

AGAINST THE SABBATARIANS:
LETTER TO A GOOD FRIEND

1538

Translated by Martin H. Bertram

INTRODUCTION

The present treatise, which takes the form of an open letter, was occasioned by Luther's receipt of a communication from his friend Graf Wolfgang Schlick zu Falkenau, reporting on Sabbatarian tendencies among the Christians of Bohemia and Moravia. We owe the identification of Count Schlick as Luther's correspondent to John Mathesius, who in his *Doctor Martin Luthers Leben*, a volume of biographical sermons first published in Nürnberg in 1566, speaks of the treatise as "addressed to Count Wolf Schlick zu Falkenau under the name of a 'Good Friend,' as I have ascertained from three fine letters to the gentleman in the Doctor's handwriting."¹ Count Schlick was a member of a prominent Moravian family sympathetic to the Reformation.

The term "Sabbatarians" has been used to refer to a number of movements, occurring in various epochs of church history, which have as their common denominator an insistence on a return by Christians to the essentials of Jewish Sabbath observance. Usually they are also characterized by an intense eschatological expectation, together with an inclination toward literalism in the interpretation of both the Old and the New Testaments. Concerning the specific movement to which Luther refers, however, relatively little is known, since no primary documents have come down to us. We do know that they were condemned by all the other parties of the sixteenth century—Romans, Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists, and even by many Anabaptists.

The two names definitely attached to the movement are those of Oswald Glait and Andreas Fischer, both of whom had written treatises sometime between 1528 and 1532 espousing the Sabbatarian position.² A reply to Glait's book was published by Caspar Schwenckfeld in early 1532 under the title *On the Christian Sabbath and the Difference Between the Old and New Testaments* (*Vom Christlichen Sabbath und Unterschied des Alten Testaments*

¹ Jubilee Editon (St. Louis: Concordia Verlag, 1883), pp. 62-63.

² See the articles on "Glait, Oswald" and "Sabbatarian Anabaptists" in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955 ff.).

und Neuen Testaments). The true Sabbath, Schwenckfeld argues, is spiritual; moreover, anyone who undertakes to observe the Sabbath literally thereby obligates himself to obey the whole of Jewish law (a point also to be stressed by Luther).

In view of Luther's emphasis on Christian freedom, based on a clear distinction between law and gospel, it was predictable that he would vigorously oppose the Sabbatarian position. What gives special point to Luther's treatise is his assumption that Jewish agitation and efforts at proselytization lay at the root of the movement. In his first explicit reference to Sabbatarianism (a remark recorded at table in the fall of 1532), he speaks only in general terms of "the new error concerning the Sabbath"; there is no mention of direct Jewish influence.³ In a similar vein are the remarks in his *Lectures on Genesis*, begun in 1535: "In our time there arose in Moravia a foolish kind of people, the Sabbatarians, who maintain that the Sabbath must be observed after the fashion of the Jews. Perhaps they will insist on circumcision too, for a like reason."⁴ A few sentences later, he uses the phrase "the Jews and their apes, the Sabbatarians." Such phraseology, as well as the passage as a whole, suggests that the initiative may have come from Christians, moved perhaps simply by Old Testament literalism.

On the other hand, it is known that fraternal relations did exist between members of the Jewish community and various leaders of Christian reform movements, as indeed they had once existed between Luther and the Jews.⁵ Direct proselytizing activities by Jews were uncommon, but not unknown. Former Jews who had been converted to Christianity—perhaps under unsavory conditions such as the pressures of the Inquisition—offered a prime target for re-conversion; and such efforts became more feasible when the monolithic power of the medieval church was broken by the Reformation.

The question of the precise origins and nature of the Sabba-

³ LW 54, 51-52 (No. 356).

⁴ LW 2, 361.

⁵ Cf. Luther's comment below, p. 191. On the whole question of the relation between Judaism and the Reformation, see Louis Israel Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform Movements* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), especially pp. 435-630.

tarian movement can hardly be solved at this historical distance. What is important for our present purposes is that at the time of writing the treatise, Luther himself was convinced that the Jews were responsible for the movement. He devotes the greater part of the treatise, therefore, to direct attacks upon the Jews rather than upon the Sabbatarians as such.

Evidence of the chill that had come over Luther's attitude toward the Jews and of the role he was now attributing to them is provided by an entry in the *Table Talk* dated "Between May 27 and June 18, 1537," where we read: "A letter was delivered to Dr. Martin from a certain Jew who requested and pleaded (as he had often written to the doctor before) that permission be obtained from the elector to grant him safe entrance into and passage through the elector's principality. Dr. Martin responded, 'Why should these rascals, who injure people in body and property and who withdraw many Christians to their superstitions, be given permission? In Moravia they have circumcised many Christians and call them by the new name of Sabbatarians. . . . I'll write this Jew not to return.'"⁶

Luther's correspondent was no ordinary man. He was Rabbi Josel of Rosheim (ca. 1478-1554), one of the most prominent Jewish leaders of the age and a frequent spokesman for his people before the highest secular and ecclesiastical authorities. Contrary to the impression of the recorder of Luther's remark, it appears that not only Rabbi Josel's safety and freedom but that of Jewry as a whole in Saxony was in question. Edicts had recently been issued by Elector John Frederick forbidding Jews to reside in his territory or even to travel through it.⁷ Luther's reply to Josel's

⁶ LW 54, 239 (No. 3597).

⁷ On the general situation of the Jews in Germany at the time of the Reformation, as well as the specific measures mentioned, see Wilhelm Maurer, "Die Zeit der Reformation," in Karl Heinrich Rengstorf and Siegfried von Kortzfleish (eds.), *Kirche und Synagoge, Handbuch zur Geschichte von Christen und Juden: Darstellung mit Quellen*, I (Stuttgart, 1968), pp. 363-375, especially p. 370. On the role of Josel of Rosheim, see Ludwig Feilchenfeld, *Rabbi Josel von Rosheim, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland im Reformationszeitalter* (Strassburg, 1898), or Selma Stern, *Josel of Rosheim: Commander of Jewry in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation*, trans. by Gertrude Hirschler (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965).

request for him to intercede with the authorities, however, is negative:

My dear Josel:

I would have gladly interceded for you, both orally and in writing, before my gracious lord [the elector], just as my writings have greatly served the whole of Jewry. But because your people so shamefully misuse this service of mine and undertake things that we Christians simply shall not bear from you, they themselves have robbed me of all the influence I might otherwise have been able to exercise before princes and lords on your behalf.

For my opinion was, and still is, that one should treat the Jews in a kindly manner, that God may perhaps look graciously upon them and bring them to their Messiah—but not so that through my good will and influence they might be strengthened in their error and become still more bothersome.

I propose to write a pamphlet about this if God gives me space and time, to see if I cannot win some from your venerable tribe of the patriarchs and prophets and bring them to your promised Messiah. . . .⁸

Opinions of modern scholars differ as to whether *Against the Sabbatarians* is or is not the pamphlet promised by Luther in the last sentence quoted. Arguing for it is the fact that this treatise does deal with the general subject of the Jews and that its composition followed Luther's letter to Josel by only a few months. Arguing against it is the fact that the treatise does not seem to be directed at the apologetic and missionizing purposes indicated by Luther in the letter. Rather he expresses great pessimism concerning the prospects of converting the Jews. He is writing, he explains, chiefly to strengthen Christians to resist the Jews and to refute their arguments. There is no other writing by Luther, however, which more closely corresponds to the intention expressed in his letter to Josel.

The treatise came from the press of Nickel Schirlentz in Wittenberg in early March, 1538. To secure an international reader-

⁸ Translated by the present editor from the letter as printed in WA, Br 8, 89 ff. (No. 3157).

ship, Luther's friend Justus Jonas translated it into Latin; this version was published in 1539. The following translation is based on the text, *Ein Brieff D. Mart. Luther Wider die Sabbather An einen guten Freund*, as found in WA 50, 312-337. The treatise appeared in a modern German version in the second Munich edition of Luther's works: H. H. Borchert and Georg Merz (eds.), *Martin Luther: Ausgewählte Werke*, Vol. III of the *Ergänzungsreihe* (Munich, 1936), pp. 29-60.

For a further discussion of Luther's attitudes toward the Jews, see below, pp. 123-126.

AGAINST THE SABBATARIANS: LETTER TO A GOOD FRIEND

Grace and peace in Christ! I received your letter and the oral request of your messenger. However, I was kept from answering as promptly as I should have liked, and as I promised to do, by many unavoidable obstacles. Please excuse me for this.

You informed me that the Jews are making inroads at various places throughout the country with their venom and their doctrine, and that they have already induced some Christians to let themselves be circumcised and to believe that the Messiah or Christ has not yet appeared, that the law of the Jews must prevail forever, that it must also be adopted by all the Gentiles, etc. Then you inquired of me how these allegations are to be refuted with Holy Scripture. For the time being and until I am at greater leisure, I will convey my advice and opinion briefly in this matter.¹

[Part One]

In the first place, the Jewish people have become very stubborn because of their rabbis.² As a result they are difficult to win over.

¹ As indicated above in the Introduction, the present treatise in the form of an open letter was occasioned by Luther's receipt of a report from his friend Count Wolfgang Schlick zu Falkenau of Judaizing tendencies among the Christians in Moravia. Luther's aim is to provide the count and other interested readers with biblical, theological, and historical arguments against the Sabbatarian position. The further treatment of the question promised by Luther in the second paragraph found expression in three treatises published in rapid succession in the year 1543. *On the Jews and Their Lies* is published for the first time in English translation in the present volume. *On the Ineffable Name and on the Lineage of Christ (Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi)* is not available in translation; for the original, see WA 53, 579-648. *The Last Words of David (Von den letzten Worten Davids)* appeared in English translation in Henry Cole (ed.), *Select Works of Martin Luther*, Vol. II (London, 1826), pp. 175-335.

The designation "Part One" for what follows is not in Luther's text but is implied by the "Part Two," below, p. 79.

² As the argument of this and the subsequent treatises makes clear, by "their rabbis" Luther means not only contemporary teachers but also the whole tradition of rabbinic theology and exegesis.

Even when one persuades them out of Scripture, they retreat from the Scripture to their rabbis and declare that they must believe them, just as you Christians (they say) believe your pope and your decretals. That is the answer they gave me at one time when I disputed with them and adduced Scripture against them. Therefore, to fortify the Christians, you must enlist the old argument which Lyra³ and many other have employed and which the Jews have not been able to refute down to the present day, even though they have shamefully perverted many Scripture passages while trying to do so, in contradiction of their own most venerable teachers. However, time and space are lacking for a discussion of that now.

This is the argument: The Jews have been living away from Jerusalem, in exile, for fifteen hundred years, bereft of temple, divine service, priesthood, and kingdom. Thus their law has been lying in the ashes with Jerusalem and the entire Jewish kingdom all this time. They cannot deny this, for it is proven clearly and emphatically by their wretched situation and experiences and by the place itself, which is even today called Jerusalem and which lies desolate and devoid of Jewry before the eyes of all the world. However, they cannot observe Moses' law anywhere but in Jerusalem—this they themselves know and are forced to admit. Outside of Jerusalem they cannot have or hope to have their priesthood, kingdom, temple, sacrifices, and whatever Moses instituted for them by divine command. That is one point, and it is absolutely certain.

Now you must ask them the nature and name of the sin that caused God to punish them so cruelly, obliging them to live in exile so long, without priestly and princely, that is, Mosaic, office and government, without the sacrifices and the other regulations of the law, and particularly without Jerusalem. For God's promise—of which they also boast—is that the law will endure forever,

³ Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349), an eminent biblical scholar and commentator whose influence can be discerned in much of Luther's exegesis, and who in turn had been deeply influenced by the Jewish biblical exegete Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105). Lyra's commentary, the *Postillae perpetuae, sive brevia commentaria in universa Biblia*, was the first such work to be printed (5 vols.; Rome, 1471–1472) and had a wide circulation. For an extended discussion of Lyra, see Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), pp. 135–246.

that Jerusalem shall be God's own residence, and that both the princes of the house of David and the priests of the tribe of Levi will forever remain before God. The prophets and the Scriptures are filled with such promises, as they know and (as said) of which they boast. Yet these glorious, great, and numerous promises have failed of fulfillment all these fifteen hundred years. Of this they are woefully aware.

Since it is nonsense to accuse God of not keeping his promise and of having lied for fifteen hundred years, you must ask what is wrong, for God cannot lie or deceive. They will and must reply that this is due to their sins. As soon as these are atoned for, then God will keep his promise and send the Messiah. Here again you must be persistent and ask them to name these sins. For such a terrible, long, and gruesome punishment indicates that they must have committed gruesome and terrible sins previously unheard of on earth. For God never tormented even the heathen for that long a time, but destroyed them quickly. Why, then, should God torture his own people so long and in such a way that they foresee and can foresee no end of it?⁴

Of course, it is meaningless if they declare that this is because of their sin and yet they cannot name this sin. They might as well say that they had committed no sin—since they are not aware of any sin that they can name—and therefore that they were being punished unjustly by God. Therefore you must press them hard to name the sin. If they do not do it, you have made the point that they are employing lies and are no longer to be believed.

If they do name the sin, well and good, note it carefully. For this argument hurts them; and even if I were a Jew and had been born from the body of Abraham and taught most diligently by

⁴ In this and the two preceding paragraphs, Luther lays out the essentials of the argument which will occupy him throughout Part One of the treatise. Its structure seems to be as follows: (a) The Jews are experiencing and for fifteen hundred years have been experiencing unprecedented suffering and exile. (b) This suffering far exceeds what could plausibly be attributed to divine wrath over a particular sin or sins, especially in view of God's forgiving nature and the firmness of his promises. Therefore (c) the Jews' suffering must be due to their rejection of the Messiah, whose coming God would not delay on account of even the most heinous sin. Luther supports the first point by appeal to history and contemporary observation; the second and third points he bases on logic and scriptural testimony.

Moses, I surely would not know how to answer this question. I should have to forsake Mosaic Jewry and become what I became.

Some of their rabbis, to comfort and to blind their poor people, answer this question by saying that this sin was their fathers' worship of the calf in the wilderness, and that they now have to atone for it until, etc.⁵ Isn't that terrible blindness? And what sense does it make to those who read Scripture? If that sin were really so great, why then did God subsequently confer so many blessings on the people of Israel? Why did he ever and again perform so many miracles through prophets and kings, also through peasants and women, as the books of Moses, Joshua, Judges, Kings, etc., testify? He would not have done any of this if he had not graciously forgiven all sin, except for this one, which was duly punished at the time. Why did he not forsake his people then because of this sin as he forsakes them now, instead of taking them, despite this sin, into the Promised Land, lavishing all good things on them, and elevating and honoring them above all the Gentiles? If God is withholding his Messiah now because of this sin (which was atoned for at the time) he might also have said then, "I will not lead you into the land nor honor you so highly as I promised; for you committed this sin which I will never forgive or forget."

But if no sin prevented God at that time from keeping his promise made to Abraham—as he never has forsaken his promise because of men's sin—why should he now delay so long with his Messiah by reason of this sin, in view of his glorious promise made to him that the throne of David and the sacrifices of the priests would not end before the Messiah came? Many other sins were committed at that time under Moses—the sins with Baal Peor,⁶ the

⁵ Although Luther appears to have had some direct acquaintance with rabbinic literature, he was largely dependent for points such as this upon the contra-rabbinic treatises produced in the late medieval period. Nicholas of Lyra, for example, in addition to his great commentary (see n. 3, above), wrote a work entitled *Pulcherrimae quaestiones Iudaicam perfidam in catholicam fide improbant* (*Excellent Issues Proving the Jewish Perfidy Against the Catholic Faith*). Paul of Burgos (ca. 1350–1435), a converted Spanish Jew who rose to the rank of archbishop, wrote an apologetic treatise entitled *Scrutinium Scripturarum (Scrutiny of the Scriptures)*, as well as an extensive gloss on Lyra's commentary which is known as the *Additiones*. The argument attributing the Jews' misfortunes to the worship of the golden calf is explicitly mentioned by Burgos in his *Scrutinium*, Part II, Dist. 6, Ch. 2. For other literature on Jewish faith and practice known to Luther, see below, p. 130.

⁶ Cf. Num. 25:1–5.

sin of tempting God so often, etc., for which, as Moses' books attest, they were severely punished. Why do they not also mention those sins here? Dear friend, to such Jews you must say that this is foolishness, as they know, or ought to know.

Furthermore, at that time the Messiah had not yet been promised to David. For this reason their sinning with the calf cannot come into consideration here. Therefore let them name some other sin because of which they are suffering such misery and exile. If they should mention one or several, I ask you most kindly to inform me at once of this in writing. Then I, old fool and miserable Christian that I am, will immediately have a stone knife made and become a Jew. And I will not only circumcise that one member but also my nose and my ears. However, I am convinced that they can name none.

The Scriptures record that the Jews committed many more and graver sins before the Babylonian captivity than they can point to in connection with this Roman captivity. Yet the Babylonian captivity did not last more than seventy years, and at that time they were also very much comforted with the presence of prophets, princes, and the promise, as I shall show later.⁷ We find none of these in the Roman captivity; and yet we behold this terrible punishment. Whoever is able, let him say: Dear Jew, tell me, which sin is it, what is this sin, that prompts God to be angry with you so long and to withhold his Messiah?

In the second place, even if the Jews could name the sin—and it is quite indifferent whether they call it A or B (though they are able to do neither)—that still would not help them. They would still be caught in their lie. For in Jeremiah 31 [:31-34] we find recorded: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be

⁷ Cf. below, pp. 76-77.

their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

This beautiful passage embraces many points, but since the Jews always flit and flutter from one subject to another when they feel themselves trapped, you must avoid all the others at this time and tenaciously stick to the issue for which this passage is now cited—namely, because the Jews claim that the promised Messiah's advent is being delayed as a result of their sin. Quite to the contrary, God here declares that he will make a new covenant or law, unlike Moses' covenant or law, and that he will not be prevented from doing this by the fact that they have sinned. Indeed, precisely because they failed to keep the first covenant, he wants to establish another, a new covenant, which they can keep. Their sin or their breaking of the previous covenant will not deter him. He will graciously forgive their sin and remember it no more.

You must base your argument on this passage and hold it before the Jews' eyes. For how do these things agree? How do they accord? The Jews say that the Messiah's advent is being impeded because they have not kept God's covenant but have sinned against it. God says, "No, I will not regard such sin. The fact that they did not keep my covenant will not hinder me. I am prompted to issue a new covenant all the more because they did not keep the old one, in order that such sin might be eternally forgiven and forgotten through the new covenant." Now it is time to pose the question: Who is lying here? God or the Jew? For they contradict one another. The Jew says "Yes," and God says "No." However, the question is quite superfluous, for it is proven that the Jews are lying and that their excuse that the Messiah is delayed because of their sin is worthless. God remains truthful when he declares that he is not stayed by any sin, but that he has held to his promise and the Messiah's coming, and that he still does so, regardless of their sin and their violation of his covenant.

Here you might well refer the Jews to the ninth chapter of Deuteronomy (the fifth book of Moses), where Moses tells them

in a powerful sermon and in many words that they are not entering the land of Canaan because of their righteousness, since they are a stiff-necked, base, and disobedient people, who always have provoked God to anger. "You have been rebellious against the Lord," he says, "from the day that I knew you" [Deut. 9:24]. No, they were entering the land because God wished to punish the heathen who dwelt therein and because of his promise sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as anyone will discover in the same chapter who will read and note it.

Note that here Moses himself testifies that the Jews were not brought into the land of Canaan on account of their righteousness or their penitence, but by virtue of God's promise which he had sworn to the patriarchs. God was not prevented from keeping such an oath even though the Jews with their sins deserved complete destruction, if he had not recalled his oath and promise. In his prayer found in the same chapter, Moses also indicates that he allayed God's anger by the sole word that God should remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who, though long dead, were still remembered for the sake of the promise, who lived before God and who were able to do all things, etc. [Deut. 9:26-29].

If God at that time was not restrained by the people's terrible sin from keeping his promise and from bringing them into the land, although their sin was clearly and distinctly named and known, as everyone can read in the Scriptures, why should he now, because of the people's sin—which they themselves do not know, which they cannot name or recognize, which is not mentioned anywhere in Scripture, and which no one can think of—delay such glorious, mighty promises about the Messiah so long beyond the time, or not keep them at all, and thus become a liar, because of the Jews' unknown sin?

Why should it happen to good King David that the promise sworn to him by God should not be kept, either in the past or the future, because of the Jews' sin? Even his own sins which he committed and which are very clearly named in Scripture can be read of there, such as his adultery, the murder of his pious servant Uriah, his blasphemy, etc.—even these did not obstruct God's promises, which David repeats and exults in on his deathbed as

part of his last words and testament.⁸ He says that God made a firm and certain covenant with his house, as we can read in II Samuel 23 [:5], and he prophesies at the same time that the ungodly, unbelieving Jews will be rooted out and consumed [vv. 6-7].

Moreover, what about the arch-patriarch Abraham? Should God's promises, given him so richly long before any Jew or Israel existed—much less had sinned—not have been kept for him because of the sins of his descendants, since he, being holier than David, did not sin after he was called from Chaldaeae? The same may be said about Isaac and Jacob, to whom God also gave and confirmed such a promise. Because of this, he also calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob throughout the Scriptures. Manifestly, he could not cease being their God or become a liar because of their disobedient children and descendants, as Moses calls them. No, the Jews make themselves liars and blasphemers with such inane excuses.

Finally, we read at the end of the first commandment⁹ that God will be angry with the disobedient children of Israel, to whom this commandment is given, to the third and fourth generation. At present the Jews have been under God's wrath for fifteen hundred years, with no end in sight. This covers far more than three or four generations. No heathen were ever afflicted as long as this, and they never had a promise from God. How could he then so shamefully forget the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and all the prophets and delay so long and, moreover, fail to indicate when this misery is to end? For Scripture insists that God will be and remain the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of their seed, and that he will not let David's throne topple or cease. Yet we know that this has been toppled and has ceased to exist for fifteen hundred years, as they themselves must feel and grasp even if they could not see or hear it.¹⁰

⁸ II Sam. 23:1-7. Subsequently Luther was to write an extended study of this passage (*The Last Words of David*; see n. 1, above).

⁹ Exod. 20:5; Deut. 5:9 (counted in other traditions as the second commandment).

¹⁰ The implication here is that since the advent of the Messiah, these promises find their fulfillment in Christ's kingship and in the church as the New Israel, rather than in the Jewish people as such. This is a fundamental tenet

Since it is clear and obvious that the Jews are unable to name a sin because of which God should delay so long with his promise and thus be a liar in this matter, and that even if they could mention one or more, God's word still stamps them as liars, since he assures them that he will never fail because of their sins in his promise to send the Messiah and to preserve the throne of David forever—it follows incontestably that one of the following two things must be true: either the Messiah must have come fifteen hundred years ago, or God must have lied (may God forgive me for speaking so irreverently!) and has not kept his promise. I repeat, either the Messiah must have come fifteen hundred years ago when the throne of David, the kingdom of Judah, the priesthood of Israel, the temple, and Jerusalem were still intact, when the law of Moses and the worship he instituted still endured, and the people were still living under their government in Jerusalem, before all of this had collapsed and been destroyed so miserably; or if not, God has lied. Those Jews who are still in possession of their reason cannot deny this. The hardened ones may wriggle and writhe, bend and twist with whatever artifices they may or can find, but their expedients and subterfuges are nothing over against such obvious truth.¹¹

The Messiah has come and God's promise has been kept and fulfilled. They, however, did not accept or believe this, but constantly gave God the lie with their own unbelief, etc. Is it any wonder that God's wrath destroyed them together with Jerusalem, temple, law, kingdom, priesthood, and reduced these to ashes, that he scattered them among all the Gentiles, and that he does not

in Luther's view of the relationship of Christianity and Judaism and of course had long been part of the common Christian tradition, traceable to the New Testament itself.

¹¹ Luther was to elaborate this argument concerning the timing of the Messiah's coming in his treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies*. The key text was Gen. 49:10, to which he had already alluded in his treatise of 1523, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (see LW 45, 213-216): "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs" (in Luther's text: "until Shiloh comes"). The end of the political kingdom of the Jews and the beginning of the spiritual or messianic kingdom had to coincide; according to Luther and other earlier Christian apologists, this in fact happened in the first century. The coming of the Messiah coincided with the destruction of Jerusalem and the final loss of Jewish independence.

cease to afflict them as long as they give the lie to the divine promise and fulfillment and blaspheme them by their unbelief and disobedience? For they should have accepted the new covenant (as promised by Jeremiah) from the Messiah and received him. He was commissioned to teach them properly concerning the throne of David, the priesthood, the law of Moses, the temple, and all things. As Moses writes in Deuteronomy 18 [15]: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed." For God says that he will put his words in the prophet's mouth and speak with them.

They may object here that God has indeed often withheld his help because of sin; as when he let them be afflicted so long in Egypt, and later when he prolonged the forty days in the wilderness into forty years in view of their sin, and finally also when he let them live in exile and prison in Babylon for seventy years, etc. Well, if that is the point they want to make, then they are on the right track, and you must accept such an argument to catch them again in a patent lie and empty subterfuge. Just say: God does of course punish the sinner, and he also tests his dear saints with misfortune. However, he does not let his promise become a lie or go unfulfilled, for he is Truth itself by his very nature, so that he cannot lie. His afflicting and testing of the children of Israel in Egypt was not an indication that he had renounced his promise. Quite the contrary, before the children of Israel were created or born, also before Abraham had a child, God provided so solicitously for them that he proclaimed and promised to Abraham (in the sixteenth chapter of Genesis [15:13-14]) that his seed, not yet existent, should dwell in exile for four hundred years, and that he would then lead them forth in prosperity. This promise he truly kept and he led them from the Egyptian exile after four hundred years, although there were sins aplenty. For they opposed Moses vigorously, as they themselves boast in Exodus [14:12]: "Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?'"

But the Jews do not have now, nor did they ever have, such a promise regarding their present exile. Furthermore, at that time God gave to the children of Israel the patriarchs, who were great

prophets, and he sent Joseph in advance of them to prepare a home for them, so that they should be properly received prior to the exile. Thus God was with them at all times and upheld his prophecy and promise, so that they were certain that they would be led out of Egypt. Joseph, too, said this on his deathbed, and for this reason commanded that his bones be taken along from Egypt.

But now in their last, Roman exile,¹² there is none of this. There is no prophet, and they have no word from Scripture telling them how long this exile will endure. They must be so pitifully afflicted for an indefinite time, wandering aimlessly about without prophets or God's word. God never did this before, and he would not do it now if his Messiah had not come and his promise had not been fulfilled. For he promised that David's throne would not fail or the priestly sacrifices be discontinued; and yet both David's throne and Moses' altar, together with Jerusalem itself, have been destroyed and have lain desolate for fifteen hundred years. Meanwhile God keeps silent, as he never did in Egypt or in the other exile. Nor will he or can he do so, lest he be untrue to his promise.

Likewise in the wilderness where they were afflicted for forty years, he did not forget his promise given to Abraham that his descendants should come into the land of Canaan and occupy it as an inheritance. Just as he had said, he brought them into the land. However, he had not defined the time or the number of days in which he would do this. If they had not sinned, they would have entered the land very promptly. But when they sinned, he promised them in his anger that they should not enter the land before forty years had passed, corresponding to the forty days which the spies had spent in spying out the land. Thus their murmuring protracted the forty days into forty years, as the text tells us [Num. 14:34]. Still God kept his promise, and despite his anger at that time they did enter the land after forty years.

Moreover, God did not desert them in the meantime, but gave evidence of his presence among them through many miraculous deeds. He had pillars of cloud and fire serve them day and night. He fed them daily with bread from heaven, he gave them water

¹² The condition of Jewry after the first century was characteristically called "exile"—*captivitas*—by writers of Luther's time.

from a rock, and supplied them with meat and birds. He did not permit their garments or their shoes to wear out. He constructed a tabernacle; he regulated the tribes of Israel; he was with Moses, Aaron, and other prophets. He punished Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And he conferred many other similar favors on them, from all of which they could conclude that God was with them, that he was not abandoning them because of their sins, but was keeping his promise faithfully above and in spite of all their manifold wickedness. Their sins and their malice are referred to frequently in this passage;¹³ they were by no means unknown.

But now in this last exile there is none of all of this. No sin is named to which they might point. There is no prophet; there is no time limit defined; there is no sign, no miracle, no manifest blessing which might let them sense God's grace. Nor is a definite place and location specified for their exile, as Egypt and the wilderness has been specified; but they are forever without established home and are cast about from place to place. Today they build their nests at one spot, tomorrow they are driven off and their nests destroyed. There is no prophet to tell them: Flee to this place or to that! No, even the place of their exile must remain uncertain to them, and they flutter wherever the wind carries them. All of this is without precedent. Egypt, the wilderness, and Babylon were definite places in which they suffered their exile. There they always had God's word and the prophets with them, and God's clear revelation. But here they are utterly forsaken, and it has been so long that David's throne has lain desolate and Moses' law neglected in the temple in Jerusalem, for which it was ordained.

Similarly, when they were driven into the Babylonian captivity, God did not forget his promise nor did he desert his people, but he fixed a definite time (namely, seventy years) and a definite place (namely, Babylon) and assured them that they would return to Jerusalem after those twenty years and that their kingdom and priesthood would remain. In addition, he granted them excellent prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and his friends, through whom they meanwhile were comforted and sustained. He

¹³Luther apparently refers particularly to the story of Korah's rebellion, Numbers 16.

also demonstrated by great miracles and benefactions performed by Daniel that he was with them and had not forsaken them. The royal person of Jehoiachin was elevated by the king of Babylon far above all the other kings, so that the throne of David and the priesthood did not become extinct, and even the persons remained to the end of the exile. Through Isaiah he had also long before this named King Cyrus to liberate them (Isaiah 45). The same prophet also foretold many things about this captivity. He did not keep silent about the sin, but like Jeremiah, mentioned it distinctly, so that it is well known for what sin they were punished in this manner.

Therefore those three punishments or exiles—in Egypt, in the wilderness, and in Babylon—cannot be compared with this last Roman exile. For in regard to the former, the sin is known, there are prophecies and promises, there are prophets and persons, for both the throne of David and the altar of Moses; and there is a definite time specified. In brief, where God is so disposed toward his people and where he deals thus with them and diligently keeps them and reassures them, one cannot say that he has forsaken them or has forgotten his divine promise. Nor can they be called forsaken, when God provided for the children of Israel in Egypt before they were born, determining the time for Abraham before he ever had a child. Read Jeremiah 30 and 31 and you will discover how God bemoans, like a weeping mother, the exile of his people in Babylon. He did this even before they went into exile and without any regard for their sin on account of which they were to be driven into exile.

Why, then, should God forget his promise so woefully in this exile or let it fail of fulfillment or be so hostile to them, since they have no sin which they can name, and yet this promise of the Messiah is the most glorious and the mightiest promise, upon which all other prophecy, promise, and the entire law are built? For the other promises such as those pertaining to Egypt, the wilderness, and Babylon, are to be esteemed very small in comparison with this chief promise of the Messiah. If God kept his less important promises there and then and comforted the people so heartily in lesser exiles; if he specified the time; if he proved himself their

faithful God by means of persons and blessings and in every way, and always provided for them—how is it possible, how is it credible, how is it consistent that he would fail to keep, in this terrible, long, and great exile, his glorious promise given to David that his throne should remain established forever, as David exults in his last words (recorded in II Samuel in the first chapter [23:5]) and as we find in many other writings of the prophets, for example, in Isaiah and Jeremiah?¹⁴

The Jews may say what they want about the sins for which they are suffering (for they are lying). God did not promise and pledge an eternal throne to their sin or their righteousness, but to David. Even if he were disinclined to keep this promise to the Jews because of their sin (which they cannot even name), he would not for that reason lie to David and fail him to whom he promised this. This is what David sings in Psalm 89 [4:52]. However, since David's throne, which God declares is not to be destroyed or fall, has been destroyed now for fifteen hundred years, it is incontrovertible that either the Messiah came fifteen hundred years ago and occupied the throne of his father David, and forever occupies it, or God has become a liar in his most glorious promise because of evil men and disobedient Jews. But this God did not want and never will want. No, the Jews are slandering God and deceiving themselves when they accuse God of breaking faith and trust with David because he did not send the Messiah in the manner they would have liked and as they prescribe and imagine him to be.

I know this argument is true. Where there are still reasonable Jews, it must move them, and it must even upset the obdurate ones a little, for they cannot bring any substantial evidence against it. But if it does not move them or make them waver, we have nonetheless substantiated our own faith, so that their foul and worthless lies and idle chatter cannot harm us. And if they do not stick to the point of the argument but evade the issue by resorting to other twaddle, as they like to do, let them go their way and you go yours. It only shows you how they are given to babbling and lying.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cf. Isa. 9:7; 55:3; Jer. 17:25; 33:17.

¹⁵ This paragraph is in the vein of Luther's later treatises, especially *On the Jews and Their Lies*.

Part Two

You write that the Jews boast that their law will endure forever and that we Gentiles must become Jews. You must reply: In the first place, if it is true that the Messiah has come, then they themselves know that their law has ended. For Moses is to be binding only till the advent of the Messiah. In Deuteronomy 18 [:15] Moses declares that they must heed the prophet whom God will raise up after him. The following saying is current also among their own teachers: *Cum venerit Sanctus Sanctorum, cessabit unctio vestra*; that is, "When the Saint of all Saints appears, your anointment will terminate."¹⁶ "Anointment" here refers to the priesthood and kingdom established upon them and among them by Moses. The Messiah will establish a new and better one for the people of Israel and the throne of David.

Second, how does their assertion that their law will endure forever agree with the fact that it has lain in ashes for fifteen hundred years, together with priesthood, temple, kingdom, and worship? It would seem to me that this means the end of the law; for they cannot keep Moses' anointment or law outside the land and outside Jerusalem, as they well know and cannot deny.¹⁷ And God surely would not have allowed such laws to fall or to lie for so long if he had planned to have them observed forever and ever. So you must tell them that they themselves should take the initiative in keeping Moses' law and becoming Jews. For they are no longer Jews, since they do not observe their law. When they have done this, we shall promptly emulate them and also become Jews. However, they should have begun to do so fifteen hundred years ago when they still dwelt in the land and in Jerusalem, when they still had their temple, priesthood, and government. They should have been concerned or done their part so that it would not have fallen or ceased for these fifteen hundred years and thus have lost its

¹⁶ A specific source for this saying has not been located.

¹⁷ Luther obviously has in mind here the ceremonial laws which presuppose a temple cultus in Jerusalem, together with the civic or judicial ordinances which presuppose an independent state. Under the conditions of the "Roman exile," both these aspects of the law fall away, while the "moral" aspects—especially insofar as they agree with the natural law—retain their force. On the latter point, see Luther's argument below, pp. 88-95.

eternity. Then they themselves would not now have become such miserable non-Jews and be bereft of Moses.

But since this was neglected and did not come to pass, 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. If they will not do this, it would be extremely ridiculous for them to convert us Gentiles to their expired law, which has been in decay and has not been a law for fifteen hundred years. Should we be expected to observe that which they themselves do not and cannot observe as long as they are not in possession of Jerusalem and the land? They dream that they will observe it at the time when the Messiah appears. We wish to retain our freedom meanwhile and not believe in their dream until it comes true.¹⁸

From this, dear friend, you can infer what empty, meaningless folly the Jews are given to in declaring that their law of Moses will endure forever. It has been in ruins for fifteen hundred years now and did not survive, and they do not yet know for how long this situation will prevail. We Christians, however, know that it has ceased forever and that it is entirely abrogated through the Messiah, not only among us Gentiles, to whom this law of Moses was never issued and commanded and on whom it never was imposed, but also among the true Jews and posterity of David. For since God himself has let it lapse for these fifteen hundred years, it is reasonable to assume that he pays it no heed and that he is not interested in obedience or service to such a law. Otherwise he would never have let it collapse or, at least, he would have determined how long he would let it lie in decay (as he did in the abovementioned instances), and with new promises, as well as

¹⁸ Jewish people had continued to live at Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine throughout the Middle Ages, enjoying now greater, now less freedom as control of the land alternated between Christian and Muslim rulers. On the whole, the latter proved the more tolerant. During Luther's lifetime, the hegemony of the Egyptian sultans was succeeded by that of the Ottoman Turks, who were to retain control for four hundred years. The event with whose unlikelihood Luther taunts the Jews in the present passage—the re-establishment of an independent Jewish state—finally occurred in 1948.

prophets and other persons, he would have secured and regulated it. But he did not do this. Therefore the law of Moses is finished. It does not stand as a law that endures forever; rather it has become a law that is forever abandoned.

But when the Jews bandy about the word *le-olam* to prove their point, quoting Moses' command to keep such and such laws which he gave them *le-olam*, that is "eternally," these rascals are well aware that this is empty talk designed to dupe those not versed in the Hebrew language. They would not dare to confront me or anyone else who understands a little Hebrew with this,¹⁹ unless to make a joke or to provoke some laughter. In Exodus 21 [:5-6] Moses himself writes that when a slave, after serving his term, does not choose to leave his master but wishes to stay on with him, the master shall bore his ear through with an awl at the doorpost as a sign that he wishes to remain attached to the house eternally. And he shall remain the master's servant *le-olam*, that is, eternally. The Jews know very well that neither master, slave, nor house will abide eternally, but that these must die and pass away, and all will be changed. Yet Moses uses the word *le-olam* here, which means eternally. They themselves interpret this to mean "on and on," that is, without a definite end among the children of men. There are no doubt other examples in the Scriptures of the use of this word *le-olam*.

If I were Moses, I would give my pupils, the Jews, a good

¹⁹ Luther is modest concerning the degree of his own expertise in Hebrew. In this case, however, he had the assistance of his predecessors Nicholas of Lyra and Paul of Burgos, both of whom had explored the meaning of the term *le-olam*. See especially Burgos' *Scrutinium Scripturarum*, Part I, Dist. 8, Ch. 5; his position is similar to Luther's. A modern authority, the Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, reprinted 1953), states the following as the meaning of *olam* with a preposition indicating futurity: "for ever, always (sometimes=during the lifetime)." Hermann Sasse, in his discussion of the Hebrew background of the Greek terms *aion*, *aionos*, attributes the differences in meaning of *le-olam* such as those pointed to by Luther in part to historical developments in Hebrew thought and language. See his article in Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Vol. I (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 197-209. Luther deals with the same point in his *Lectures on Genesis*, commenting on Gen. 17:9: the covenant of circumcision is to be kept by Abraham and his descendants "throughout their generations"; i.e., according to Luther, "as long as the kingdom and priesthood continue to exist" (LW 3, 127).

box on the ears. How often, I would say, have I used not only the word *le-olam*, but also the words *le-dorotham*, *benothekem*, *le-dorothekekem*, *moshebothekekem*,²⁰ when I meant "as long as you live or remain in your dwellings." This cannot be understood otherwise than to mean, "It shall be kept by you forever so long as you live or remain in your dwellings." But they have now been expelled from their dwellings (that is, from the land of their dwellings) for fifteen hundred years. They did not remain the nation that Moses founded. For fifteen hundred years they have been without their own dwelling place; nor do they have a promise or a specified time indicating how long they must still be in exile outside their dwelling place, perplexed and uncertain. Moses thus protected himself nicely against misunderstanding, for he did not wish to have his institution and his law remain eternally any longer than his nation would remain and keep its dwelling place. In view of these qualifications, *le-olam* cannot mean "eternal" in the ordinary sense of the word, where it means literally eternal without any qualification, as God's promises are and as he himself is.

We Germans use the word *ewig* ["eternal" or "eternally"] in the same sense when we say: Am I to suffer or to do this eternally?—that is, as long as I live. Under the papacy many "eternal" masses for the dead were endowed, which means, to be maintained as long as possible. And fiefs are conferred "hereditarily and eternally"; that is, as long as the fiefs and the heirs exist or remain alive. But whenever God, who is truly eternal without qualification, speaks of eternal things, these are eternal indeed, for he is able to make them eternal—things such as David's throne, the Messiah, and the eternal blessing which he has brought to us lost men. For he does not change as the dwellings of the Jews or the feudal estates of the Gentiles change, which are changed as one changes a garment.

Therefore the Scriptures differentiate between the human *le-olam* or eternal and the divine *le-olam* by adding a negative to the latter, to indicate that it shall not change. For instance, Daniel 7 [6:26] declares of the Messiah: "He is the living God, enduring

²⁰ Literally, "to their generations," "your daughters," "to your generations," "your dwellings."

for ever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed." Here we find the word *ewig* ["eternally" or "for ever"], but to insure that this might not be construed as a human but as a divine "eternal," the negative phrase "shall never be destroyed" is added. Similarly, David prophesies of the eternal Priest, the Messiah, in Psalm 110 [:4], "The Lord has sworn"—this would have sufficed for the oath of such a Lord, but lest it be conceived as a temporary oath, the words are added—"and will not change his mind." That is to say that this Priest will be eternal, not in the Mosaic or human sense, but in the sense of without end and truly eternal.

And Isaiah in chapter 9 [:7], also speaking of the Messiah—as the Jews are very ready to admit—declares: "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom," etc. Here the prophet does not content himself with saying that the kingdom of the Messiah (the Prince of Peace, as he calls him) will be great, but he states that there will be no end to peace, as though he were to say: It will not only be eternal, but eternal without any hindrance. And who knows—for I am not an expert in Hebrew—whether the closed Mem, which here conveys much subtlety to the Hebrews (as they claim), does not mean just this: that this Messiah's kingdom shall be thus eternally great, since it is not an open Mem, which might signify an earthly eternal, but a closed Mem, which excludes every other possibility than that of the truly eternal.²¹

But if the Jews claim here that they have indeed kept the law of Moses down to the present time, for instance with regard to circumcision, also with regard to abstinence from certain fish and meat, etc., and that the law, in view of this, has not come to an end, we say that this is empty talk. For we are speaking of the entire law of Moses which they are obliged to keep, especially the truly chief paragraphs and sections: namely, those dealing with the priesthood, the kingdom, the temple, worship, Jerusalem, and the

²¹ The Hebrew letter Mem is customarily written in closed fashion only at the end of a word, whereas in this passage a closed Mem occurs in the middle of the word *le-marbeh*, "of the increase." Luther's speculation is typically medieval. Another opinion held that the closed Mem signified the closed womb of the Virgin from whom the Messiah was to be born. Modern scholars make the more pedestrian suggestion that it might be due to a scribal error.

whole country, all of which are basic to the law of Moses and which it has instituted. He who would keep Moses' law must keep it in its entirety, especially in the chief parts, or his keeping of the law goes for nought. It is just as though I were to ask for a pot and they would show me the shards or small fragments of a shattered vessel. Isaiah in chapter 30 [:14] uses this very simile against them, saying that they will become like a pot that is smashed into such small pieces that one cannot find a shard of it which could serve to carry fire or dip water.

So in this instance, we ask them where their entire law concerning priesthood, temple, city, country, and government is now, and they show us the battered fragments and small shards of their eating of fish and meat, etc. Was there ever a city or country destroyed of which some slag, bits, and pieces have not been found? Is a house ever so completely consumed by fire that not a vestige of lime, stones, bricks, nails, iron, or glass remains in the ashes? If I were to inquire about the house and someone showed me a brick or two or some nails in the ashes to persuade me that this was the house about which I had asked, what in the world should I think of him? Either I would think he was a mischievous fellow who was trying to make fun of my question, or if I felt he did not understand, I would say to him: Dear friend, these odds and ends indicate, to be sure, that a house once stood here; but it has disappeared and is here no longer.

Thus the Jews show us with their leftover shards and slags of eating fish and meat, etc., that they did once have the law of Moses, but that it has disappeared from the scene, since the house, the government, the land, the city, the temple, and the whole true head and body of the law have been absent and destroyed for fifteen hundred years. If they refuse to believe that their law is temporary and not eternal, then let them explain how their land, Jerusalem, the temple, Moses' ordinances and law, happen to be torn to bits and they themselves destroyed and dispersed. They may call it an eternal thing, but we perceive that it has fallen, and been at an end for fifteen hundred years, and will never be restored. For there is no prophet, no promise, which foretells its restoration, as hap-

pened in Babylon and Egypt. Therefore the Jews' hope is doomed, for it has no basis in God's word.

Nor is circumcision a law of Moses, for it was given to Abraham much earlier.²² Thus our Lord testifies in John 5 [7:22]), "Circumcision is not from Moses, but from the fathers." This the Jews cannot deny. Furthermore, this circumcision is not eternal; it did not exist prior to Abraham and it was entirely directed to the future Messiah, Abraham's seed. Him they should have heard. And circumcision did not extend beyond Abraham and his seed. There are many examples in the Scriptures which demonstrate that God accepted great kings and nations from among the Gentiles. They were not forced to be circumcised, much less to obey the law of Moses. First there was Pharaoh and his princes and priests, and doubtless also many of the people, who had learned to know the true God through Joseph. Psalm 105 [:22] testifies that the king set Joseph "to instruct his princes at his pleasure and to teach his elders wisdom." In that way the Egyptians obtained a knowledge of God through Joseph, and yet, since they were not Abraham's seed, they were not burdened with circumcision, much less with the law of Moses, which was not yet promulgated.

Later Jonah was dispatched to Nineveh to preach repentance to them. The text declares that the king with his princes and people accepted faith in God and became believers, so that God was gracious to them and averted their punishment [Jonah 3:5-10]. These people of Nineveh, too, came to grace without circumcision and the law of Moses and were preserved by their faith and good works. This the prophet Jonah shows clearly.

Similarly, the evil king Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon was so thoroughly converted by Daniel's message and by God's punishment that he had a public pronouncement issued in his name, ordering that the God of Israel be regarded as the true God since he was in fact the true God [Dan. 4:34-36]. Notice that the king himself became a believer in God and a pious person, and indubitably many others in his kingdom with him; and yet he was not circumcised, nor was the law of Moses imposed on him. Daniel

²² Cf. Gen. 17:9-13.

surely would not have omitted to indicate and impose this on him unless he knew that Moses' law was to be imposed solely on the Jews and circumcision solely on Abraham and his seed, until such a time, as the true Teacher, the Messiah, would come from his race.

Later King Darius and Cyrus in Persia became believers through the same Daniel and other Jews, who acquainted the latter with the prophecy of Isaiah recorded in Isaiah 45, to the effect that God had long before called this king Cyrus by name, speaking of him as his own king or anointed one, and had gloriously proclaimed that he should build for God his city of Jerusalem and release his people from Babylon, etc. This Cyrus did and publicly promulgated his confession throughout his land, as the God of heaven had commanded him, etc. (II Chronicles 36 [:22-23] and Ezra 1 [:2]). He was not circumcised either, nor was he subjected to the law of Moses; nor was anyone else in his kingdom of Persia. Daniel and his assistants would surely not have permitted this had they considered it necessary to impose Moses' law and circumcision on the Gentiles, who were not Abraham's seed or Moses' people. If it had indeed been necessary to observe them, then these kings would have been sufficiently instructed by Daniel, they would not have been true believers in God, and they would not have been saved; and all this would have been Daniel's fault.

Similarly, Job and his family and friends were endowed richly with knowledge of God and faith, and yet he was not circumcised or forced to obey the law of Moses. And there must have been many more such people dispersed throughout the lands, such as Hiram, the king of Tyre in the days of Solomon [I Kings 5:1-12], and others, too, who are not mentioned in the Scriptures.²³ These believed in the true God of Abraham, and in that way were saved. It is surprising to see that Moses, amid so many laws, does not at all mention circumcision after the exodus from Egypt, when his law went into effect, while yet he urges so intensely and extravagantly many less important laws upon his people, the Jews. It is as though he wished to say, "Circumcision is not my law." In Exodus 12 [:43 ff.], where he speaks of foreigners who wished to eat the Passover with the Jews, he says merely that no uncircum-

²³ Very likely Luther was using a traditional list of "believing Gentiles."

cised should eat it; he does not force the foreigners to eat the Passover, or to be circumcised. He only insists that those who wanted to eat the Passover be circumcised. So it was something quite novel when the Jews later on made proselytes or converts to Judaism from among the Gentiles and commanded them to be circumcised. Moses does not force the Gentiles to adopt any of his laws against their will, because he was appointed a prophet solely to the people who were led out of Egypt, until the advent of the Messiah, who was to become the Prophet, Teacher, and Lord of all the world.

Since circumcision and the law of Moses were not necessary for the kings and heathen in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and elsewhere who nevertheless believed in the God of Abraham and were saved without circumcision and the law of Moses at the very time when these were flourishing and when the people had their government in Jerusalem and in the land, why then should we Gentiles be required to keep a circumcision and a law which has now ceased and which they themselves cannot keep because they have lost country, city, government, and all that Moses instituted, without any promise of ever retrieving them? From this, I am sure, you can gather that the Jews have been smitten with blindness. They put forth these crass lies and this foolishness about their law to us Gentiles, telling us that it is eternal and is to be imposed upon all the Gentiles, whereas it has really been abolished and completely forsaken by God once and for all, without any prophecy. Even when still in force, it never extended, nor was intended by God to extend, beyond the people of Moses whom he led out of Egypt, and Abraham's seed, until the time of the Messiah.

In conclusion you should again introduce the passage in Jeremiah 31 [:31-32]: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. . . ." This verse really pains the Jews; for they fret and sweat remarkably in an attempt to make their first covenant eternal even though the text states clearly and lucidly that it will not be eternal, but there will be another, a new covenant. Let

them carry on here as they will, saying, for example, that at the time of the Messiah their law will be renewed and will be observed by all. Jeremiah does not say that the old covenant will be renewed, but that it will not be the same covenant that they received through Moses at the time of the exodus from Egypt. It will not be the same one, but a new and different covenant. Now it is well known what kind of a covenant Moses made with them at that time. Therefore it is also clear what is meant by saying that it is not to be the old covenant; for "not to be" does not mean to renew the old, but to abolish the old and to institute something different and new. You must adhere firmly to this verse and not listen to the prattle which they dream up. For this verse declares that the old, former covenant will not remain or be renewed, but that there will be a different, a new covenant, and that God no longer wants the old one.

Now let us consider whom it is more reasonable for us to believe, the faithful and truthful God or the false and lying Jews? God declares that Moses' covenant will not endure forever, but that it will terminate at the time of the Messiah.²⁴ The Jews assert that it will endure eternally and will never terminate. Thus to the Jews God must ever be a liar. And yet they wonder why they suffer such miserable exile. They insist that they are in the right and that God is in the wrong.

If at this point they try to escape and blaspheme, saying, "Your Jesus himself stated that he had not come to abolish the law, not a dot, not a letter of it," etc., you must answer that they should stick to the passage in Jeremiah and give a correct and thorough answer. Since they do not believe our Jesus at all, they cannot appeal to him. They must either refute Jeremiah or defend themselves against him with plausible reasons and valid statements. In any event, they are lying when they claim that our Jesus was referring to the law of Moses when he said that the law will not pass away; for, as everyone may read, our Lord Christ is here not at all speaking of circumcision or of the law or ordinance of Moses, but rather is speaking of the Ten Commandments.²⁵ But why should they

²⁴ An interpretation which, if based on Jer. 31:31-32, presupposes the equation of "the time of the new covenant" with "the time of the Messiah."

²⁵ Luther invokes again the distinction between the ceremonial, judicial, and

leave our books and writings uncorrupted and inviolate when all their studies are nothing but a corruption even of their own prophets and sacred writings with lies and falsehoods? We have neither time nor space to discuss what our Lord Christ says here about fulfilling the law. Moreover, the Jews cannot understand this, and we would only be diverted from our subject. Christians must deal with such words of Christ, for they understand them and—God be praised!—know their meaning well.

Finally, we also want to discuss the Ten Commandments. For perhaps the Jews will also call the Ten Commandments the law of Moses, since they were given on Mount Sinai in the presence of none but Jews or children of Abraham, etc. You must reply: If the Ten Commandments are to be regarded as Moses' law, then Moses came far too late, and he also addressed himself to far too few people, because the Ten Commandments had spread over the whole world not only before Moses but even before Abraham and all the patriarchs. For even if a Moses had never appeared and Abraham had never been born, the Ten Commandments would have had to rule in all men from the very beginning, as they indeed did and still do.²⁶

For all creatures rightly regard God as God and honor his name, as do also the angels in heaven. Thus we and all human beings are obligated to hear his word, to honor father and mother,

moral aspects of the Mosaic law which underlies his whole argument in Part Two.

²⁶ The concept of natural law is deep-rooted in Luther's thought. His essay of 1525, *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (LW 35, 155-174), had already employed the distinction made here between the natural-law elements and the historically conditioned elements in the Mosaic code. "We will regard Moses as a teacher," Luther affirmed, "but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law" (LW 35, 165). He took the same tack in his pamphlet *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, published in the same year: "Where then the Mosaic law and the natural law are one, there the law remains . . ." (LW 40, 97). For the rest, the Mosaic code is merely the *Sachenspiegel* of the Jews—their ancient equivalent of the social and economic laws obtaining in Luther's own sixteenth-century Saxony. See also the references to natural law in Luther's treatises *Warning to His Dear German People* and *Against the Antinomians* in the present volume. For brief studies from among the voluminous modern literature on the question, see John T. McNeill, "Natural Law in the Thought of Luther," *Church History*, X (1941), 211-227, and Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms*, trans. Karl H. Hertz ("Facet Books, Social Ethics Series," No. 14; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

to refrain from killing, from adultery, from stealing, from bearing false witness, from coveting one's neighbor's house or anything else that is his. All the heathen bear witness to this in their writings, laws, and governments, as can be clearly seen; but nothing is said therein of circumcision or of the laws Moses gave to the Jews for the land of Canaan.

Moses did precede all other legislators, however, in revealing in his history the genesis of all creatures and the coming of death into the whole world through Adam's fall or sin. And later when he wants to set up a special law and nation apart from all others, as he has been commanded to do, he first introduces God himself; he is the universal God of all the nations, who gives the universal Ten Commandments—which prior to this had been implanted at creation in the hearts of all men—to this particular people orally as well. In his day Moses fitted them nicely into his laws in a more orderly and excellent manner than could have been done by anyone else. Circumcision and the law of Moses, however, were not implanted in men's hearts; they were first imposed by Abraham and Moses on their people.

We and all Gentiles are just as duty-bound as the Jews to keep the first commandment, so that we have no other gods than the only God. But we Gentiles have no use and can have no use for the phrase with which he modifies this commandment and which applies solely to the Jews, namely, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." For if I were to approach God and say, "O Lord God, who brought me out of Egypt, out of the exile," etc., I would be like a sow entering a synagogue,²⁷ for God never performed such a work for me. God would punish me as a liar; I would be making an imaginary god out of him. Yet I must recite and keep all the other words of the first commandment. I may also say, "You are my God, the God and also the Creator of us all, who, to be sure, led the children of Israel out of Egypt, but not me; however, you did lead me out of *my* Egypt and *my* exile." Thus the first commandment remains common to both Jews and Gentiles. It is especially adapted and suited to the Jews with reference to the exodus from Egypt, just as everyone after his own exile

²⁷ A proverbial expression.

can and should name and praise the God of all as his own God and Helper.

Let me suggest an analogy. It is as if a prince or the head of a household wished to establish an ordinance for his country or his house because God had rescued him from great need and he wanted to show his gratitude, as perhaps Naaman the Syrian did or might have done.²⁸ He also would begin by teaching first about God, how he alone should be worshiped and regarded as the true God, able and willing to deliver from every need all who trust and believe in him, whatever nation it may be, just as the first commandment teaches and makes no distinction, but declares that God punishes all who hate him and helps all who love him, etc. After that the prince or the head of a household would continue by enunciating the ordinances for his country or his house.

In this way the prince would not have imposed the ordinances of his country on all the other countries which did not experience this help, nor would he have had the authority to do this, even if he at the outset first commanded that they should worship and honor the true God of all countries. That is what Moses also does. When he is supposed to organize his people, who have been delivered from Egypt, he first lets God himself issue his Ten Commandments, which pertain to all of mankind. Subsequently, and still at God's command, he gives his people the peculiar laws of their country, which do not concern other nations. As Moses' people were obligated to obey these ordinances because God had given him this command, so each country and each household is duty-bound to observe the ordinances of its prince and head of a household. For these also are the commandments of God, who ordained all the governments of the world.²⁹

Similarly, the third commandment concerning the Sabbath, of which the Jews make so much, is per se a commandment that applies to the whole world; but the form in which Moses frames it and adapts it to his people was imposed only on the Jews, just as with regard to the first commandment none but the Jews must believe and confess that the common God of all the world led

²⁸ Cf. I Kings 5.

²⁹ An application of the Pauline principle expressed in Rom. 13:1.

them out of Egypt. For the true meaning of the third commandment is that we on that day should teach and hear the word of God, thereby sanctifying both the day and ourselves. And in accord with this, ever after to the present day, Moses and the prophets are read and preached on the Sabbath day among the Jews. Wherever God's word is preached it follows naturally that one must necessarily celebrate at the same hour or time and be quiet, and without any other preoccupation only speak and hear what God declares, what he teaches us and tells us.

Therefore everything depends completely on this, that we sanctify the day. This is more important than celebrating it.³⁰ For God does not say: You shall celebrate the holy day or make it a Sabbath—that will take care of itself. No, you shall sanctify the holy day or the Sabbath. He is far more concerned about the sanctifying than about the celebrating of it. And where one or the other might be or must be neglected, it would be far better to neglect the celebrating than the sanctifying, since the commandment places the greater emphasis on the sanctifying and does not institute the Sabbath for its own sake, but for the sake of its being sanctified. The Jews, however, lay greater emphasis on the celebrating than on the sanctifying (which God and Moses do not do) because of the additions they have made.

Moses' mention of the seventh day, and of how God created the world in six days, which is why they are to do no work—all this is a temporal adaptation with which Moses suits this commandment to his people, especially at that time. We find nothing written about this previously, either by Abraham or at the time of the old fathers. This is a temporary addendum and adaptation intended solely for this people which was brought out of Egypt. Nor was it to endure forever, any more than was the whole law of Moses. But the sanctifying—that is, the teaching and preaching of God's word, which is the true, genuine, and sole meaning of this commandment—has been from the beginning and pertains to all the world forever. Therefore the seventh day does not concern us Gentiles, nor did it

³⁰ The German terms are *heiligen* ("sanctify") and *feiern* ("celebrate"). A similar distinction is made in Luther's interpretation of the third commandment in his *Large Catechism*; see Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), pp. 375-379.

concern the Jews beyond the advent of the Messiah, although by the very nature of things one must, as already said, rest, celebrate, and keep the Sabbath on whatever day or at whatever hour God's word is preached. For God's word cannot be heard or taught when one is preoccupied with something else or when one is not quiet.

Therefore Isaiah, too, declares in chapter 66 [:23] that the seventh day, or, as I call it, Moses' adaptation of it, will cease at the time of the Messiah when true sanctification and the word of God will appear richly. He says that there will be one Sabbath after another and one new moon after another, that is, that all will be sheer Sabbath, and there will no longer be any particular seventh day with six days in between. For the sanctifying or the word of God will enjoy full scope daily and abundantly, and every day will be a Sabbath.³¹

I am well aware of what the Jews say about this and how they interpret this saying of Isaiah. However, I cannot include everything in the present letter that I have in mind against the Jews, who so shamefully distort and pervert the prophets. But in brief, no Jew can tell me how it is possible for all flesh to worship before the Lord in Jerusalem every new moon and every Sabbath, as the text, translated most accurately and exactly into German according to their understanding, conveys. Some people or flesh live so far from Jerusalem that they could not get there within twenty, thirty, or a hundred Sabbaths, and the Jews themselves have not worshiped in Jerusalem for fifteen hundred years, that is, in twelve times fifteen hundred new moons—I will say nothing of the Sabbaths. However, I cannot enlarge on all of this in the course of a letter.

Jeremiah comments on the first commandment's qualifying phrase, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt," in chapter 23 [:5]: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land," etc. And he adds immediately: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when men shall no longer say, 'As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' but

³¹ With these paragraphs, Luther has reached the heart of his argument against the Sabbatarians as such, as distinguished from his broader polemic against the Jews.

'As the Lord lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel (note that not the entire house of Israel but the descendants of it are mentioned here) out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land" [vv. 7-8].

There are many important matters in this passage which would be dealt with. But let us stay with our subject. Wherever the Jews hold to their old teachers,³² they are agreed with us that Jeremiah is here speaking about the time of the Messiah. When this time comes, the prophet states plainly, that part of the first commandment which was given by Moses, where it says, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt," will cease to apply. For the text says that one must no longer swear by the God who brought them up out of Egypt, but by the God who gathered them from all the lands unto the Branch of David. Now, if this phrase in the first commandment does not pertain beyond the time of the Messiah, then Moses' law is not eternal but terminates with the Messiah, and there remains only the law of the Ten Commandments, which was in force prior to Moses from the beginning of the world and also among all the Gentiles: namely, that one must not have more than one God, etc. So far as the Ten Commandments are concerned, there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, for God is the God not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles, as St. Paul declares [Rom. 3:29] and as the aforementioned examples of the kings of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, etc., prove.³³

Nor can we Gentiles join in the words of the fourth commandment, "that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." And yet all of us must obey the first part, namely, the words, "Honor your father and your mother." Moses, or rather God himself, is here speaking with the people of Israel whom he had led from Egypt into the land of Canaan. In this commandment he refers to the same country of Canaan, which he gave them at that time in order that they should live long in it and experience good times if they would observe the fourth commandment concerning obedience to parents. So here again the general

³² Presumably Jewish exegetes who dealt with the passage before it became a focus of controversy with the Christians.

³³ Cf. above, p. 87.

commandment implanted into the hearts of all people is adapted and applied especially to the Jews with reference to the land of Canaan. We Gentiles, of course, are not able to say or believe—nor could God tolerate our doing so—that he brought us out of Egypt or led us into the land of Canaan, in which we will prosper if we honor father and mother. No, we have to take this in a general sense, that God would give happiness and well-being to anyone in his own country who honors father and mother. We also observe that countries and governments, yes, also families and estates, decline or survive so remarkably according to their obedience or disobedience; and it has never happened otherwise than that he fares badly and dies an evil death who dishonors father and mother.

Therefore this fourth commandment cannot be eternal, that is, it cannot, as the blindness of the Jews would have it, be applied to us Gentiles in the sense that we will possess the land of Canaan and prosper in it, when they themselves have had to live outside of this country in all sorts of misery for fifteen hundred years as people who despised, dishonored, and persecuted their fathers and prophets. They do not cease from persecuting them; therefore the punishment, too, does not cease. For they reject the Messiah, whom their fathers and prophets proclaimed and foretold and commanded and enjoined them to accept. They remain their fathers' disobedient children.

I should here like to point to similar circumstances that attend the ninth and tenth commandments, which forbid the coveting of another man's wife and house. For among the Jews a letter of divorce had to be recognized as legal; but this cannot be the case among us Gentiles, much less the cunning and the trickery employed in alienating wife and house which were practiced so willfully among the Jews, as the prophet Malachi laments [2:14-16].

And finally, to bring this letter to a close, I hope, my dear friend, that you will at least have been supplied with enough material to defend yourself against the Sabbatarians and to preserve the purity of your Christian faith.³⁴ If you are unable to con-

³⁴ A reiteration of the purposes of the letter as occasioned by Count Schlick's request. Cf. above, p. 65.

vert the Jews, then consider that you are no better than all the prophets, who were always slain and persecuted by this base people who glory solely in the boast that they are Abraham's seed, though they surely know that there have always been many desperate, lost souls also among them, so that they might well recognize that it requires more to be a child of God than just to be the seed of Abraham. Therefore neither does the law of Moses do them any good, for they have never kept it, as is shown by the aforementioned verse from Jeremiah 31, where God himself states this and bemoans it. Rather their disobedience does them harm. Even today they do not keep this law, nor can they keep it so long as Jerusalem does not become the seat of the Jews' kingdom and priesthood.

It is a known fact—and this they also admit in part—that they themselves no longer understand the law of Moses, especially certain passages in Leviticus and in other books. How, then, could they keep it even if they were now in Jerusalem? In brief, since these fifteen hundred years of exile, of which there is no end in sight, nor can there be, do not humble the Jews or bring them to awareness, you may with a good conscience despair of them.³⁵ For it is impossible that God would leave his people, if they truly were his people, without comfort and prophecy so long. He never did this before. Moreover, he promised that he would do nothing without a prophecy preceding the event, as Amos says, "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" [Amos 3:7]. All estates, all governments, all the works of man must exist, occur, and continue in the word of God so that his people may know how they stand with God and what they are to do, to suffer, and to expect. This God has done from the beginning, and this he will do forever.

Because God for fifteen hundred years has failed to do this with the Jews but lets them live on and on in exile without any

³⁵ Luther's advice reflects the despairing attitude that he himself had adopted on the question, as evidenced also in his lectures, *Table Talk*, and correspondence during this period. Cf. Reinhold Lewin, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland während des Reformationszeitalters* (Berlin, 1911), pp. 72 ff., and Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. by Eric W. and Ruth C. Critsch, ed. by Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 77 ff.

word or prophecy to them regarding it, it is evident that he has forsaken them, that they can no longer be God's people, and that the true Lord, the Messiah, must have come fifteen hundred years ago.³⁶ What, do you suppose, might be the sin that continues to provoke such a terrible penalty and such silence of God other than their rejection, past and present, of the true Seed of Abraham and David, the dear Lord Messiah? They committed more terrible sins before the Babylonian captivity—the murdering of the prophets, etc.—than they can point to subsequently.

It does not make sense that they should suffer such misery for fifteen hundred years for unknown sins—sins which they cannot name—whereas they did not have to suffer more than seventy years for sins that were more obvious, terrible, murderous, and idolatrous. Furthermore, at that time they were not without prophets and without comfort, while in their present exile not even a fly flicks a wing for their consolation. If this is not being forsaken by God, then the devil, too, may boast that he is not forsaken by God.

If we reckon the time exactly, we find that their present exile under the Roman Empire is lasting longer than their former state and government in the land of Canaan. Anyone may figure the time from the exodus from Egypt to the final destruction of Jerusalem, under which they still live, and he will arrive at the sum of approximately fifteen hundred and ten years.³⁷ At present they have not lived many fewer years in exile; and in the end this will become a far longer period of time, since they neither have had nor will they have any prophet or prophecy regarding their exile's end. Is it credible that God should let his people live longer devoid of their dominion than in possession of it, longer without the law, temple, divine worship, Jerusalem, priesthood, kingdom, and country than with them?

This letter has grown in the writing. I was quite unaware of it, so quickly did my pen skim over the paper. For I have more thoughts on this subject than I have managed to express. Please

³⁶ In his closing paragraphs, Luther reiterates the argument that he had developed earlier in the letter, reinforcing it with further chronological computations. Cf. above, pp. 66 ff.

³⁷ Luther assumes the traditional date of 1430 B.C. for the Exodus. Modern scholars, working on the basis of archaeological research as well as a critical analysis of the literary sources, generally prefer a later date.

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be content with this for the time being, for the subject is far too big to be disposed of in a letter.³⁸ I commend you to God. Amen.

³⁸ Five years later, Luther published three substantial treatises on the subject. Cf. above, p. 65, n. 1.

AGAINST THE ANTINOMIANS

1539

Translated by Martin H. Bertram