

How a toy figure of Luther sparked charges of anti-Semitism

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [February 1, 2017](#) issue

Cloaked in black robes, Playmobil's toy figure of Martin Luther holds a quill in one hand and his German translation of the Bible in the other.

But the inscription on the open pages of the Bible led to a theological controversy and a change to the toy's design for this year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Back in 2015, after consulting with a Protestant theologian, Playmobil, one of Germany's leading toy manufacturers, rolled out a three-inch plastic figure of Martin Luther.

About 500,000 figures have been sold, mostly in Germany—especially in cities where Luther lived and worked—but also in the United States and other countries.

That makes it the most popular figure ever produced by the Bavarian company, whose thousands of toy figures manufactured since 1974 include astronauts, pirates, and even Nativity sets.

Micha Brumlik, a retired Frankfurt University professor and Jewish commentator, wrote last June in the Berlin newspaper *Tageszeitung* that the toy was “anti-Jewish, if not even anti-Semitic.”

The problem was that the left page of Playmobil Luther's Bible reads in German, “Books of the Old Testament. END.” The right page says “The New Testament, translated by Doctor Martin Luther.”

Why was the word *end* written so prominently? Brumlik asked.

“Theologically, there can be no other reason than that the ‘Old Testament’ and its validity should be seen as ended and superseded,” he wrote. “Is the Old Testament, the scripture of the people of Israel common to Jews and Christians, outdated and overtaken, as many Nazis—the so-called German Christians—wanted to see it, or is it just as important as the Gospels for Christian denominations?”

The regional Protestant church in Hesse, where Frankfurt is located, acknowledged that the wording could be misunderstood. And in an open letter, a group of progressive theologians said the toy presented a questionable view of the Bible “in a political and social context in which anti-Jewish views are again on the rise.”

The German National Tourist Board and tourist officials in Nuremberg—center of Germany’s toy industry—developed the toy with Playmobil as a marketing gimmick to promote visits to Reformation-themed events in cities linked to Luther.

The Nuremberg tourism office sells the Luther figure on its website for 2.39 euros (about \$2.50). It’s one of countless souvenirs on sale for the anniversary, in addition to Luther beer, Luther noodles, Luther socks, Luther refrigerator magnets, a Luther board game and, of course, a wide variety of new books about the man and the Reformation.

After discussions with sponsors, the Nuremberg tourist bureau announced that the word *end* would be removed from all future copies of the toy. The new model will be available in March.

The Evangelical Church in Germany, the country’s main association of Protestant churches, known by its German initials EKD, embraced the figure. It even commissioned a life-size model to show at events promoting the Reformation commemoration.

“In this jubilee year, it’s not primarily about Luther Playmobil figures, Luther socks, and Reformation candies,” Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, chairman of the EKD, preached on New Year’s Day. “They only open the door so the message can be heard. And it is clear and more relevant than ever: rediscover Christ!”

The EKD has been addressing the legacy of Luther’s anti-Semitism as it prepares for the anniversary.

At the group’s synod in 2015, it passed a resolution that “Luther’s view of Judaism and his vilification of Jews are, according to our understanding today, in contradiction to the faith in the one God who revealed himself in the Jew Jesus.”

In November, the EKD officially renounced the Mission to the Jews, an evangelism project that most churches had given up in the decades after the Holocaust but which had retained support in some congregations. —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on January 17, appears in the February 1 print edition under the title “A toy figure of Luther sparked accusations of anti-Semitism.”