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052102045X - The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel
According to St Matthew

Douglas R. A. Hare

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE
NATURE OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN
JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

IN studying the early conflict between Jews and Christians one must constantly guard against a tendency to oversimplify the issues in dispute and the causes of hostility. The conflict was as many-sided as the two opposing groups.

To suppose, for example, that the Pharisees were the sole protagonists on the Jewish side is to ignore the earlier conflict with pro-Roman Sadducees and the continuing conflict with anti-Roman Zealots.¹ It further assumes that the primary opposition to Christianity was of an official nature, led by the acknowledged leaders of Jewry, and ignores the complexity of the Christian movement itself, which included a significant number of loyal Pharisees (Acts 15: 5; cf. 21: 20).

A similar inclination to oversimplification is seen in those statements which reduce the conflict to matters of orthopraxis as over against orthodoxy. It is not true to say that obedience to the requirements of Torah exempted one from conflict, regardless of one's beliefs. Whereas considerable tolerance prevailed in both areas (behaviour and belief) as far as most Jewish groups were concerned,² there is reason for believing that Christians met with intolerance on account of their religious beliefs as well as for failure to observe all the requirements of

¹ Such a view is explicitly stated by R. T. Herford, *The Pharisees* (1924), p. 213: 'If there had been no Pharisees, the Church would have met with little or no opposition.' I owe this reference to P. H. Deever, *The Anti-Judaism of the New Testament in the Light of its Biblical and Hellenistic Context* (1958), p. 138.

² Even the use of images was more widely tolerated than has often been assumed. Cecil Roth, 'An Ordinance against Images in Jerusalem, A.D. 66', *H.T.R.* XLIX, no. 3 (1956), 170, notes that Agrippa I, who was popular with the nationalists and regarded as religiously observant, was the only Jewish ruler to circulate coins bearing his own image. Halakic disputes were frequent, yet accompanied on the whole by surprising tolerance; cf. *Mish. Yeb.* 1: 4.

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Torah.¹ The conflict is too narrowly conceived when viewed as a series of legal disputes.

The approach of historians, both Jewish and Christian, has generally been too theological. Jewish writers tend to find the basis of the conflict in the Church's rejection of Torah.² Christians, on the other hand, are inclined to view the strife as due to Jewish rejection of the Messiah. This theologizing tendency is, of course, as old as the New Testament itself. In the present study we shall be particularly concerned with Matthew's theological interpretation of the struggle.³ While a completely objective delineation of the separation of Christianity from Judaism is neither possible nor desirable, an adequate historical study must take full account of sociological factors before theological conclusions are drawn.

To a sociologist it would be obvious that certain tolerance-limits were present in the Jewish communities of Palestine and the Diaspora in the first century A.D. In any given community there is a limit to the amount of deviation which can be tolerated. In the communities with which we are concerned various types of eccentricity and religious laxity were permitted, but those deviations which challenged the community's way of life too drastically stimulated a hostile reaction which ranged in intensity from silent resentment to mob violence.

Philo's quarrel with the Allegorists of Alexandria is pertinent. His own emphasis on the reality of the unseen world inclined him to sympathy with those who subordinated the literal meaning of the laws to a spiritual understanding. He had no patience, however, with the extreme Allegorists who claimed that possession of spiritual meanings freed them from literal observance of the laws. Undoubtedly the Allegorists believed that they were carrying Philo's own approach to religion to its logical conclusion. Philo refused to follow them, because, as a man of great common sense, he realized that his beloved

¹ It is generally conceded that a primary cause of Bar Cocheba's hostility toward Jewish Christians was their persistent belief that not he but Jesus was Israel's Messiah.

² An extreme example is Ignaz Ziegler, *Der Kampf zwischen Judentum und Christentum* (1907). Ziegler maintains that there was no conflict with the followers of Jesus until Paul declared that the law of circumcision and the food laws were no longer binding, pp. 73 f. Cf. p. 53.

³ See below, chapters iv and v.

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Jewish community could not tolerate such a flagrant disregard for its customs.

It follows that, exactly as we have to take thought for the body, because it is the abode of the soul, so we must pay heed to the letter of the laws. If we keep and observe these, we shall gain a clearer conception of those things of which these are the symbols. *And besides that we shall not incur the censure of the many and the charges they are sure to bring against us.* [Italics added.]¹

Here Philo acknowledges the expediency of conformity. To remain within the community requires a minimal observance of the accepted *mores*.

The early Church was not as sociologically prudent as Philo. Various groups of Christians departed radically from accepted standards. In going beyond the limits of tolerance they invited anger, rejection, and, in some instances, violence. The hostility engendered by the extremism of a few could, on occasion, bring down the wrath of the community upon all known Christians. It may safely be assumed that while the more discerning would distinguish, for example, between the position of Stephen and his associates and that of the more conservative members of the Jerusalem church, the populace would tend to bulk all Christians together as undesirables and rebels.² To argue, therefore, that only Hellenists were under attack in ‘the persecution that arose over Stephen’ (Acts 11: 19) is to over-emphasize the official aspect of the persecution and ignore the role of popular confusion.

From the sociological point of view it would seem that the conflict arose because of Christian disrespect for ethnic solidarity, the fundamental principle of Jewish life from the Exile to the present. Four aspects of the Christian attack may be isolated for purposes of study.

1. In the first place, *Christians questioned the central symbols of Jewish solidarity*. Symbols of first rank were Torah, Temple and Holy City; not far behind were the purity and food laws, cir-

¹ *Migr. Abr.* 93. All citations from Philo are from the Loeb Classical Library edition.

² Dom Gregory Dix, *Jew and Greek: A Study in the Primitive Church* (1953), p. 41, presents the view that popular reports of Christian antinomianism in the Diaspora were responsible for persecutions of Torah-observing Christians in Jerusalem. See also Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel* (1948), p. 304.

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cumcision and Sabbath. These were symbols of Israel's distinctiveness, tokens of its separateness.

There is reason to believe that each of these prized possessions was questioned by Jewish groups other than the Church. A sceptical attitude toward these external manifestations of Israel's faith was shown by the Allegorists, as already mentioned.¹ H. J. Schoeps finds a strong anti-ritualistic strain in Palestinian Judaism of the first century.² The Dead Sea documents reveal at least a serious ambivalence toward the Temple and its ritual.³ Because the Holy City was so closely identified with priestly religion, its value as a symbol for the unity of far-flung Jewry was questionable as far as many in the Diaspora were concerned.⁴ Although the evidence is admittedly slender, it is probable that many individual Jews, in Palestine itself as well as in the Diaspora, were seriously tempted to spiritualize their religion and move toward closer assimilation with the dominant culture without abandoning their monotheistic faith and high moral standards. While such liberals would have aroused antagonism because of their failure to conform, and, in some instances, have been haled before the courts, the Jewish community would have regarded them otherwise than it did the Christians. Stephen, Paul and presumably many others publicly challenged the basic symbols in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Not as non-conforming individuals alone but as members of an organized movement meeting regularly for separate acts of worship outside the synagogue (Acts 2: 42; 4: 24), Christians represented a more severe threat to the traditional way of life than even apostates, such as Tiberius Alexander, Philo's nephew. And while many Jewish Christians, including perhaps Paul himself, remained outwardly loyal to most of the customs of Judaism, there was a difference in

¹ Above, p. 2. See also M. Simon's identification of a 'Reform Judaism' in the Diaspora, *Verus Israel*, pp. 75 ff.

² *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (1949), pp. 219–33.

³ See, e.g., IQS ix. 4 f., where it is maintained that a more satisfactory atonement is wrought by obedience than by whole burnt offerings.

⁴ Justin, *Dial.* 117, attributes to Trypho the Jew the opinion that 'God did not accept the sacrifices of the Israelites who then dwelt at Jerusalem, but that He has declared that the prayers of the Jews who were then in the Dispersion were pleasing to Him and that He calls their prayers sacrifices'. Cf. M. Simon, *Verus Israel*, pp. 55–7.

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their attitude to these tokens of ethnic solidarity, a difference which could not fail to be noted by those who heard them preach.

Christians subordinated all symbols to the central symbol of their faith, the Christ. It must not be assumed that the dispute over Jesus was peripheral to the conflict. It is true that a good deal of tolerance existed in Jewry with respect to messianic speculation. Even the Christian claim that the crucified Nazarene was to return on the clouds of heaven as victorious Son of man may have elicited little more than derision among early opponents. It was the insistent emphasis upon the *centrality* of Jesus that excited intolerance.¹ While schismatics at Qumran might elevate their Teacher of Righteousness to a place of great honour, and proclaim the imminence of messiah(s) from Aaron and Israel, the role assigned to such figures was not crucial.² Torah remained supreme. Christians, however, proclaimed a Christ who transcended Torah even as he fulfilled it.³ The followers of Jesus might disagree among themselves with regard to which precepts of Torah were still valid, but with the possible exception of the most conservative wing of the Jerusalem Church there was general agreement that the authority of Jesus transcended the authority of Torah. While moderately-conservative Jewish Christians such as the author of the First Gospel were careful to maintain that Jesus did not annul Torah (Matt. 5: 17), the contrast between their view of Torah and that of Pharisaism and Essenism was unmistakable. The focus had changed. The supreme norm for the life well-pleasing to God was no longer Torah but Jesus.

Not only Torah but also Temple and Holy City were subordinated to Jesus. It is highly probable that the prophecy of the destruction of the Temple and the Holy City attributed to Jesus in the gospels,⁴ represents a genuine reminiscence, not

¹ G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel According to St Matthew* (1946), p. 123, declares that the distinctive character of the Matthean church 'was not due to any rejection of Judaism itself, but to its subordination to the central doctrine of Christ'.

² CD i. 11, xii. 23, xiv. 19; 1QS ix. 11.

³ See W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (1964), pp. 106 f.

⁴ Mark 13: 2 (Matt. 24: 2; Luke 21: 6); Matt. 23: 37 f.; Luke 13: 34 f.; cf. Mark 14: 57-9 (Matt. 26: 60 f.), Mark 15: 29 (Matt. 27: 40), John 2: 19-22, Acts 6: 13 f.

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a *vaticinium post eventum*.¹ The treasuring of this prophecy provides evidence that Jewish Christians were ready to surrender cherished symbols of the old faith in exchange for a place in the messianic community. Even if the ‘something greater than the Temple’ of Matthew 12: 6 refers not to Jesus but to the kingdom he proclaimed, there can be no doubt that for Christians Jesus was himself the central symbol of the kingdom of God. And if Jewish followers of Jesus continued to lend support to the Temple ritual (Acts 2: 46), it was with a sense of messianic freedom from cultic obligations (Matt. 17: 26 f., ‘Then the sons are free. However, not to give offence to them...’).

Purity and food laws, circumcision and Sabbath were likewise depreciated by Christians. It is not that Jewish Christians abandoned these symbols completely but rather that they came to be regarded as of secondary importance. Evidence for this change of attitude can be seen in the fact that the leaders of the Jerusalem church gave the right hand of fellowship to Paul, the ardent defender of Gentile freedom from such obligations (Gal. 2: 9), and in the willingness of Cephas to eat with Gentiles in Antioch with a freedom contrary to Jewish custom (Gal. 2: 12, 14). That the Sabbath continued to be an important institution is indicated by Matthew’s addition of μηδὲ σαββάτω (‘nor on the Sabbath’) to Marcan material at 24: 20.² In view of Matthew’s conservatism, his inclusion of controversy-narratives relating to the Sabbath (Matt. 12: 1–14), including the Marcan saying ‘For the Son of man is lord of the Sabbath’ (Matt. 12: 8), is significant evidence of the subordination of Sabbath to Son of man in primitive Christian thought.

It can hardly be doubted that such an attitude toward the basic symbols of ethnic solidarity met with hostility. Whether

¹ Accepted as genuine by R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (1951–5), I, 21. S. G. F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (1951), pp. 37–40, maintains that the prophecy is a post-war creation of the Church. Brandon believes that there was such a close identification of Jewish Christianity with Zealot nationalism that it is impossible that a dominical prophecy calling into question symbols cherished by the nationalists would have been preserved by Palestinian Christians. The chief weakness in Brandon’s excellent work is that he underestimates the sectarian tendency in the primitive Jerusalem church which set it over against the community as a whole (see below, pp. 13–15).

² Cf. Kilpatrick, *Origins*, p. 116.

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or not Christian preaching in Jerusalem following the martyrdom of Stephen was more temperate in its treatment of the accepted symbols cannot be ascertained. In the Diaspora, however, this fundamental departure from Jewish *mores* made itself increasingly apparent.

2. Ethnic solidarity was further challenged by Christians in their *rejection of Jewish nationalism*. Those who made Jesus the central symbol of their corporate life found that the ties of popular nationalism had been transcended. This is not to say that for Jewish Christians nationalistic feeling was completely annulled. Even Paul, presumably one of the most liberal in this respect among Jewish Christians, was not able to remove from his thought all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, as Romans 9–11 makes abundantly clear. Apparently many believed that the coming kingdom of God would be a Jewish kingdom, to which Gentiles would belong as proselytes.¹ Acts 1:6 suggests that there were some who looked to Jesus to ‘restore the kingdom to Israel’ in a this-worldly sense. The quietistic attitude of Jesus, however, militated against the development of Zealot nationalism in the Palestinian Church. Loyalty to Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies undoubtedly produced a sharp cleavage between Christians and political activists. While Zealots agitated for violent revolution, Christians preached spiritual repentance and called for faith in their Messiah, who would soon return to establish the kingdom by supernatural power. Their central allegiance was not to the nation and its political destiny but to Jesus, their risen Lord, who in his own person represented the real Israel.² Only those who confessed Jesus as Messiah and Lord could claim membership in the eschatological Israel.³ Thus while a nationalistic

¹ Cf. Matt. 19: 28 (Luke 22: 30), ‘... You... will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel’.

² The view that Jesus represents Israel is not clearly stated in the synoptic gospels, but is suggested by the corporate significance of the ‘one like a son of man’ in Dan. 7: 13, and by the identification of Jesus with the Elect Servant of Deutero-Isaiah (Matt. 8: 17; Acts 8: 32–5), a figure which in the LXX is more consistently identified with Israel than in the Masoretic Text (LXX Isa. 42: 1, Ἰσραὴλ ὁ πᾶς μου... Ἰσραὴλ ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου). For a discussion of Matthew’s repudiation of this identification, see below, p. 159.

³ Cf. Mark 8: 38 (Matt. 10: 32 f.; Luke 12: 8 f.); Rom. 4: 16–25.

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flavour continues, it is a nationalism which is different in kind from the popular Jewish nationalism of the time.

Josephus tells us that while war with Rome was brewing he repeatedly warned his countrymen of the folly of armed revolt until he realized that his public admonitions would incur the hatred of the revolutionaries and result in his murder.¹ Undoubtedly many, like Josephus, found it prudent to remain silent or to collaborate with the Zealots. Those Christians who had not the courage to condemn violence as openly as had their Master may have elected this alternative. Others, refusing to support the Zealot cause, chose withdrawal. The extant evidence is not sufficient to indicate how much suffering was inflicted on Christian pacifists by fanatical nationalists during the first war with Rome, A.D. 66–70.² For our present purpose it is sufficient to say that on the issue of nationalism Christians challenged both the popular nationalism of the community as a whole and the militant nationalism of the Zealots. To the extent that this challenge was vocal and open, hostility toward the Christians would be intensified.

3. A third challenge to the Jewish community was present in the *Christians' attitude toward the Gentiles*.

The fundamental question of how Israel was to relate itself to the hellenistic world had remained an unsolved problem since the Antiochene period.³ Individual Jewish response to this question ran the full gamut from complete hellenization including religious apostasy to violent treatment of Gentile intruders in the Holy Land.⁴ The majority accepted the necessity of co-existing with Gentiles, and *halakoth* were issued on the use of Gentile foods and similar matters.⁵

The Mishnah indicates that it was not uncommon for Jews to share a common courtyard with Gentiles.⁶ Business partnerships with Gentiles were also permitted.⁷ The rabbis did not frown upon the use of Gentile baths, even those containing idols.⁸ A *halakah* regulating the use of Gentile washermen is

¹ *Vita* 4–5 (17–20).

² Justin reports considerable suffering during the Bar Cocheba revolt, *Apol.* 31.

³ Cf. W. R. Farmer, *Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus* (1956), p. 50.

⁴ Josephus, *Vita* 23 (113).

⁵ *Abod. Zar. passim*.

⁶ *Erub.* 6: 1; 8: 5.

⁷ *Bekh.* 1: 1; 2: 1, 4.

⁸ *Abod. Zar.* 3: 4; cf. *Maksh.* 2: 5.

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attributed to the School of Shammai and may be taken as indicative of the situation in Palestine in the first century A.D.¹

The Mishnah also permitted the purchase of non-Jewish bondmen or bondmaids. It is perhaps to be assumed that such slaves would eat with their Jewish owners, although this is not clearly stated. Berakoth 7: 1 allows Samaritans to be included in the quorum for the Common Grace but specifies that Gentiles may not be counted, thus indicating that at the time this *halakah* was formulated it was not uncommon to invite a Gentile to a meal. That such a practice was permissible even in the first century is suggested by a halakic dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel.

The School of Shammai say: An Israelite may not be numbered [in the same company] with a priest for [the consumption of] a Firstling. And the School of Hillel permit it even to a Gentile.²

Explicit mention of an Israelite eating with a Gentile at the same table is made in Abodah Zarah 5: 5, where the possibility of such a common meal is taken for granted and concern shown only for the ritual cleanliness of the wine to be shared.³

Contact with Gentiles prompted not only regulatory *halakoth* but also a vigorous proselytizing movement. The eagerness with which proselytes were sought and the success of such efforts are attested by pagan, Jewish and Christian writers of the period.⁴

¹ Shabb. 1: 8.

² Bekh. 5: 2 (Danby, *The Mishnah* (1933)).

³ The assertion of Dom Gregory Dix, p. 34, that 'the rule against "eating with men uncircumcised" (Acts 11: 3) was something which every practising Jew observed as an elementary act of loyalty to the covenant of his People', is as extravagant as the basis claimed therefor: 'To "eat with the uncircumcised" rendered a Jew ritually "unclean"... and so excluded any Jew from all social and domestic intercourse with his own people' (italics in the original). Despite the large share of attention paid to questions of cleanness and uncleanness in the Mishnah and elsewhere, the common man was little hindered by being in a state of uncleanness except when it was a question of consecrated food, the priest's portion and the second tithe, and when going on a visit to the Temple; cf. G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (1927), II, 76. The use of Gentile slaves is further evidence against the position maintained by Dix; cf. B. J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (1939), pp. 126, 289.

⁴ For references by pagan authors, see Théodore Reinach, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et romains relatifs au judaïsme* (1895), pp. 155, 182, 244, 259, 263, 293, 307, 346. Examples of Christian witness to Jewish proselytism are Matt. 23: 15; Acts 2: 10; 6: 5; Justin, *Dial.* 80, 122 f. For a thorough

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Josephus makes mention of a large body of 'Judaizers' in Syria.¹ Jewish congregations throughout the Diaspora were surrounded by 'God-fearers', οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, men and women who were inclined toward Judaism but not yet ready to become full proselytes.² B. J. Bamberger, who has done one of the most thorough studies of Jewish proselytism in the Talmudic era, maintains that throughout the period the rabbinic attitude toward proselytism was overwhelmingly favourable.³ Many rabbis hoped for the ultimate conversion of all the heathen.⁴ Bamberger concedes, however, that the attitude of the populace may not have been as favourable as that of their spiritual leaders, as evidenced by the strenuous support offered to the proselytizing movement by the rabbis.⁵ It is probable, he suggests, that

among the people as a whole there were certain prejudices against converts. These prejudices were probably analogous to the dislike of the foreigner which we so often meet in modern nations. The few passages we have found in which the Rabbis attack converts are best explained as cases in which these popular prejudices invaded the scholarly class.⁶

The missionary zeal displayed by the Christian Church toward the Gentiles ought therefore to be viewed not as a departure from Judaism but as a continuation of a strong tendency within the parent religion.⁷ If the Pharisees objected

survey of rabbinic references, see Bamberger. According to H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (1961), pp. 27 f., the missionary zeal of the Diaspora is evidenced by specific readings in the LXX. For a discussion of the successfulness of proselytizing efforts, see E. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, Div. II, vol. II, 304–11.

¹ *Bell.* ii. 18. 2 (463).

² Acts 10: 2, 22; 13: 16, 26; cf. Schürer, Div. II, vol. II, 304 f., 314 f.

³ According to Bamberger, p. 161, there are only four passages in the entire literature which are unfavourable without any reservation. He finds no support for the view that while a friendly attitude toward proselytes existed in the Diaspora a negative attitude dominated Palestine, p. 277.

⁴ Bamberger, p. 168.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 161.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 277 f.

⁷ The notice of Acts 11: 19 that 'those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except the Jews' should not be taken as representing a dogmatic position. It is hardly probable that the