basic concerns and interests Jews entertained and determine how Jewish authorities understood the doctrinal issues as well as the political and social ramifications of this signal Christian conflict. We will also take note of how Jewish chroniclers of the age explained the roots of this conflict. Before examining these views, however, we should clarify several important points concerning the Jews in question and their traditional views of Christianity.

Though Christendom understood the “Jew” as a uniform theological category peculiar, unique, and inherently evil in its rejection of Christianity, in point of fact Jews were a varied lot. Jews of different countries practiced varied religious rituals, possessed different concepts of self awareness, and expressed diverse attitudes towards Christianity. Italian Jews, for instance, were well accepted in the more open atmosphere of the Italian Renaissance with many rising to positions in trade, scholarship, the arts, and even statecraft. German Jewry, on the other hand, experienced the pain of expulsion from many German cities in the 1480s and again in the 1560s and suffered from the more strident antisemitic quality permeating northern culture. Consequently, Italian and German Jewry differed sharply.

1 The most complete analysis of Jewish thought in the sixteenth century and its relationship to its Christian environment can be found in Salo W. Baron's Social and Religious History of the Jews, Volumes 13, 14 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). See especially the excellent notes at the end of each volume. Also, see H. H. Ben-Sasson's “The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes,” Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, Volume 4 (Jerusalem, 1971). Other works concerning Jewish attitudes towards the Reformation can be found in footnotes below.


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in their assessment of the Christian conflict since one group knew Luther
while the other knew the papacy. In turn, Polish Jewry experienced the
greatest toleration of all in the open frontier atmosphere of underpopulated
Eastern Europe and enjoyed warm and cordial relations with the many
radical Christian sects which were also seeking safe refuge from Western
Christianity. Spokesmen for this group of Jews understood the Reforma-
dtion differently from both German and Italian Jews.

Spanish Jews constituted a fourth group. Until 1492 Spanish Jews con-
stituted the largest, wealthiest, best educated, and most socially successful
Jews in European history. In that year, however, all Jews were expelled
from Spain with the result that a quarter million people were torn from their
homeland, friends, and possessions, and they flooded the refugee quarters
of the Mediterranean coast. Most went to Italy en route to Turkey, North
Africa, Greece, and Israel. This group, sixteenth century boat-people, was
so large and caused so much dislocation wherever they went that even nor-
mally friendly Venice created the first formal and legal ghetto to cope with
this Jewish deluge. Spanish Jews were often anti-Spain, often anti-Catholic,
and often very curious about Luther’s effect upon the church.

One other group of Jews, the Marrano converts, viewed Christianity
with a more jaundiced eye than their Spanish brothers. The Marranos
could not bring themselves to leave their homeland and converted to Chris-
tianity while practicing Judaism in secret. Their numbers were enormous,
probably larger than the number of exiled, and they lived in fear and dread
of the Spanish Inquisition. The already large and growing Jewish com-
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Before we approach the spokesmen for any of these diverse groups, we
would do well to consider how Jews traditionally understood Christianity
to appreciate the changes caused by the Reformation.

1 Concerning Polish Jewry, S. M. Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland,
Trans. I. Friedlaender, Vol. I (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1916); H. Graetz,
History of the Jews, Vol. 4, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956); Chapter 18. Ber-

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1941); see next footnote.

3 C. Roth, A History of the Marranos, 4. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1974); idem, The
Spanish Inquisition, (London: Hale, 1937); H. C. Lea, A History of the Inquisition in Spain, 4
vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1906-1907); B. Netanyahu, The Marranos of Spain (New York:
AAJR, 1966). An excellent guide to all aspects of Jewish existence in Spain and Portugal is R.
Singerman, The Jews in Spain and Portugal: A Bibliography, (New York: Garland, 1975); the
most complete bibliography of the Spanish Inquisition is Emile van der Vekené, Bibliographie
der Inquisition; ein Versuch (Hildesheim: Olms, 1963).

4 The literature on this subject is extensive; the reader might consult the following: for the
classical period, N. N. Glatzer, “The Attitude Toward Rome in Third Century Judaism,”
Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz: Festgabe fur Eric V6gelyn (Munich, 1962); the
Judaism and Christianity have usually understood each other in rather nasty terms though the intensity of the position varied according to the relationship of the two communities at any given time. The most hostile Jewish position held that Christianity was no different than other ancient pagan religions mentioned in the Bible whose religious rituals were characterized by use of idols and images. Christianity, however, was pagan on other counts, too. Christians claimed Jesus was divine much as Egyptians claimed the pharaoh was God and the Romans worshipped the emperor. All these religions were considered offensive to God, and from the Jewish perspective all constituted violations of God's teachings and simple human logic and reason. Hence, when Christians debated the nature of the trinity and how the Son was generated from the Father, Jews saw this as a more recent version of ancient Greek mythology.

A more tolerant view emphasized Christianity's belief in the God of the Old Testament and its acceptance of Scripture despite its erroneous understanding of that corpus of writings. Additionally, Christianity practiced what the rabbis considered the minimum standard of civil human behavior and decency as explicated in the Seven Articles of the Children of Noah. Consequently, while Christianity was not righteous, neither was it pagan. If Christianity failed to meet the requirements of an adequate system of divine belief, it did accept the ten commandments and a rudimentary system of morality. Moreover, some rabbis maintained that whatever Christianity's failings it was spreading knowledge of the Old Testament to the many corners of the world. Once true paganism had been eliminated by Christian missionaries, it would be possible for those less mature in the spirit to begin to approach the truth of Judaism.

The traditional historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity was symbolized by the images of Jacob and Esau, Judah and Edom. While Jacob, or Israel, was righteous, Esau's most prominent quality was his strength. One could only hope that Esau, a popular euphemism for Christianity, would come to its senses and like its namesake refrain from persecuting Jacob. In ancient times God used powerful Edom of Trans-Jordan to irritate Judah when the Hebrews departed from His ways. Similarly, Christianity—modern Edom—was a chastening tool. Indeed, there was fitting irony in Christian persecution of Jews. Jesus of Nazareth, the apostles, and the earliest disciples of Christianity were Jewish, and Judaism bore a heavy responsibility for spreading this idolatrous paganism throughout the ancient world.


Reformation age recognized such commonality. According to the prophets of old, heresy would be eliminated from the world, and both religions looked forward to the eventual demise of the other as each was convinced of its unique presentation of divine truth. From the vantage point of this traditional attitude towards Christianity the Reformation conflict certainly appeared to be the beginning of Christianity's demise. Consequently there was great interest in Luther, who seemed to wield the shovel digging the grave of Christianity's burial.

When appraising the Reformation's meaning and significance, sixteenth century Jews approached this conflict on four different levels. On the one hand, there were the doctrinal issues separating the rival Christian positions. Though many dogmatic concerns were not germane to Jews, the supremacy of Rome for one, many others were of definite interest to them.

The second approach concerned the significance of the Reformation as an historical event. It was obvious that this unparalleled schism within Christian ranks was pregnant with meaning, and Jewish observers sought to understand the Reformation, why it occurred at the precise moment it did, and the terrible violence accompanying it.

There was yet a third level of understanding the Reformation: as an act in apocalyptic history, God's unfolding plan for mankind. What significance did this Christian conflict have in terms of God's messianic plans for Israel? Consequently, from this vantage point, it was important to understand this event to see more clearly the hidden meaning of the Book of Daniel and other messianic texts.

A fourth approach to the Reformation was peculiar to those Jews caught between the warring Christian factions. Hoping to stay neutral, these Jews adopted a non-ideological and pragmatic political position predicated upon concerns far removed from esoteric messianism or other conceptual approaches. For all of its shallowness, this group alone had first-hand contact with both reformers and Roman Catholic leaders. While none of these themes and approaches were necessarily mutually exclusive, their variety reflected the true multiplicity of concerns within a Jewish community which witnessed unprecedented trouble within the Christian household.

Doctrinal Approach

The great number of Jewish anti-Christian polemics and treatises written before, during, and after the Reformation debate demonstrate a general, if often superficial, Jewish familiarity with both Christian systematics as well as Scriptural exegesis. But the most important religious issues of the

Reformation were of little interest to Jews. The primacy of Rome, the eucharistic conflict between Lutherans and Calvinists, and matters of ecclesiastical concern were meaningless against a backdrop of Jewish rejection of Christianity and the New Testament. Similarly, most of the differences separating Radical theologians from their orthodox co-religionists were but nuances on a generally unacceptable theme to Jewish observers. Consequently, only those issues which were important to Jewish distinctions between Protestant and Catholic will be treated here as well as those few areas where Jews took interest in the conflict between Radical theologians and their more orthodox counterparts. These issues included iconoclasm, the faith-works controversy and predestination, the trinity, and the role of the law in Christian thought.

The religious use of images, symbols and other forms of church art was important to both Christians and Jews. The Christian use of icons, statues, and graphic-pictorial forms of religious artistry was understood by Jews as nothing less than a direct violation of the divine commandment regarding graven images. Hence, one Jewish author after another congratulated early Protestant iconoclastic tendencies. The Spanish exile Abraham Halevi wrote from Israel that early reports indicated that “Protestants destroy and burn images of their Gods, and their idols are cut down in all parts of his [Luther’s] dominion.”10 Another Jewish author, Joseph ben Joshua Ha-Kohen, also noted that “No longer were graven images set up or homage paid to the saints, as before.”11 Even an observer like Abraham Ibn Megas, personal physician to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in Constantinople, was impressed with this same position on images: “This congregation has cast off all faith in icons and priests and has discarded the form of this worthless creed [of Catholicism].”12 This was the only instance of Jewish support for Protestant thought; on other issues Jewish observers were decidedly pro-Catholic.

Despite differences between Jewish and Roman Catholic notions of good works, both found Protestant emphasis on faith alone totally unacceptable. For both religions the freedom of the will was a central point, and Rabbi Yehiel of Pisa noted that fundamental “is the principle of free will and
choice... as opposed to the mockers who claim that man neither prospers nor suffers perdition by his works unless divine sanction has so determined. In our generation we have seen the sages of the gentiles divided into sects. Some maintain this view [of predestination] which is more bitter than wormwood and destructive of the very foundations of faith. But others maintain the principle of free will in a simple and straightforward manner, branding their co-religionists as heretics and apostates...

In yet another blast at Protestantism Yehiel of Pisa also noted: “The new sect that has emerged among the Christians who fail to understand the meaning of Scripture—may their souls be damned. In their opinion all the actions of man are of necessity subject to God’s determination in the absence of which man can do neither good nor bad. The same is also the case with punishment.” A century later another spokesman for the Italian Jewish community, Rabbi Simeon Luzzatto of Venice, came to much the same conclusion when writing about the many similarities between Roman Catholicism and Judaism, and noted: “... they [Catholics] believe that the merit of good deeds is highly regarded by the Lord... only they combine them with faith. They maintain that man possesses free will and regard this as the first fundamental point of their religion.” Luzzatto also noted that Catholics, like Jews, “maintain that many passages of Scripture cannot be properly understood without the light of tradition.” Yet other points of similarity noted by Luzzatto included the importance of contrition, penance, and confession.

Jewish appreciation of the Reformation debate reached its most thoughtful level in Poland, where a natural affinity existed between certain Jewish thinkers and anti-trinitarian and Sabbatarian radicals. Moreover, both Jews and Christian radicals were persecuted by orthodox Christian churches and both found refuge in Poland and Lithuania. One leading Jewish controversialist, Isaac of Troki, was particularly close to Christian radicals because he was a Karaite Jew. The Karaites were Jews who did not accept the validity of Talmudic Judaism and professed a literalist approach to Old Testament Scripture. Karaites disregarded medieval Jewish tradition

"Minhat Qenaot, ed. D. Kaufmann (Berlin, 1858), p. 11.
Ibid., p. 46.
Discorso circa il Stato gl’Hebrei... (Venice, 1638). He was born 1583 and died 1663; see E 11:607-608 for further information.
Ibid.
as a corruption of an ancient message much as anti-trinitarian radicals believed that medieval Christian tradition had been tainted by Satan since the Council of Nicaea and the formulation of the doctrine of the trinity. Troki noted: "In our generation many of their scholars, called Ebionites and Unitarians, believe in the unity of God and oppose belief in the trinity.... Marcin Czechowic, in part 2 of his Book of Dialogues writes in Polish and repudiates the belief in the trinity with strong proofs based on Scripture and reason." 19

Another scholar with whom Troki was familiar was his friend and neighbor, Simon Budny: "The Christian scholar Simon Budny wrote that the divine law given to Israel by Moses at Horeb is pure and eternal and there is no other law besides it... and he substantiated this position with prophetic and rational proofs." 20

Another group with whom Troki had contact were the Sabbatarians who so upset Luther: "We likewise meet with gentile authorities who state that the law of God given to Israel is eternal and perfect [and] that no succeeding law has ever been given [and] that they are mistaken who assert that Moses gave the first law and Jesus the second law [and] that Jesus gave no new law but merely confirmed the commandments given through Moses. Thus, on all these doctrinal points they are found to agree with us." 21

On the level of religious systematics no clear picture emerges. Though Jews applauded Protestant iconoclasm, they tended to favor Roman Catholic emphasis upon freedom of the will, the importance of good works, confession and penitence, and the significance of tradition. Jews in contact with anti-trinitarianism applauded a more unitarian understanding of the Godhead and the affirmation of the law by Sabbatarians would please any Jewish audience. In short, Jews did not necessarily favor one Christian denomination over another though agreement might be found with various Christian sects or churches on a single issue while disagreeing on everything else.

**Historical Approach**

Other than on the level of religious doctrine, Jewish observers viewed the Reformation as an historical event of obvious importance. In this light it was necessary to explain what could cause so much violence and hatred between Christians holding so many views in common despite their differences. Also, why did God permit this conflict to occur and would it bring about change in the traditionally poor Jewish-Christian relationship.

Foremost among Jewish observers of the Reformation as an historical event was the chronicler of French history, Rabbi Joseph ben Joshua Ha-
Kohen. Born in Avignon, his family was exiled from France to this papal enclave in 1394, when all Jews were expelled from France. Expressing the bitterness of several generations of exile, Joseph presents us with a favorable view of the Reformation, predicated upon strong anti-Catholic sentiment: "Thus, Martin grew wise, probing and investigating and amending many works and matters concerning their faith and cause, and discredited papal practices throughout Germany." In his chronicle of the French monarchy Joseph Ha-Kohen devoted much space to the effects of the Reformation in France. He noted: "In those days there was neither law nor justice in France. If a man was hostile to another, he would slay him, saying 'He is a Lutheran,' or he might rise up against him saying, 'He is a collaborator of the clergy,' and there would be none to save him." Historians examining this manuscript have noted that Protestant leaders such as Henry of Navarre, the princes of Turenne and Condé, and the admiral Coligny appear in a favorable light while the Duke of Guise is presented as a blood-thirsty cut-throat. When attempting to explain why such violence should have torn at the heart of Christendom, Joseph's conclusion was a common theme in contemporary Jewish circles: "Violence was risen up as a rod of wickedness throughout all the land of France from end to end. Never have such things happened before today. This has come upon them for their pride because . . . they have vilified [exiled] the people of God."

Other Jewish observers too pointed out how Christendom's problems found their origin in Christian ill treatment of Jews. Abraham Ibn Megas of Constantinople, already cited regarding iconoclasm, wrote in this contest: "...they will find favor with God after being scourged for their sins and the sins of their fathers for all that they and their fathers have perpetrated against Israel." Ibn Megas also presented another common view in Jewish circles; once Christians had been adequately chastised for their sins, they would return to Israel: "They are in a state of formlessness, ready to take shape since faith has departed and no longer finds expression in their utterances . . . And when they find favor with God, they will be ready to accept the faith." Consequently, for Ibn Megas the Reformation was the first step in a process which would lead to the demise of Christianity and lead Christians back into Israel.

Perhaps the most innovative use of the theme that Protestant-Catholic conflict was God's punishment of Jew-persecuting Christians came from the Marrano author, Samuel Usque. Usque was born in Spain, where he was
educated for the priesthood. Leaving for Italy, where he reassumed his ancestral faith, Usque wrote an apology for Marrano and Jewish history entitled the *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*. Usque warned European rulers: “You should consider how much harm you bring upon yourself by compelling Jews to accept your faith.” This forced conversion of Jews to Christianity could come to no good because such converts would vent their anger against their new faith “for these ways [i.e. forced conversion] . . . in the end become the means that undermine and destroy them [European rulers].” Jews were God’s chosen people, Usque reminded his reader, and when they were forced to convert, they remained Jews but became God’s chosen tool against the persecutors: “Since throughout Christendom Christians have forced Jews to change their religion, it seems to be divine retribution that these Jews [i.e. Marranos] should strike back with the weapons that are put into their hands to punish those who compelled them to change their faith. . . .” Since so many Marranos left Spain for England, France, Germany, as well as the Low Countries, where they lived a secret Jewish existence, “that generation of converts has spread all over the whole realm, and though a long time has elapsed, these converts still give an indication of their non-Catholic origin by the new Lutheran beliefs which are presently found among them, for they are not comfortable in the religion which they received so unwillingly.” Clearly then, the Reformation and the expulsion of Jews from Spain after decades of forced conversion were inter-related events. Where many Jews understood Reformation conflict as God’s punishment for Christian ill treatment of Jews, Marranos such as Usque went even further and identified Lutherans with Marranos. Consequently, Spain’s sin was being visited upon Christendom with the Marrano-Lutherans acting as God’s tool of justice.

**Apocalyptic Approach**

A third frame of reference through which Jews judged the Reformation was as an historical event in God’s unfolding plan for mankind, leading to the coming of the messiah. Jews were not alone in apocalyptic prognostication, and such events as the fall of Constantinople were of signal importance in many Christian apocalyptic and millenarian schemes much as the fall of Rome had long been similarly prominent. Jews used these general historical dates as pegs upon which to hang chronological patterns but add-

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30Ibid.
31Ibid.
32Ibid.
33Ibid., p. 185.
ed events of a particularly Jewish nature such as the expulsion from England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1492. In similar terms, the Reformation crisis and the ensuing military conflicts were far too significant not to have secret meaning. Consequently, there was a hidden "Jewish" content to the Reformation over and above that conflict involving so many Christians. One such Jewish apocalyptic interpreter of the Reformation was Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi.

In common with many other Spanish Jews Halevi believed that 1492 was a turning point in world history. The Reformation too was a crisis through which the world must pass before the messiah could come. For Halevi Luther was God's agent sent to destroy corrupt Rome before the world's end. He claimed to have written even before the Reformation, indeed, as early as 1478, "that a man will arise who will be great, valiant, and mighty. He will pursue justice and loathe debauchery. He will marshall vast armies, originate a religion, and destroy the houses of the clergy." All of this must have been written of Luther, Halevi believed, for he "laid bare the pretense of Rome and exposed her ignominy." Writing in the late 1520s, Halevi was convinced that Luther, like Cyrus, was God's agent: "But now it is evident that he alone is none other than the man mentioned above, who is exceedingly noble in all his undertakings, and all these forecasts are realized in his person."

All successful apocalyptic schemes must provide both numerological as well as historical reasons, and for Halevi there were many signs that Luther was a latter-day Cyrus. In addition to his own mathematical and Cab-balistic equations, Halevi knew of Luther's revolutionary treatise of 1523 entitled That Jesus Christ was Born A Jew, in which he wrote startling things. He said Judaism had a firm foundation in Scripture, that Jews had done well to resist Catholic conversion all these many years, that to be a good Christian one had almost to become a Jew, and that should Catholic authorities tire of persecuting him as a heretic, they should persecute him as a Jew. Luther called for an end to the persecution of Jews and admonished his readers that, after all, Jesus was born a Jew. At no time in recent history had any significant spokesman written so kindly about Jews. At no time in recent history had Jews needed kind words more than after 1492.

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36Published by G. Scholem, Kiryat Sepher, VII (1930), 446.

37Letter Concerning the Ten Lost Tribes... Qovez al Yad, (N.S.) VI [XVI] Part II (Jerusalem, 1966), fol. 5r.

38This work can be found in volume 45 of Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), trans. by W. I. Brandt, pp. 195-229.
Equally amazing were the Christian-Hebraists flocking to Jewish scholars for tutoring in Hebrew. These scholars learned Hebrew, stressed the importance of the Old Testament, and seemed more favorably disposed towards Jews, as both Pico and Reuchlin certainly were. Indeed, Reuchlin defended Jews before the emperor and wrote that they should be granted citizenship in the Empire. Halevi was convinced that Christian-Hebraica was only a first step in Christianity's return to Judaism, and he noted how “there will undoubtedly be large numbers of them who will turn in repentance to the one above.” Christian-Hebraica, iconoclasm, renewed interest in the Old Testament, and Luther's favorable statement about Jews could have only one meaning: “Now through the man referred to above, men in great numbers and of high repute are proceeding towards the goal [of conversion]. . . . Time alone will—with God's help—enlighten us as to the ultimate fate of these men.” Indeed, Halevi was concerned that Luther and others did not understand that the end of their road led to Judaism. He hoped they would see where their path led, for “God's right hand is outstretched to accept them before the advent of the messiah, for afterwards they are no longer acceptable.”

Halevi's enthusiastic welcome of Luther into the Jewish fold was premature. From the distance of Italy Luther's deeds looked more dramatic than they might have really been, and Halevi's vision was as much the result of true human events as the product of his messianic lens. Luther was not Cyrus, and exile would not so easily come to an end. Elsewhere I have written about Jewish “theologies of exile” and the strong messianism developing in the sixteenth century to satisfy the needs of a people so recently expelled from so many European countries. Halevi was but one scholar whose anticipation of the messiah was so strong that any and all contemporary events were immediately filtered through this strange prism of expectation.

By the late 1530s Luther was sorry he had spoken and written well of Jews a decade and a half earlier, for his pro-Jewish statements became grist for the Roman Catholic propaganda machine. Indeed, Protestantism was too easily identified with Judaism, however curious this identification seems in retrospect. Protestant interest in Hebrew, Reformed covenantism, sporadic outbreaks of anti-trinitarianism and Sabbatarianism all made it possible for Eck and other Catholic propagandists to label the new religion as just one step away from the rabbis to account for its strange heretical views. It was exactly this conflict within Germany itself that provides the context for our last Jewish observer of the Reformation.

40Kiryat Sepher, VII (1930), 446.
41Ibid., p. 445.
42Ibid.
Non-Ideological Pragmatic Approach

We have noticed how Jews outside Germany were able to transform the Reformation from a purely Christian event into one filled with significance for Jews. This was a luxury affordable to those who could view this violent conflict from the safety of foreign shores and borders. For such observers, the day to day reality of this conflict was either unknown or easily forgotten in an apocalyptic desire to elucidate how this event demonstrated God’s deep love for Israel. The Jewish community within Germany was not able to take so abstract a view of the fighting around them. In a great many instances Jews were held to blame for the sorry state of affairs by both Protestants and Catholics unable to explain otherwise why their side had not won this conflict. Germany possessed what was somewhat less apparent in other countries, a recent history of antisemitism. When German cities experienced the dislocation of the renaissance commercial revolution, Jews were expelled for being responsible for that dislocation. Hence, the 1480s and 1490s witnessed the expulsion of Jews from their ancient residences in one city after another. When John Huss expressed the frustration of Bohemian Catholicism, the Council of Constance blamed Jews for these religious difficulties when it condemned Huss at his execution: “Woe unto thee accursed Judas since thou has forsaken the counsel of peace and hast adhered to the council of the Jews. Therefore do we remove from thee this cap of salvation.” When the Dominican order tried to forbid Jews the religious use of the Talmud, the emperor agreed that all copies of this work should be burned. When the Imperial lawyer Johannes Reuchlin defended the right of Jews to use these works for their own religious purposes, the Dominicans in Cologne dragged him through courts for twenty years. In the process Reuchlin lost many friends, his modest wealth, and his health and in the end was condemned for heresy by the papacy. In other parts of Germany Ulrich Zasius, the famous legal authority, made a name for himself by writing several volumes demonstrating that it was unnecessary to honor the traditional rights and privileges of imperial Jewry. How very strange when one considers that in all Germany there were less than a few hundred Jews. The largest community, Frankfurt, had only about 78 Jews. Most Jewish communities numbered less than 20 people, mostly the elderly and the sick and others unable to move to Poland and Lithuania.

44The literature concerning Reuchlin is vast, but the reader might consult the following: Max Brod, Johann Reuchlin; sein Leben und sein Kampf (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965); L. Geiger, Johannes Reuchlin. Sein Leben und Seine Werk (Leipzig, 1871); J. H. Overfield, “A New Look at the Reuchlin Affair,” Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History, VIII (1971), 165-207.
The German Jewish community was fortunate to have had an able leader and spokesman in the person of Rabbi Josel of Rosheim, Imperial representative of German Jewry to the court of Charles V. In his memoirs Josel has left a running commentary and account of Protestant-Catholic relations during the long reign of Charles V and the difficult position of Jews in attempting to remain neutral. One would have anticipated Josel favoring Protestantism much as other Jewish observers saw Luther in a favorable light. Josel met Luther on several occasions, knew Bucer, and was a warm friend of Wolfgang Capito. Indeed, his memoirs speak with warmth about Capito: "A mild, warm personality tending towards melancholy. In his undogmatic way [Capito was] the most broadminded of all the German reformers, the protector of the persecuted and the oppressed." Additionally, the young Emperor Charles did not seem open to Jewish needs. He defended Reuchlin's opponents and maintained the persecution of Marranos in Spain. Josel recounted how Charles' advisers were of the opinion that Jews were responsible for the Reformation "because they [the Jews] had taught their faith to the Lutherans." And yet, much as Luther's views of Jews underwent change, by 1530 Charles' attitudes made an abrupt about-face.

At the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 Josel was requested to debate Luther's protege, the Jewish convert Anton Margaritha, concerning the merits of both religions. The ostensible purpose of the debate was to determine the true religion so that blasphemy might be eliminated from the Empire. It is difficult to understand how and why Josel was declared the winner of the debate, with Margaritha personally banished from Augsburg by Charles V. Whether Josel actually merited victory or whether Charles was making German Jewry a personal political tool at the expense of Protestantism, declaring Josel the winner of this confrontation was daring, controversial, and very anti-Protestant. Significantly, two years later Josel had an audience with Charles concerning the sorry state of German Jewry, and at that time Charles accepted as binding all of Frederick II's list of Jewish privileges of 1216 and Frederick I's list of 1182.

Contrasting with Charles' more open views was the increasingly hostile tone taken by leading Protestants. In 1538 Luther wrote his treatise Against the Sabbatarians, which in point of fact was but the first of several treatises directed against Jews and Judaism. In that same year Martin Bucer created the first Protestant plan for the Jews in his Cassel Advice. Bucer stipulated that Jews should be severely persecuted both religiously and socially and

 Ibid., p. 95.
 Concerning the curious trading of positions regarding Jews by both Luther and Charles V, see my article "Sebastian Münster, the Jewish Mission and Protestant Antisemitism," Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, 70 (1979), 238-259.
called for state action against Jews. Bucer justified this position by claiming that Jews should be severely persecuted both religiously and socially and called for state action against Jews. Bucer justified this position by claiming that Jews and Catholics were really the same: "For, except that the papists sian Jews, all Josel could reply was: "Be pious and suffer; then you will be saved from the scheming of Martin Bucer.""

In the following years conditions in Protestant Germany got worse. Jews were expelled from Saxony, and Luther wrote three vicious antisemitic treatises entitled The Jews and Their Lies, Concerning the Ineffable Name, and The Last Words of David. In these works Luther called for not merely the persecution of Jews but for their wholesale murder. This murder was justified by Luther because Jews were not biologically human since they did not originate from the seed of Adam and Eve and it would be carried out by Christians to demonstrate their love of Jesus. The effect of these treatises the Strassburg area was immediate. The pastor of Hochfelden called from his pulpit for his community to attack and kill the Jews.

Consequently, when Josel addressed the magistrates of Strassburg in 1543 to request that the first of these treatises not be published in that city according to plan because it was "a crude and inhuman book, full of abuse and slander" the magistrates agreed. Moreover, the town council agreed "not to preach turmoil from the pulpit."

Sensing Protestant irritation with Jews, in 1544 Charles V issued a new statement of Jewish privileges which surpassed his actions of 1532. Jews were granted full freedom of trade; Jewish bankers were permitted to charge higher interest rates than those permitted Christian bankers. The closing of synagogues was forbidden as was any interference with Jewish ritual and religious practice. It was forbidden to spread false rumors regarding ritual murders or alleged Jewish desecration of the host and well poisoning. The

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50M. Bucer, Von den Juden (Strassburg, 1539), cover letter. Concerning Bucer's attitudes, see my article above and H. Eells, "Bucer's Plan for the Jews." Church History, VI (1937), 127-135. It astounds this reader that Eells completely exonerates Bucer of any ill-will towards Jews and even proposes that Bucer's plan was very even-handed. Then again, the opening sentence of this article dealing with "Protestant fairness" towards Jews reads, "It is a matter of common knowledge that at the beginning of the Christian Church the Christians were persecuted by the Jews." Hopefully, the score is now even.

51Stern, p. 179. The Priviligiorum Universorum Teutoniae nationis HEbraeorum Confirmation, dated Speyer, April 3, 1544, was reprinted in A. Engel, "Die Ausweisung der Juden," Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft der Juden in der Tschechoslovakischen Republik, II:69f. Also, see Baron, 13d, 454, note 82.
expulsion of Jews from any state was forbidden except with the personal approval of Charles himself. The effect of this new set of laws, the most liberal ever granted German Jewry to that time, was immediate, as Josel described: "At that time, while I was in Worms, the [Protestant] princes decided to expel the Jews and to have the emperor grant them a permit to do so. However, a good man—may his memory be a blessing—came forth and explained to them that this could not be done, for according to the laws and ordinances, they [Jews] had to be retained within the domain of the emperor and king."

With the coming of the Smalcaldic War, Jews were again caught between the rock and the hard place. Viewed as a fifth-column by Protestant leaders, Josel recounted how he tried to intervene for the "many poor widows and orphans who had been despoiled and driven from their homes." Josel explained that Jews were now fair game for Protestant attack "because they were not under the protection of the emperor and the Reich [in Protestant areas]."

On the other hand, Charles employed Spanish troops against his Protestant enemies. These troops were no better in their treatment of Jews, but Josel described the situation and how he was able to bring about a remedy.

Then the Emperor decided to muster an army and to march against the two princes [Elector of Saxony and Landgrave of Hesse]. There then came into the country foreign troops, the Spaniards, who fell upon the Jews. But God was at my side when I came to the great ruler who was known as the Lord of Granville and who was second only to the emperor, to ask him to request of the emperor to protect us. He stood by us saying to the emperor: "Behold, the Jews have suffered so much at the hands of the apostate Lutherans, and now your own people, the Spaniards, have come to deliver them up [to death] in spite of the new privileges which you have issued to them yesterday and the day before." And the emperor agreed to make a proclamation as follows; "It is not right to kill the Jews. Let it therefore be decreed and sealed on pain of punishment that no man from any of Our armies may lift up his hand or his foot to injure or harm any Jew whatsoever." And messengers sped throughout Germany forthwith, proclaiming that anyone who would violate this prohibition would be liable to the death penalty. All at once the mercenaries became well disposed towards the Jews, and when the emperor and his army went forth into battle, the Jews supplied the mercenaries with bread and wine.”

55Stern, p. 212.
56Ibid.
57Ibid., pp. 210-211.
The end of the first series of wars found Josel bitterly anti-Protestant and equally pro-emperor. His words speak for themselves:

We have now beheld it with our own eyes. A nation which founded a new faith with all sorts of modifications attempted to cast off every yoke and plotted to attack us and destroy the Jewish nation by many oppressive decrees and abuses so that it might cease to be a people. He [God] sent his anger in the persons of compassionate kings who gave power and strength to the Emperor Charles to defeat the enemies over and over again, to frustrate their alliances and conspiracies, to subdue them, and to conquer their cities and provinces without effort. He [Charles] won the battle in a miraculous manner and saved the Jewish nation from the might of this new faith which had been founded by a monk called Martin Luther, who is impure, and who planned to wipe out all the Jews, young and old, and to slay them.58

In another location Josel recounted how Jews prayed for Charles to vanquish his opponents:59

But we, the Jewish people, uttered fervent prayers in Frankfurt on the Main, in the morning and in the evening, calling on our father and king in heaven, on the one almighty God whose power would be able to help even the smaller of the armies win victory, beseeching him to protect our emperor and thus also us Jews . . . . The victory which the emperor won came to pass in 1546. The all merciful God in his compassion wrought great miracles for us as well in that no Jew suffered harm in this terrible civil war in which Germans fought against Germans in bitter hatred.59

We may well wonder why Charles abruptly changed policy regarding German Jewry. As protector of Jews Charles had the power to intervene in the local affairs of many German states, a power most princes would certainly have denied him, especially Protestant princes. Such power could be important to a strong ruler, and Jews, as “servi camerae” made this possible. Additionally, Charles was no doubt aware of growing Protestant antagonism towards Jews. In his later years Luther came to believe that his own poor health and the poor health of the Protestant movement were the

58Ibid., pp. 223-224.
59Ibid., p. 216.
result of nefarious Jewish activities. To the extent that Jews were an irritant to his Protestant adversaries, Charles may have wished to maintain this irritation by forbidding the expulsion of Jews without his express permission. A third factor, however, can be found in Josel's memoires. In this section he tells of the conflict between Germany and France and the Jewish role in that conflict:  

In the year 1545 [1544] the emperor set out with a mighty army to do battle with the King of France, and he pushed forward until he came to a place near Paris. Authorized officials went about the country to obtain pledges of war contributions from the Jews of Germany.

Josel claims the figure so raised was 3000 florins, with 400 for Charles himself. At the Diet of Worms in 1545 Charles acknowledged:

Our Jew, Josel of Rosheim, commander of all our Jewry in the Holy Empire. . . paid in cash the sum of 3000 Rhenish florins in behalf of Our said Jewry, at Our request, which sum we graciously accept from him.

Thus, the Jews were helpful in defraying the escalating costs of war in an age of war. There is also reason to believe that Jews created an information and espionage network for imperial military planners. Charles' avid protection of his Jews was noticed by more than Josel and his constituency. It is perhaps just coincidence, but Protestant expulsion of Jews in the 1550s and 1560s occurred after Charles resigned in 1556 and even more so after his death three years later.

We have noted a variety of Jewish responses to the Reformation conflict depending upon who the Jewish observer was and the country from which he wrote. Among these responses Josel's thorough pragmatism stands alone as the only assessment which did not attempt to read some particularly Jewish theme into this Christian conflict. Some saw this Christian predicament as the first sign of Christianity's demise. Many believed the doctrinal confusion of the 1530s would eventually give way to a clarity of religious vision in Christendom which would lead many Christians back to Judaism through Christian-Hebraica. Others saw in the Reformation a measure of divine retribution for past Christian injustice to Jews, with one author actually identifying forced Jewish converts with world-wide Marranos who in turn became Lutherans to wreak havoc upon Catholicism.

"Ibid., p. 206.
"Ibid. Stern cites entry of August 6, 1545, of the Records of the Imperial Diet, Fasc. 16., Convol. II, fol. 22.
Some saw a measure of rapprochement with Sabbatarians and antitrinitarians while others applauded Luther for his role in this apocalyptic drama of the fall of papal Rome.

The modern reader may well express surprise at the degree to which Jewish observers outside the Reformation conflict were able to wind Christian history around a core of Jewish contemporary events. This ethnocentric tendency was common to all religious confessions in this age of faith when all events were filtered through the perceptions of one's own faith. Consequently, Jewish observers, no less than their Catholic and Protestant contemporaries equated their opponents' ill luck with divine sanction of their own position. For the English in 1588 it was a Protestant wind that destroyed the Spanish Armada much as the Battle of Lepanto witnessed the victory of Christianity over Islam. Similarly, for many Jews, the terrible violence and cruelty in the wars of religion were vindication of their own anti-Catholic sentiments stemming from events in Spain in 1492 and the Spanish Inquisition. Much as Christian polemicists continually pointed to the ill fortune of Jewish history as proof of their rejection by God, Jews simply turned the tables and used the Reformation as proof of God's anger with Christendom.