

Martin Luther's Understanding of Sin's Impact on Nature and the Unlanding of the Jew

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Introduction

Often cited as a precursor to the Holocaust, Martin Luther's anti-Jewish polemic proposed complete exclusion of the Jewish people from German society. Histories of anti-Semitism and social critiques of the Reformation usually credit Luther's antagonism to Jewish unwillingness to become Protestant or to his christological interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures.¹ Dan Cohn-Sherbok quotes passages in Luther's writings condemning the Jewish people as foreigners who are in league with the devil.² Luther's rejection of Jewish residency in the 'Christian' landscape, however, suggests that the reformer's view may be linked to his creation theology. Further, Gerhard Falk points out that Luther objected to Jewish claims to Canaan and Jerusalem, which Luther treats as an actual landscape, as well as to Jewish claims to descent from the Patriarchs, election by God, and possession of a God-given law.³ The purpose of this study is to investigate Luther's views about the relationship of sin or religious apostasy to nature and residence in fertile landscapes, and to compare his beliefs about Judaism to those concerning the natural order. By investigating the doctrine and hermeneutics of an influential Protestant reformer, this analysis

1. Heinrich Bornkann, *Luther's World of Thought* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 210; Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther—God's Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 130-45; Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 292-97; Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism* (4 vols.; London: ELEK Books, 1965-74); Robert Wistrich, *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991); Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

2. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew: Twenty Centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 72-74.

3. Gerhard Falk, *The Jew in Christian Theology* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1992).

identifies historic ecotheological concepts that may encourage environmental racism.

Sin and the Creation

Throughout Martin Luther's writings there is an emphasis on God's punishment becoming manifest in nature or in the Creation. He points out that God's wrath descends not only upon sinful human beings, but also upon the physical land they occupy. Luther writes in his commentary on Genesis: 'God's practice has always been this: Whenever He punishes sin, He also curses the earth'.⁴ Luther, like others before him, has taken the story of the Fall or the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and drawn it throughout history to be repeated by different peoples at different times.

For Luther, two instances of sin-induced divine wrath stand out amongst the rest—the Expulsion from Eden and the Flood, both of which inflicted a universal punishment upon both human kind *and* the rest of God's creation. These two disasters completely changed the face of the earth. Prior to the Fall, the earth was in its intended form of 'uncorrupted creation'. Luther states: 'At that time the world was pure and innocent because man was pure and innocent. Now...the world, too, has begun to be different; that is, the fall of man was followed by the depravation and the curse of the creation.'⁵ The great Flood not only temporarily cleansed the world of sin, but it dramatically changed the earth's appearance. 'Mountains were torn apart, fountains were broken up, and the courses of rivers were changed by the immeasurable force of the rushing waters.'⁶ Luther concludes:

This curse was made more severe through the Flood, by which the good trees were all ruined and destroyed, the sands were heaped up, and harmful herbs and animals were increased. Accordingly, where, before sin, Adam walked about the most fertile trees, in lovely meadows, and among flowers and roses, there now spring up nettles, thorns, and other troublesome sprouts in such abundance that the good plants are almost overwhelmed.⁷

He suggests that the Fall initiated a continuing process of degradation in creation, causing further fracturing of the relationship between

4. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan; 55 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St Louis: Concordia, 1955–76 [hereafter cited as *LW*], I, p. 99.

5. *LW*, I, pp. 77–78.

6. *LW*, I, p. 310.

7. *LW*, I, p. 205.

humans and nature, as when trees lose their good taste. Luther also holds the abundance of trees declined in the post-Fall cosmos. This loss of fertility extends to Reformation era, when Luther projects: '[as] in Zephaniah (1.3) He [God] threatens that He will gather up the fish of the sea and the birds of the heaven. Similarly, in our age many streams have fewer fish than they had within the memory of our ancestors.'⁸

Divine wrath also sapped the strength and vitality of the human body. In 'Lectures on Genesis' Luther concludes:

So it is certain that the strength of heaven and earth and of all creatures that are in heaven and earth is decreasing, of animals, men, plants, and herbs. There is no longer as much strength and vigour in them as there was formerly... But after the Flood the age of men decreased, and all creatures and heaven and earth degenerated. The power of the sun and the fertility of the earth is not what it was formerly...Indeed, it even devastated and destroyed Paradise.⁹

The vigorous reformer believed that in antediluvian times a man's finger possessed as much strength as an entire arm does after the era of Noah. Moreover, the effects of sin have limited human intellectual capacity. Wisdom and reason are no longer as acute as they were prior to the Flood.¹⁰ For Luther, this degradation of human capability was God's way of reminding future generations of His wrath, and of the terrible sin of their ancestors. Luther does not portray the Fall and Flood as singular finite events, but presents them as a continuing and unified process, extending into his own day. History becomes retrogressive, rather than progressive, and human existence becomes one long battle against an overwhelming, dark apocalypse. All creation, even the celestial realm, is steadily deteriorating.

Luther thus subscribes to the concept of an ideal primal state, displaced by human folly. In scattered references, he refers to the life enjoyed by Adam in Paradise before the fall, and eulogizes the lost Eden in a poetic or nostalgic manner. These texts are often saturated with a sense of longing for the arrival of the Kingdom of God, which will reinstate Paradise on earth. In his commentary on Genesis, for example, he writes: 'And so we now wait for the restoration of all things, not only of the soul but also of the body, because on that Day

8. *LW*, I, p. 99.

9. *LW*, VI, p. 189.

10. *LW*, II, p. 65.

we shall have a better and statelier one than the one in Paradise was.'¹¹

Luther describes the loss of the garden in stages. After God cast Adam and Eve out, an angel with a flaming sword protected the garden's entrance. Later, the Flood erased the garden from the face of the earth, leaving only slight traces of its former magnificence. Luther believed Paradise (the garden) was once located in the land of Canaan, because traces of an exceptional landscape were still present. He argues: 'I have no doubt that the land of Canaan was the most delightful part of the entire world. Therefore I readily agree with those who believe that Paradise was situated in that area before the Flood.'¹² Luther, further, cites as evidence for this geographic revelation:

It is said that traces of this gift are in existence to this day. For near the Dead Sea the most beautiful fruits are produced; but when they are opened, they are full of vile odour and ashes, obviously, as the poet says, 'monuments of an ancient crime'. Therefore I think that this very place was Paradise, and that after the Flood there adhered to it something of the richer blessing; eventually this also perished, because of the wickedness of the inhabitants...And it is very fitting that in the same land where a tree brought ruin to the human race, the offence of the first tree should be expiated on the tree of the cross, and innocence and eternal life should be returned to man through the son of God.¹³

Luther continues by explaining that even to his day the area surrounding the Jordan is most delightful, 'a small trace of the former paradise'.¹⁴

Loss of Fertility in Post-Biblical Landscapes

Luther infers from his biblical exegesis that, following the Flood, God still exacts punishment upon lands where the sins of humans are great. Although universal curses are precluded because God promised Noah that divine action would never again destroy the entire earth, localized environmental failures and disruptions continue, as God employs famine, the loss of fertility, and pestilence to punish the sins of humans. Luther peppers his works with examples of God's curse falling upon a regional landscape. The continuance of this phenomenon throughout history is a major topic in Luther's biblical exegesis, particularly where the patriotic German intends a political as well as a

11. *LW*, I, p. 101.

12. *LW*, II, p. 204.

13. *LW*, II, pp. 343-44.

14. *LW*, II, p. 344.

spiritual lesson. Luther, for example, dedicates much attention to the natural beauty that surrounded the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which occupied the most pleasant and fruitful portion of the land, ('it seemed like God's place of rest'), yet their sinful nature and disobedience to God were also extraordinary. God, therefore, destroyed the cities with fire. Luther comments:

The land of the Sodomites was a sort of Paradise, but because of their sin it became a lake of pitch...The reason for this is that the Sodomites did not recognise the gifts of God when He blessed them but wilfully misused those gifts. Furthermore, they blasphemed God; and, puffed up by their advantages, they persecuted His saints. As a result, the blessing was taken away from them, and a curse was put on everything.¹⁵

In the exegete's opinion, the terrible fate of these cities was intended to serve as an example to all the world and to frighten the ungodly.

Luther also offers contemporary examples of God's wrath damaging the land of the 'ungodly', such as the Roman Catholics of Naples. He interprets natural disasters as responses to apostasy when he concludes: 'During this year a goodly part of the earth in the territory of Naples near Puteoli vanished because of an earthquake and an inundation—not by some chance, as the papists think, but because of the sins of the people, of which there is no end.'¹⁶ Luther almost exclusively associates cursed land with Jews, Turks, Catholics and peasants—his most 'loathsome' adversaries.

Towards the latter half of his life, Luther grew convinced that the end-times were imminent because the sins of the world were so great. As Heiko Oberman has pointed out, Luther believed 'God's Reformation would be preceded by a counterreformation, and the Devil's progress would mark the Last Day's'.¹⁷ Furthermore, he thought God's localized curse of the land was becoming more frequent throughout the world. In the 'Genesis lectures' he declares:

Therefore I am fully of the opinion that because of the increase of sins the punishments were also increased and that these troubles were added to the curse of the earth...Yet no one will deny that as the sins increased, so also the troubles. Thus today we experience more frequent disasters to crops than in former times. The world is deteriorating from day to day.¹⁸

15. *LW*, II, p. 136.

16. *LW*, III, p. 295.

17. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 12.

18. *LW*, I, p. 206.

In addition to the land losing its fertility, Luther believed God's wrath was exacted upon man through the creation of novel, more potent illnesses and plagues. Syphilis, as he points out, did not exist in Germany when he was a boy. He attributes these new afflictions to the increase in sin amongst his fellow Germans. As further evidence of the biological impacts of wrongdoing, Luther points out the long lives of people prior to the Flood, which as he says, 'seems incredible to us'.¹⁹

Where desolate and arid land is mentioned in a biblical text, Luther often assumes the current or former residents have lost the favor of God and thus the land has received a curse. In several of his works, Luther emphasizes this correlation between sin, barrenness and the Jewish people. In his commentary on Psalm 104, for example, Luther believes the divine provision of water to birds and animals is an allegory of the provision of the divine word to the faithful. He comments: 'Thus all nations drink from the books and evangelical fountains, except the parched synagogue'.²⁰ His exegesis of Isaiah 32.15-18 interprets the passage: 'And the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, that is, the blind will see, and the seeing will be blinded. The wilderness will become a thoroughly cultivated field through the Word and the church, and those who seem to be cultivated, namely the synagogues, will be turned into deserts by the Word of the church.'²¹ Turning this association to an historic case, Luther reasons that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple and the lands around the city, because the Jews were unrepentant for the murder of Christ (a conclusion without historic foundation). In Luther's mind, the region had never recovered from the degradation initiated by retaliatory arson and pillage:

Those who have seen the Promised Land in our time declare that it in no way resembles the favourable description which appears in Holy Scripture. Therefore when Count Stolberg had explored it with special care, he stated that he preferred his own lands in Germany. On account of sin, on account of wickedness and vileness of men, the land was made unfruitful, as Ps. 107.34 says.²²

Godliness produces Good Land and Abundance

As God's wrath brings a curse upon the land of the sinful, God's pleasure with a people will, in contrast, bring abundance and fertility to

19. *LW*, I, p. 207.

20. *LW*, XI, p. 330.

21. *LW*, XVI, p. 280.

22. *LW*, I, p. 78.

the land they inhabit. Although they are less frequent than curses, blessings of land are sometimes described in Luther's works. In his commentary on Gen. 41.25, Luther emphasizes the blessing God bestows upon the land of Egypt due to his pleasure with Joseph's work: 'Therefore at that time the kingdom was in a most flourishing state, not only by reason of its fertility and other material blessings but also because of the enlightenment it obtained from the Word of God'.²³ Here, God's blessing follows the arrival of His Word. Luther takes precautions to praise God for the fertility and abundance God has provided his own territory of Saxony, and remains firmly aware that God's wrath often rains upon those who do not recognize the gifts God has bestowed upon them. In an interesting passage from 'Table Talk', Luther thanks God for the abundance He has bestowed upon His undeserving region:

Ah, praise God, this is wonderful weather! God is merciful and grants it to us without our deserving it. Would that we might also become more godly! If this happened we'd have paradise and heaven right here. All pains and troubles would be ended. Caterpillars, ants, and all sorts of worms would no longer harm our fruit, but everything would grow green and ripen in a delightful way. However, the punishment of original sin goes out into the whole world and falls on all creatures. Just now the grain in Thuringia and Meissen must cut shorter with the sickle because the fertility is excessive. We Saxons don't have to do this, and therefore we have an earlier harvest than they do.²⁴

Luther mentioned other German states, particularly revolt-stricken Thuringia, in order to bring these points about sin and the land a little closer to the hearts and minds of the German people. His sub-text implies that resistance to 'true religion' could wither the fruits of the soil. It is notable that Luther fluctuates between allegories of lush and barren landscapes, and implications that God's 'natural' wrath is still fully possible in the early modern European political context.

In the sixteenth century, the Thuringian plain, south of the Harz Mountains, was known for its fertility and abundance. In the Isaiah lectures Luther compares the bountiful Thuringian meadows, with their rich soils, to the biblical mountains of Sharon and Carmel which were also known for their productivity.²⁵ Luther had a personal interest in the nearby German state, as he had pledged loyalty to its Elector, John Frederick 'the Wise', and continued to rely on officials and

23. *LW*, VII, p. 152.

24. *LW*, LIV, p. 351.

25. *LW*, XVII, p. 382

princes for protection from Catholic retaliation as well as to secure his influence in German politics.²⁶

Luther greatly feared widespread contempt or revolt towards temporal authority, including peasant insurgence in Thuringia. His support for civil authority is displayed in a letter written in 1525, after suppression of the revolt:

In my opinion it is better that all of the peasants should be killed rather than that the sovereigns and magistrates should be destroyed, because the peasants take up the sword without God's authorization. The consequence of this wickedness of Satan can only be the satanic devastation of the kingdom of God and of the world.²⁷

This had been the fate of different 'wicked' people throughout history as we learn from this passage in the Genesis lectures, where he comments on disobedience to elders, and other divinely selected authority and infers natural disaster as a consequence:

Disobedience toward parents is, therefore, a clear indication of an impending curse and disaster; likewise also contempt for the office of the ministry and the government. When people in the ancient world began to deride the patriarchs and to despise their authority, the Flood followed. When among the people of Judah a child began to be insolent against an old person, as Is. 3.5 shows, Jerusalem fell, and Judah collapsed. This deterioration of morals is the surest indication of impending ruin. We have reason to be fearful for Germany too, where the infraction of law and order is so widespread.²⁸

Following this passage Luther warns of God's tendency to delay punishment. Just as Ham heard he was cursed, but laughed because he did not feel the curse; or as Sodom was allowed to flourish in sin for years before God finally destroyed the city with fire. The same fate could be visited upon an unsuspecting region of Germany. In the lectures pertaining to Genesis 13.10, Luther warns that the sins of the Thuringian people are presently deteriorating the once famous fertility of the region: 'These (sins) not only obstruct the blessing of a land

26. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms was largely adopted to gain the support of German authorities. In the context of temporal authority, the doctrine served to reassure the rulers who would support Luther's efforts. It assured the rulers that the Reformation was not a political revolt. It also served to keep rulers who were hostile to evangelical doctrine away from the new church. In the context of the new church it served as a reminder to the faithful of their responsibility to two worlds, one spiritual and one civic. Steve Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution*, (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

27. *LW*, XLIX, p. 114.

28. *LW*, II, p. 175.

but do away with it entirely, as we observe today that Thuringia is being turned into stones'.²⁹ He also comments that it now took seven years to produce what used to be produced in three years on the soil of Thuringia. Luther believes his home neighborhood around Wittenburg does not have the optimal soil of Thuringia. However, as Luther states in 'Table Talk', Wittenburg has received a greater blessing than Thuringia: 'God has in a wonderful way blessed us here on this sandy soil more than he has those who live on richer Thuringian land'.³⁰ This claim is both an advertisement for the economic advantages of Luther's sect of Protestantism and a petition for adherence to the existing political hierarchy.

Just as the sins of the peasants in Thuringia had brought the curse of God upon their soil, so too would the 'most detestable sinners of all', the Jews. Luther believes the Jews to be the most wretched and despised people on the face of the earth, who throughout their history have brought God's wrath upon the lands they inhabited, turning them to barren wastes. And it is for this reason, among others, that Luther wants them expelled from Germany: 'For they are a heavy burden, a plague, a pestilence, a sheer misfortune for our country'.³¹ In one of his most telling statements, Luther attributes the poor soil of his region to a curse brought upon it by Jews who lived there before the Saxon people: 'I have no doubt that once upon a time the worst of men lived in this region of ours. For whence come the dryness of the earth and the barren sands? The names also indicate that at some time Jews inhabited this region. Where wicked men dwell, there the land is gradually ruined because of the curse of God'.³² Luther was convinced that Jewish people had lived in his region for many centuries: as evidence he pointed out the many Jewish place names to support his contention!³³

The New Jerusalem

Luther's program of excluding Jews from the land also relied on his vision of a 'New Jerusalem'. In addressing the question of Jewish ownership of the 'Holy Land', Luther argued that the Jews were no longer God's chosen people, and since they had rejected and killed

29. *LW*, II, p. 344.

30. *LW*, LIV, p. 345.

31. *LW*, XLVII, p. 265.

32. *LW*, II (pp. 137).

33. *LW*, LIV, p. 306.

the true messiah, they were punished with dispersion throughout the world. He writes:

God had given them [the Jews] the promise concerning Christ, as well as the kingdom and priestly office, in order that they should be the first ones to accept Christ as their true King and Priest. But if they refuse to do this, the prophecy also predicts that their kingship and royal line will cease, that the land will be desolate, and that the people will be scattered and destroyed.³⁴

Luther associates the Diaspora with a decline of fertility, and in this context, he relates this notion to historic rather than to allegorical events. Once the Jews reject the Christ, thereby losing God's favor, their land no longer supports or harbors them.

Luther's allegorical interpretation converts the literal 'Jerusalem' in the prophetic scriptures to a 'New Jerusalem', which is simultaneously the Christian church, and the Word of God in the Gospels. In his commentary on Isaiah, Luther shifts Isaiah's promise of a return to a New Jerusalem from its geographic location to the hearts of believers:

The kingdom of the Jews was physical, established with government and ceremonies. This indeed was changed. The kingdom of the church, however, is only spiritual. Hence there is a difference between a kingdom of faith and an external kingdom, not according to the matter but according to appearance. Faith has to do with hope and expectation. For that reason the prophets write as if the kingdom of Christ were standing and flourishing, and even though it does not appear, it is visible to hope and faith. We are truly in the kingdom of Christ, yet, as it were, in a mystery.³⁵

Since ancient Jerusalem had been destroyed due to Jewish sin, Jerusalem was no longer a physical place, but a faith that was grounded in the Word of God. Likewise, the return to Jerusalem will not be upon horses and in chariots, but through the Word.³⁶ This also argued against the necessity of 'Roman' pilgrimage:

In former times saints made many pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, and Compostella in order to make satisfaction for sins. Now, however, we can go on true pilgrimages in faith, namely, when we diligently read the psalms, prophets, gospel, etc. Rather than walk about holy places we can thus pause at our thoughts, examine our heart, and visit the real promised land and paradise of eternal life.³⁷

34. *LW*, XIII, p. 341.

35. *LW*, XVII, pp. 386-87.

36. *LW*, XVII, p. 414.

37. *LW*, LIV, p. 238.

In countering Catholic dedication to relics and shrines, Luther believed there was no longer any holy value to Jerusalem, as the old Jerusalem was gone.

Luther was fond of attacking the Jewish insistence that they were still the chosen people of God. The reformer had a definite interest in disproving the Jewish claims to spiritual authority; thus he argued since the Jews no longer had possession of the Holy Land, there could be no reason to embrace the Judaic Law. He reasons: 'If they do not have a land, how can they insist on the sacrifices and other things commanded in the Law?'³⁸ He instructed his readers to challenge religious Jews on this point by demanding an explanation for their current miserable state. Luther accused the Jewish people of making a liar of God by claiming the continuation of the Law. In his lecture on Genesis 3.16, he rails:

The text states clearly here that the descendants of Abraham according to the flesh should have possession of this land (Canaan) forever. But for one thousand five hundred years the Jews have not had possession of this land; hence it follows clearly either that Moses is lying or that God has cast aside and forsaken the Jews, His people, so that they are no longer the people of God.

What answer will you give to this, you circumcised fellow? It will be difficult to say that Moses was lying; yet the actual situation indicates clearly that your nation has lost possession of the land of Canaan.³⁹

Luther continues with what he sees as the proper interpretation of the passage:

under the monarchy of the Romans the Jews are entirely without any promise; the prophets, too, threaten them with eventual destruction. Thus this passage demonstrates that the Jews are no longer the people of God, but that they have been cast aside by God because they denied Christ.

Therefore Moses' statement, 'I will give this land to your descendants forever', must be understood as 'that is, up to the time of Christ'. They should have received Him and listened to Him. They had been appointed heirs of this land until the King of theirs would come; and if they had received Him and listened to Him, they would have kept the Promised Land.

38. *LW*, II, p. 362.

39. *LW*, II, p. 359.

But because, according to John 11.48, they try to keep their land after they have destroyed Him, the opposite takes place; and they themselves perish without any hope of help.⁴⁰

Luther did not believe the Jews to be rightful owners of Jerusalem, or to have any further claims to the Promised Land. The 'New Jerusalem' was to be preserved through the word of God in the Gospels:

Who will accuse God of a lie because He preserves the church in a manner different from the way men either desire or know? The promises about preserving Jerusalem and the temple were similar. These promises were not annulled when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Babylonians. At that time God established another Jerusalem and another temple in the Spirit and through the Word, when Jeremiah promised (29.10) that the people would return after seventy years and would rebuild the temple and the city. For the Jews the temple and the city were destroyed at that time, but not for God, who promised in His Word that they would be rebuilt.⁴¹

The former monk enthusiastically adopted Augustine's doctrine of two kingdoms to support his own theology and societal objectives. The terms 'Jerusalem' (New Jerusalem), 'the Kingdom of God' and 'the church' were all but interchangeable for the politically astute advocate of German religious and civic independence from Rome. In these foundational Protestant texts, the Jewish loss of Jerusalem becomes an event much like the Fall or the Flood—an expulsion that cannot be reversed and results in ever expanding degeneracy so contagious, it turns the soil of Wittenburg to sand.

Discussion

Too often, we assume anti-Jewish or racist Christian biblical interpretation is an insertion or an addendum, rather than the result of arguing a major doctrinal issue or utilizing a widely accepted hermeneutic. Luther's anti-Judaism points to four theological concepts or interpretive conventions that may encourage environmental exclusion of ethnic or religious outsiders who are not members of a Christian-dominated society. First, Luther utilizes a hermeneutic with deep medieval roots. Although the emphasis might vary among exegetes, medieval Scripture interpretation extracts several meanings from the same text. One is the letter or the more obvious historic or literal message. The second is the allegory, from which the reader extracts the

40. *LW*, II, pp. 360-61.

41. *LW*, II, pp. 99-100.

ecclesiastical or doctrinal intent. Luther makes extensive use of allegory in attempting to align passages from the Hebrew scriptures with his christological interpretations. The third is the moral or soteriological meaning, and the fourth is anagogy or 'the text's meaning as far as transcendent reality and future events are concerned'.⁴² Luther treats allegory and historical fact as if they are interchangeable, creating a dangerous measure of poetic license. Further, Luther writes as if Hebrew texts such as the Psalms 'referred to Jesus both literally and spiritually, as if, indeed, Jesus were the literal sense of the whole of Scripture'.⁴³ Some commentators on Luther have suggested he reduces 'the traditional four senses of Scripture to two: Christ in the literal sense and faith in Christ as the moral sense.'⁴⁴ As Luther progresses in his biblical commentaries, however, he increasingly emphasizes 'the historicity of God's promises to mankind' and appreciates the 'witness' of historical personages such as David.⁴⁵ His use of allegory allows him to select matching historic cases, thereby giving him the power to identify the 'sinners'. By portraying the Diaspora as an analogue of the Expulsion from Eden, he makes the displaced Jews the villains, and exonerates the vengeful Roman legions. Conversely, he taunts the Jewish people over their potential eschatological role, when he jibes: 'let them even now travel to the land and to Jerusalem, build the temple, establish priesthood, kingdom, and Moses with his law, and thus again become Jews and possess the land. After that is done they will soon find us on their heels, coming right after them, and we will also become Jews.'⁴⁶

Modern Christian apocalypticism still ties allegorical interpretation directly to historic or current events, and then uses the hybrid to predict the future. Concepts such as the righteous occupying the land may, for example, still be shifted from spiritual allegory to arguments for white or Protestant political control of national or regional landscapes. Or, this genre of hermeneutics may depict the Islamic nations as a boiling caldron of militancy, threatening to bring the tribulation of the last days. Using the prophetic scriptures to interpret the politics of modern Israel, for example, may subtly or openly encourage envi-

42. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 66.

43. Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550*, p. 71.

44. Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550*, p. 71.

45. Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550*, p. 71.

46. *LW*, XLVII, p. 80.

ronmental racism, either against the Jews or against the Palestinians (or both).

Second, Luther's contempt for the Jewish people extends beyond their theological role as God's 'rejected' nation or his fear that they are continuously blaspheming the name of Christ. Luther saw Jewish householders as more than just a threat to the Christian community or the New Jerusalem, but as actual pollution infecting the land upon which they lived. Apostasy and blasphemy, were to him, sins which carried irreversible cosmic consequences. Luther portrayed the Jews as the main instigators in the continual destruction and degradation of God's creation throughout history, as a punishment for the rejection of God's Word. The Flood, and destruction of Jerusalem, and the Jews, continual degradation of the land are portrayed by Luther as a historically reoccurring event, as he states here in the 'Lectures on Genesis': 'Men who depart from the Word...' will nevertheless not go unpunished for this defection from faith. The Flood, the captivity of the Jews, and their present wretched state demonstrate this.⁴⁷ The links Luther forged between apostasy and God's punishment upon the land were not limited to the Jewish people alone. God's wrath could be invited upon the land of fellow Germans who did not properly receive the Word of God. Luther thus inserts fear of economic failure into his arguments against other religious sects.

Although it is easy to dismiss Luther's perspective as superstitious, and no longer an ecotheological alternative, the concept that apostasy of a sacred community can have a devastating impact on the environment is far older than the Reformation. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, a Jewish scholar, suggests in *In the Wake of the Goddesses* that ancient Israel, in describing their unified deity, portrayed a 'God...revealed as the master of all the forces of nature'.⁴⁸ This removes concepts of tension in nature or of paired male and female forces producing a productive landscape. Frymer-Kensky suggests that radical monotheism 'entails a unified vision of reality, a sense of nature as a creature of God'.⁴⁹ Hosea, in fact, proclaims God's control over fertility. In her insightful discussion of this change from the world-view of surrounding cultures, such as the Sumerians or Babylonians, Frymer-Kensky identifies two major theological difficulties faced by ancient Israel: first, 'if God has all the power... what can impel God to act?' and

47. LW, II, p. 101.

48. *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 98.

49. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, p. 98.

second, if Israel experiences natural turmoil, such as droughts, or is defeated in battle, why doesn't God protect His people?⁵⁰ Frymer-Kensky proposes that biblical monotheism moves humanity to centre-stage, but not as simple beneficiaries of nature. She states: 'The biblical theory of God's reactivity is biblical monotheism's way of grounding humanity in its interconnectedness with nature and its ultimate responsibility for nature's well-being and survival'.⁵¹ With the old pantheon of deities gone, 'God's audience, partners, foils, and competitors are all human beings, and it is on their interaction with God that the world depends'.⁵²

Luther accentuates the biblical concern for deviating from God's will, but he modifies the trajectory of the Hebrew texts, when he argues that correct theological interpretation of Scripture produces righteous action and aligns society in proper relationship with God. He, of course, projects all interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures through a New Testament lens. The Hebrew prophets, in contrast, had little concern for the written word, other than the Torah, demanded the exclusion of idols, and petitioned for righteous action, such as care for widows and the poor.

In contemplating the relationship between apostasy, faith and nature's well-being, we must also recognize that almost from its inception, Christianity differed from Rabbinic Judaism in its interpretation of the ties between humans, the non-human cosmos and God. Shayne J.D. Cohen concludes: 'Although ancient Judaism eschewed dogmas and creeds, its liturgy contains the closest approximation to a "normative" or "official" theology', which is concisely articulated in the Shema.⁵³ Unlike Luther, who is obsessed with 'the Fall' (a Christian theological construct), the Shema rejoices in God's redemption. Jacob Neusner, in discussing the Mishnah as 'a document about the holiness of Israel in its land', states: 'The Mishnah's system had one fundamental premise: Israel the people was the medium and instrument of God's sanctification... The system then instructed Israel to act as if it formed a utensil of the sacred.'⁵⁴ While Luther frequently asks: 'What is wrong with creation?', Jewish thinkers are more likely to ask: 'What

50. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, pp. 100-101.

51. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, p. 107.

52. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, p. 107.

53. Shayne J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987) p. 79.

54. Jacob Neusner, *An Introduction to Judaism: A Textbook and Reader* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 170.

is the purpose of creation?'⁵⁵ Jewish mysticism rejoices in God's glory in creation, and Kabbalists believe that 'God's emanation of His essence upon the world' continues in the form of the Sefirot, which in turn provide humans a means to reaching oneness with God.⁵⁶

Although we may not care for his conclusions, Luther is consistent in his logic. For the postmodern ecotheologian this raises an important question: is apostasy central to human relationship to nature or to the lack of it? And if apostasy is important, what defines it? What sort of separation from God would also disrupt the non-human cosmos? Luther's exclusive view of correct interpretation not only condemns Judaism, it implies that secular culture will lead us to our doom. We suggest that defining apostasy relative to doctrinal orthodoxy and denominational membership, if one believes that the one God is the Creator and is active in cosmos, can still unfortunately lead to Luther's conclusions that those who are of different religious heritage or are 'cast out' can pollute the land. Although the issue needs far more discussion than this paper can provide, one solution is to define idolatry as focusing on the material and personal gain, rather than on the loving, caring God, and on service to others. Christianity can concur with Judaism in emphasizing the Creation as 'an act of altruistic and perfect loving-kindness' and the concept of Creation 'for God's own Glory'.⁵⁷ When projecting the potential impacts of sin upon actual human habitats and today's ecosystems, we might also view apostasy as the absence or restriction of righteous actions, such as caring for the poor. This approach does not resolve the question of interpretive and doctrinal truth or orthodoxy, but it is quite compatible with action-oriented biblical ethics. The environmental meaning of apostasy, or a fractured with relationship with God, is an important area of discussion for all faiths based in radical monotheism.

Third, Luther presents the Fall as a continuing impact, like a major earthquake with after-shocks. This negative perspective on the present state of the Creation invites the casting of blame on those who live outside the imperfect, yet blessed Christian community. Since the degradation is continuing, the righteous must seek out and eliminate its causes. This suggests that retrogressive perspectives on human his-

55. See Michael J. Alter's summary of Jewish texts on this subject, *What is the Purpose of Creation?* (Northvale, NJ: Jacob Aronson, 1991).

56. David S. Ariel, *The Mystic Quest: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), pp. 81-88. See also Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941).

57. Alter, *What is the Purpose of Creation?*, p. 7.

tory, accompanied by the concept of an ideal primal state, may prompt social rejection of supposedly 'impure' subcultures, or of recently arrived, exogenous cultural elements. Economic or agricultural crisis or natural disasters, including epidemics, could accentuate the temptation to blame those who are different or 'Other', for environmental failures.

Luther's approach to the fallen landscape is somewhat like the pre-Reformation concept of Christian sacred space. Long before Luther, Christians excluded Jews from cathedrals, and would not bury a non-Christian in a consecrated graveyard. While denying the importance of shrines and pilgrimage sites, Luther worried about the potential spiritual pollution of entire German states. His advocacy for 'doctrinal purity' fertilized the first seeds of German nationalism, as the German princes sought to decrease external influence on German politics. Luther's tendency to extend the concept of 'sacred landscape' to whole German states is far more dangerous to religious minorities than is the concept of 'holy ground' localized around shrines, cemeteries and churches, because in Luther's 'righteous' German realms, the cultural 'other' cannot avoid intruding into 'Christian space'.

Lastly, Luther's argument for Jewish presence turning the soil to sand reinforces anti-Jewish metaphors that were common in Luther's day. Luther develops Judaism as anti-life and inorganic, and thereby a threat to what we would now call environmental health. In a number of passages Luther uses images of metal or stone to describe his interpretive competitors. He not only refers to the Jewish people as 'bronze dogs', he claims religious Jews: 'stood, and still stand, firm as a rock or as an inert stone image, insisting that God gave them the country, city and temple, and that therefore they have to be God's people or church'.⁵⁸ Similarly, he writes: 'for their blindness and arrogance are as solid as an iron mountain',⁵⁹ and 'I never expected to encounter such hardened minds in any human breast, but only in that of the devil'.⁶⁰ He, like his contemporaries, portrays Judaism as fraught with material lusts, when he writes accusingly: 'Their breath stinks with lust for the Gentile's gold and silver, for no nation under the sun is greedier than they were, still are, and always will be, as is evident from their accursed usury.'⁶¹ Inorganic motifs suggest spiritual stubbornness, materialism, and soullessness, and dehumanize

58. *LW*, XLVII, p. 173.

59. *LW*, XLVII, p. 172.

60. *LW*, XLVII, p. 177.

61. *LW*, XLVII, p. 211.

Luther's religious adversaries. Luther spiritualizes the lack of fertility when he declares: 'The Devil with all his angels has taken possession of his people, so that they always exalt external things—their gifts, their deeds, their works—before God, which is tantamount to offering God empty shells without kernels.'⁶²

Luther, again, turns allegory or metaphor into an actual physical outcome, or freely associates it with the spiritual state of those who do not agree with him. Use of metaphor in environmental theology should carefully avoid entrenched stereotypes that dehumanize non-Christians. Modern anti-Semites, including Nazis, may still associate the Jewish people with the material or inorganic, with animals in a negative sense (Luther's use of 'bronze dogs'), or with characteristics such as 'rootlessness' as opposed to 'rootedness' in a national soil or landscape. Such portrayals still accidentally or purposefully appear in 'mainstream' Christian literature and art. In the US, some openly racist sects of the Christian Identity movement and the religious wing of the 'Aryan Nations', utilize inorganic imagery when they portray racial and ethnic minorities as 'mud people' who originated outside the Garden of Eden.⁶³

We believe that Christians should draw on Christian history for environmental models, and should investigate the Creation theology of past leaders of the church. Luther's theology of Creation has many positive features that late twentieth century ecotheology has barely tapped. The stoic reformer recognizes, for example, the need for humanity to thank God for good weather and bountiful harvests. The difficulties begin when he blames innocent parties for agricultural difficulties or subtly invokes economic fears to dissuade his fellow Germans from supporting his theological adversaries. Larry Rasmussen, in *Earth Community/Earth Ethics*, has turned to Luther's panentheism, his declaration of forms of nature as 'masks of God', and the reformer's theology of the cross as a route to bring Christians down to earth to deal with our environmental sins.⁶⁴ Rasmussen concludes that 'we are always rooted in earth as earth creatures', and cites Luther's God-in-a-grain passage that states while, God's 'own divine

62. LW, XLVII, p. 174.

63. James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads and the Rise of a New White Culture* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1995). See also Susan Bratton, 'The Natural Aryan and the Unnatural Jew: Environmental Racism in Nazi and Weimar Film' (Richardson, TX: University of Texas at Dallas, PhD Dissertation, 1997).

64. Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community/Earth Ethics*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 270-81.

essence can be in all creatures collectively and in each one individual more profoundly', the entire cosmos cannot encompass God's majesty.⁶⁵ Rasmussen does not, however, approach Luther's more negative creation imagery, such as his depiction of the Jewish people as 'empty shells without kernels'.

Students of Christian ecotheology need to be aware of past failures, and should resist adopting theological models that might cause injury or injustice to those who are not Christian or who do not belong to the same sub-culture, social class or ethnic group. Our concept of how human sin may influence the greater cosmic order can be powerful argument for God's universal justice, or it can become a justification for excluding others from access to the Creation and its fruits.

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65. Rasmussen, *Earth Community/Earth Ethics*, pp. 275, 278.