

Eric W. Gritsch. *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment*.

Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012. xiv + 158 pp. \$25. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6676-9.

Eric Gritsch offers in *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism* a thought-provoking historical and theological analysis of the German Reformer's attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. This brief but dense book is especially valuable for its comprehensive appraisal of the textual evidence of Luther's hostility toward Jews and for its nuanced conclusions.

The work is presented in three principal parts, with a brief conclusion. In the first section, Gritsch analyzes the "riddle" of anti-Semitism. Here he tackles the etymology of the term, including the innumerable ways in which it has been defined; analyzes its connection both to race and to a "scapegoat mentality" present

in Christian theological tradition; surveys various historical manifestations of anti-Semitism among Christians; and offers a working definition of the term.

In the second section, the crux of the book and its most valuable contribution, Gritsch presents substantial evidence of Luther's approaches to Jews and Judaism throughout the German Reformer's three-decade-long career, and a nuanced view of the same. This section is particularly impressive as Gritsch does not simply string together Luther's most onerous utterances about the Jewish people. Instead he analyzes in some detail the Reformer's overarching theology of Jews and Judaism, concluding that his undeniable anti-Semitism went "against his better judgment." This turn of phrase is a bit unfortunate, as it seems to connote something less destructive than the horrific aftereffects of the hugely influential Reformer's words, which were utilized not only by Nazis, but also many Protestants, during the 1930s and 1940s. While Luther's anti-Semitism may have been out of sync with other aspects of his theology (and perhaps this demonstrates in some degree its irrationality), the evidence that Gritsch presents here shows that it was no small part of Luther's body of work.

In the third section he discusses some of the aftereffects of Luther's anti-Semitic views over the nearly five centuries since he lived. The gravity and immensity of the Holocaust appropriately loom large over these pages. Yet care is also given to treat the preceding centuries on their own terms historically.

A crucial contribution of the book is Gritsch's classification of Luther's anti-Jewish animus as anti-Semitism and, directly related to this, his inclusion of elements of "irrationality" (Gavin Langmuir) and "emotionally-fraught fantasy" (Albert Lindemann) in his definition of the term. As I have argued elsewhere, when scholars of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust have addressed anti-Jewish attitudes and actions in German history, they have often spoken of anti-Semitism as a modern phenomenon, one that is immersed in racial rhetoric. On the other hand, many historians of the early modern period or the German Protestant Reformation have been reluctant to attribute to Luther anything other than an anti-Judaism shaped by theology. Most Reformation scholars, to one degree or another, accept a sharp division between a premodern, theologically defined anti-Judaism and a modern, racially motivated anti-Semitism, leading them to discuss Luther's writings about Jews and Judaism primarily in terms of the former (Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany* [2012], 3–5). Helpfully, Gritsch resists the temptation to see such a sharp disconnect between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Instead he sees both kinds of anti-Jewish vitriol as integrally intertwined in Luther's writings.

This excellent work significantly augments our previous knowledge about Luther's views of Jews and Judaism. It is important reading for anyone interested in Luther, the Reformation, the history of anti-Semitism, and Jewish-Christian dialogue.

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