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978-0-521-79538-8 - Esau's Tears: Modern Anti-Semitism and the Rise of the Jews

Albert S. Lindemann

Excerpt

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**== PART ONE ==**

**THE LONG-RANGE  
BACKGROUND**

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# 1

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## *Anti-Semitism before the Modern Period: Overview and Definition*

And the Lord said unto [Rebecca], “Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.” And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled . . . the first came out all red, all over like a hairy garment; and they called his name Esau. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold of Esau’s heel; and his name was called Jacob. (Gen. 25.23–26)

Why did God create Jews and non-Jews? . . . And why in the world should they be separated from one another, not be able to stand the sight of one another, as if one were created by God and the other not? (Tevye the milkman, after his daughter, Khava, had married a Gentile).<sup>1</sup>

Esau always hates Jacob. (J. Taitlbaum)

Dictionary-style definitions of anti-Semitism (“hostility to Jews”) are usually not much help, in part because their brevity and abstractness are inadequate to this particular protean phenomenon. Similarly, any effort to provide a brief overview of Jew-hatred throughout history must be highly selective and abandon any notion of a connected narrative. Yet a theoretical stance must obviously be made; these pages are based on the axiom that history informs theory.

### *Esau’s Tears: The Deepest Roots of Anti-Semitism*

The peculiar forms of hatred for Jews that emerged in the 1870s, although in some regards novel, also had substantial connections with a history

<sup>1</sup> Sholem Aleichem, *Gants Tevye der Milkhiger* (New York, 1920), 138. (ASL translation; transliteration according to Standardized Yiddish Romanization.)

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of Jew-hatred that dates back thousands of years. Indeed, the division between Jew and Gentile goes to the very origins and structures of western civilization. It predates the advent of Christianity and may be found in the earliest texts of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible. Modern anti-Semitism cannot be productively studied without an appreciation of that much longer history. Some awareness is also necessary of a number of now little-known aspects of Jewish identity as it evolved, and in fundamental ways changed, over the centuries and millennia.

In those texts of the Hebrew Bible the mythical origins of the division between Jews and others are described, and a thought-provoking explanation for the antagonism of the two groups is offered. The account in Genesis of Esau and Jacob, twin brothers born to Rebecca and Isaac, has evoked a seemingly endless cycle of interpretations. Already in the earliest Jewish commentaries on the text in Genesis one encounters not only the rich layers of meaning but also the elusiveness, the profound ambiguity in the relationship between Jew (in archetype, Jacob) and Gentile (in archetype, Esau).<sup>2</sup>

Commentaries of the most diverse sort have continued well into the twentieth century. Adolf Hitler spoke of how “the Jew is the exact opposite of the German in every single respect, yet is as closely akin to him as a blood brother.”<sup>3</sup> An African-American woman described the relationship of blacks and whites as “like the biblical Esau and Jacob. It’s a love-hate relationship. . . .”<sup>4</sup> In the biblical account, Jacob conspired with his mother, Rebecca, to trick Esau out of receiving the blessing of their aged and blind father, Isaac. Esau, the firstborn, had already foolishly given over his birthright to Jacob in exchange for a bowl of lentils. But Esau remained Isaac’s favorite, and Esau confidently expected his father’s blessing after returning with the wild game that Isaac had instructed him to catch. Esau was outraged when he discovered that he and his father had been duped, that Jacob had posed as his older brother and had gained Isaac’s blessing. Esau’s rage prompted Jacob to flee into Mesopotamia.

Contrary to the apparent logic of the story (that the brothers would live in ever-lasting enmity), after the passage of twenty-two years, Esau, in meeting a now penitent Jacob, put aside his resentment, and the two were reconciled. Thereafter, however, Esau’s descendants, the Edomites, recurringly came into conflict with Jacob’s descendants; each butchered the other in various clashes. Rome was later identified in Jewish commentary with the Edomites, and after

<sup>2</sup> For a provocative suggestion of how the Esau-Jacob story reflects contrasting viewpoints of the biblical authors (“J” and “E”) from the southern and northern kingdoms, Judah and Israel, in the ninth century, b.c.e. (before the common era), see Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York, 1987), 68–9.

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Rauschnig, *The Voices of Destruction* (New York, 1940), 238.

<sup>4</sup> Studs Turkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession* (New York, 1992), 357.

the fall of the Roman Empire, the Gentile rulers of Jews in Europe generally became classified as “Esau.”

The Esau–Jacob imagery continued to appear frequently in both popular and learned speech until at least the early twentieth century. Even in the 1990s the notion of a somehow unbridgeable gap between Esau and Jacob, Gentile and Jew, remains central to traditional Jewish perspectives (“Esau always hates Jacob,” “The Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau have been exhausted.”). A comparable sense of the insurmountable obstacles to harmony finds expression among Jews who are less strongly tied to tradition (Raphael Patai: “The hands [are] still Esau’s, and even while trying to help they inflict pain.”<sup>5</sup>). Jews, whether religious or secular, have long retained negative, apprehensive feelings about Esau, the non-Jew – if not actual aversion or contempt then the kind of pity that one feels for an uncomprehending, potentially dangerous animal. Esau is hirsute, coarse, and brutal; he is the hunter, warrior, the untamed “natural man,” while Jacob is smooth-skinned, delicate, and contemplative, if also wily and capable of ruthless deception in advancing his interests. He is also the “incorrigible overachiever” and forever getting into trouble because of that trait.<sup>6</sup> The title “Till Esau’s Tears Are Dried” alludes to these traditional perspectives, with the implication that anti-Semitism will not disappear easily; the two identities are too different, and Esau will always feel aggrieved about Jacob’s ingrained traits.

In his autobiography the Yiddish-language author Sholem Aleichem reported how as a child in Russia he once watched a rough and dirty ferryman laboriously pulling a boat across the Dnieper River. He wrote, “Esau! Only a Goy could do work like that, not a Jew. The Bible says of Esau, ‘And thou shalt serve thy brother.’ It is good that I am a descendent of Jacob, and not of Esau.”<sup>7</sup> In old age the eminent Jewish–American intellectual Sidney Hook remembered how, as a boy, he had asked his religious teacher about the injustice of what Jacob did to Esau. The teacher responded, “What kind of a question is that? Esau was an animal.”<sup>8</sup>

Anti-Semites of various stripes have drawn upon the Jacob–Esau tale as proof of the incorrigible cunning and moral corruption of the Jews throughout history: The tale reveals the reasons, reversing the traditional Jewish formula, that Jacob will always hurt Esau. As one such anti-Semite writing in the early nineteenth century put it, “where [else] is there such a people . . . that has such vile sacred tales, lacking any poetical sense, interwoven with glorified

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Mind* (New York, 1977), 234.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fernanda Eberstadt, “Responding to the Bible,” *Commentary*, vol. 85, no. 1, Jan. 1988, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Sholem Aleichem, *Funem Yarid* (New York, 1937), 225; cf. Curt Levant, ed. and translator, *From the Fair: The Autobiography of Sholem Aleichem* (New York, 1985), 112–13. [ASL: the translation of the above phrase differs somewhat from that provided in Levant’s volume.]

<sup>8</sup> Sidney Hook, “On Being a Jew,” *Commentary*, vol. 88, no. 4, Oct. 1989, 29.

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acts of thievery?" Jacob deceives his aged and blind father, tricks and steals from his brother. His mother, Rebecca – "Mother of Israel" – not only encourages such deeds but also had stolen from her own father.<sup>9</sup>

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, enemies of the Jews had begun to use new terms, "Semite" and "Aryan," that reworked the biblical imagery surrounding Jacob and Esau to make the Semite detestable and the Aryan chosen and admirable. This reversal itself is related to the transposition that Christians originally had made in claiming that *they* had become "Jacob," God's chosen, while He now turned His face from His formerly chosen people, since they had rejected His Son, the Messiah or the Christ. The earliest and most influential Christians, such as Paul, Augustine, and Gregory, thus proclaimed a reversal in which "the elder" (the Jews) would serve "the younger" (the Christians). These Christian writers took up, in short, a central theme of the Hebrew Bible and refashioned it to Christian purposes to make Christians superior to Jews, rather than Jews superior to non-Jews.

The power of such biblical imagery over the centuries is impossible to deny but difficult to assess with any precision because of its profound ambiguity and the endlessly divergent interpretations to which it has been subjected. But it seems obvious that the negative representations of Esau, the non-Jew, in Jewish thought have no more rigidly determined that all Jews will hate all Gentiles than has the negative representations of the Jew in Christian texts rigidly determined that all Christians (or Gentiles descended from Christians) will hate all Jews. "Religion," again, is an endlessly elastic concept, not permitting firm conclusions about such causality.

The Esau-Jacob story and Jewish commentary on it do, however, suggest a number of provocative points in conceptualizing the nature of anti-Semitism. In a central passage of the Hebrew Bible, Esau's angry tears were presented as perfectly understandable; they were not the result of some mysterious fantasy about a wholly innocent Jacob. Aside from the suggestion that Jacob-Israel's sometimes improper actions had something quite tangible to do with Esau's enmity, and thus with the enmity of the Gentile world, the story touches on a tangled theme that is central to interpreting the interplay of Jew and Gentile throughout history.

It was long an axiom of Jewish history and Jewish consciousness that Jews in Galut (Exile), after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, were necessarily a powerless and passive people, subject to the will of their Gentile overlords. It was natural for Jews to describe the sufferings they endured throughout history as caused by "the hands of Esau."<sup>10</sup> Jewish troubles and

<sup>9</sup> Jakob Friedrich Fries, *Ueber die Gefährdung des Wohlstandes und Character der Deutschen durch die Juden* (Heidelberg, 1816), 14–15, 22; quoted in Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the recent use of this imagery in Stephen J. Whitfield, *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau* (Hamden, Conn., 1984).

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even Jewish vices were considered the result of a hostile Gentile environment. In 1908 Max Nordau, an early Zionist leader, wrote a friend concerning the unsavory activities of certain Jews in Vienna. "These fellows [*Buben*] . . . have grown up in a Christian–Social atmosphere and, as is so often our Jewish way, have absorbed all the mannerisms and methods of the antisemites in the suburbs, just as many of our Russian brothers have adopted the style of the Black Hundreds."<sup>11</sup>

There have certainly been other opinions about Esau's responsibility for Jacob's troubles and vices. In the most radically opposing view, the "Other Nations" (the Goyim or Gentiles) have been described by Jewish spokesmen, from the Prophets onward, as merely agents of God's punishment for an evil that repeatedly comes from *within* Israel. Jewish defects and suffering are not, in a deeper sense, the result of Gentile oppression. As any reader of the Hebrew Bible must recognize, brutality was hardly an invention of the Other Nations; the biblical Jews committed, and their spokesmen afterwards glorified, unspeakably bestial acts, such as the massacre of "idolaters" – among them captives, women, children, old and sick people, and even pets and livestock.

An underlying issue in these contrasting views has to do with the responsibility of the Jews in history for their destiny and their being: Have they been wholly helpless and passive *objects*, without responsibility for their misfortunes, or have their actions and decisions in some substantial sense been their own, as active, conscious *subjects* in history, entailing some degree of responsibility? The inclination to picture Jews as perennially helpless victims, in no sense responsible for the ills that have afflicted them, has often been part of an unsophisticated and transparently defensive reflex. The popular writer Howard Fast concludes his book *The Jews, The Story of a People*, with this remark: "Such despair and agony as the Jewish people had to endure over the past thousand years is the result, not of what they are, but of what the Christian world has inflicted upon them."<sup>12</sup> This is by no means an isolated or unusual comment.

Jewish observers of widely differing sophistication have been inclined to accept the notion of Jewish passivity or "quietism" since the biblical period. Some have seen it as basic to Jewish identity: The centuries of powerlessness have provided, they believe, the ultimate foundation for Jewish ethics and sense of transcendent purpose as a separate people.<sup>13</sup> Attaining political and national power, Jews will be inevitably corrupted by it, as the Other Nations have all been. Such, then, is believed by some to be the danger in modern Zionism, with disturbing implications for the state of Israel in the last decades

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Walter R. Weitzmann, "Politics of the Viennese Jewish Community," in Ivar Oxaal et al., eds., *Jews, Antisemitism and Culture in Vienna* (New York and London, 1987), 142.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Fast, *The Jews, The Story of a People* (New York, 1968), 370–1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Michael Selzer, *Zionism Reconsidered* (New York, 1970); and *The Wineskin and the Wizard* (New York, 1970).

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of the twentieth century. Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer once wrote, "it . . . became clear to me that only in exile did the Jews grow up spiritually."<sup>14</sup>

There are related if more strictly religious and mystical ramifications to this line of thought. Some Jewish spokesmen have described anti-Semitism as God's device to purify and uplift the Jews. He had scattered them among the Other Nations, but it was not His will that they become fully part of those nations; anti-Semitism, in its eternally recurring cycles, is then to be understood most fundamentally not as a Gentile phobia but rather as a divinely supplied device to prevent Jews from disappearing. In a potent and mystical dialectic, the ultimate inability of Jews to forget their Jewishness has ensured Gentile hostility, once Gentiles realize the sometimes slumbering but ultimately ineradicable differentness of Jews, based on their biblically based sense of superiority and favored destiny. Eternal Jewishness and eternal anti-Semitism can be relied upon to reemerge, as part of God's plan. Human efforts against it, however apparently effective in the short run, must then be seen as ultimately futile. "Esau's Tears" are an aspect of a divinely ordered universe.

Modern Zionists, predominantly secular in perspective, although believing in a valuable and irreducible Jewish differentness, one that renders living among Gentiles dangerous, have arrived at other conclusions about the merits of Jewish suffering. They have identified powerlessness and marginality as the very things that they wish to shake off, the source of what they view as the many unattractive traits of Jews in modern times – and thus a fundamental cause of anti-Semitism. The mystical delights of being the suffering servant of the Lord do not much tempt such Zionists. Other modern Jewish activists, for example the socialists of the Jewish Bund, viewed Exile more positively, not as inevitably tragic; they believed in a fruitful interplay of Jew and non-Jew. Bund socialists urged that Jews begin to consider themselves active, responsible agents inside Gentile society, rather than passive, helpless victims.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, throughout Europe, from the 1880s onward, new forms of Jewish assertiveness in the secular arena can be observed, as well as a guarded optimism about the future of Jewish–Gentile relations, in spite of anti-Semitic flare-ups – a major theme of the following chapters.

The elusive question of Jewish power and responsibility goes to the heart of Jewish self-awareness in modern times as well as to conceptualizations of anti-Semitism. It evokes the enduring sense among many Jews of vulnerability, fearfulness, and physical ineptitude, of the need for quiet calculation and for accommodation to the physically more powerful. From that question others arise: Have Jews been hated because of their power (or Gentile fantasies about

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yiddish: The Language of Exile," in Douglas Villiers, ed., *Next Year in Jerusalem* (London, 1976), 56.

<sup>15</sup> These issues have been explored most penetratingly by David Biale in *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York, 1986).

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Jewish power) or rather because of their powerlessness (which has rendered them contemptible)? Does anti-Semitism, even if conceptualized as entirely a product of the Gentile mind and having nothing to do with Jewish action, come primarily out of fear of or out of contempt for Jews?

The issue has been much envenomed by the passionate exchanges among Jews themselves over Jewish reactions to Nazi tyranny. Many Jewish leaders cooperated with the Nazis. Was that cooperation the result of foolishness, corruption, or understandable miscalculation? Is it true that most Jews went to their deaths passively, unresisting, "like sheep to the slaughter," as many, especially in Israel, put it?<sup>16</sup> An even more explosive assertion has been put forth by both anti-Semites and some Zionists: Europe's Jews, foreigners in Europe, actually deserved the hatred directed at them because they were a parasitic and psychologically perverse group, understandably inclined to self-hatred, indeed "objectively detestable."

Such issues are not unique to a study of the Jewish past. Large numbers of historians have directed their attention to the study of the downtrodden in history, to the defeated, the outsiders, the subordinate classes, the oppressed and powerless, and in each case have crept in notions much like those of "the suffering servant of the Lord," the mystical ennoblement of suffering, and the redeeming mission of the sufferer.<sup>17</sup> Professional scholars among them have not been immune to the temptations of writing thin, tendentious, or apologetic accounts about such victims. Yet blistering critiques have also been delivered against those historians whose works implicitly deny, for example, that women, workers, minorities, or even nation-states are to be conceptualized as active subjects, making conscious and rational choices that inevitably entail a degree of responsibility. Critics have charged that women, workers, or minorities have been portrayed one-dimensionally by some historians, as utterly helpless, uncomprehending, and pitiful victims in history, in no way responsible for their misfortunes (and to assert that they were responsible would be to commit the cardinal sin of blaming the victim).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Toronto, Canada, 1987), 108–9. For a more recent treatment of the issue, by the historian most identified with the charge of Jewish cooperation, see Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hannes Heer and Volker Ulrich, eds., *Geschichte entdecken: Erfahrungen und Projekte der neuen Geschichtsbewegung* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1985); Gerhard Paul and Bernhard Schossig, eds., *Die Andere Geschichte* (Cologne, 1986); Roger Fletcher, "History from Below Comes to Germany: The New History Movement in the Federal Republic of Germany," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 60, no. 3, Sept. 1988, 557–68.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Tony Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop*, vol. 7, Spring, 1979, 66–94; Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before World War I," *Central European History*, vol. 6, March 1973, 3–43; Walter A. McDougall, "'Mais ce n'est pas l'histoire!': Some Thoughts on Toynbee, McNeill, and the Rest of Us," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 58, no. 1, March 1986, 19–42.



Deciding who deserves the status of victim poses a large problem: Might Germans, too, be considered victims, since they were unwillingly or unwittingly “pulled into” World War I and then unfairly blamed for something for which others were equally culpable? Indeed, that same logic could lead to the conclusion that most Germans were uncomprehendingly drawn into the Nazi web, only realizing its evil when it was too late to oppose it, and thus the German people were also victims of the Nazis, by no means “willing executioners.” Similarly, industrialization allegedly “overwhelmed” workers, corrupting and brutalizing them. Women’s psyches were “enslaved” by sexism and male domination. Blacks were rendered childish, servile, and incompetent by the experience of slavery.

In each of these examples the concept of collective historical responsibility, beyond its obvious intellectual slipperiness, poses awkward and debilitating obstacles to the present political agendas of the groups in question, since placing blame squarely on the shoulders of others is central to their mind-set, whereas gaining recognition of victimhood is perceived as a means to open doors that have been long and unfairly shut. The logic of some feminists’ position seems to attribute women’s difficulties and dilemmas entirely to the influence of male domination; that femininity itself may generate its own kinds of contradictions is a much less attractive proposition – and far less studied – especially since there is little question that male domination *has* been the source of a large part of the difficulties that women have faced. Yet is it reasonable to assume that femininity is the source only of virtues, never vices, that female identity, “correctly” conceptualized (that is, free of corruption by male influence), is not burdened with existential dilemmas and imponderables? And might similar questions be posed about an African heritage, even when granting the undeniably large role of slavery and racism?

The sheer horror of the Holocaust has made it understandably suspect or even unconscionable in the opinion of some observers to suggest that Jews themselves may have had a degree of responsibility for that catastrophe. Similarly, to emphasize the positive aspects of Jewish–Gentile interplay in modern history repels some of those for whom the fruits of that interplay seem to be all too clear: mass murder. Even before the Holocaust anti-Semitism assumed a key position in many histories of the Jews. Gentile–Jewish interplay was presented in such accounts as primarily one of oppression, hatred, and bloodshed, punctuated by dramatic events. Yet an instructive case can be made that openly expressed aversion to Jews by Gentiles, Germans included, particularly one that espoused violence, has not been the predominant, most widespread, or most significant attitude in their long mutual history. Great numbers of non-Jews, in all stations of life, have tolerated and lived beside Jews, have admired and even loved them, but in most cases have simply found them useful, or of no major concern. Long stretches of peaceful cohabitation and

mutually beneficial intercourse have characterized Jewish–Gentile relationships. History conceived primarily as a narrative of dramatic *événements* (“events”) – the pogroms, expulsions, and massacres – can easily blind us to this deeper reality.

Although hatred by both Gentiles and Jews of one another was nearly always present in past centuries, openly proclaimed enemies of Jews, especially those calling for violence, have nearly always been a minority, although sometimes a powerful one. More relevant to the immediate concerns of this volume, until 1933 modern anti-Semites in western and central Europe were mostly outsiders, generally denigrated if also sometimes cynically manipulated by those in power. Even in eastern Europe, where anti-Semites more often wielded political power, the situation was by no means always so consistently or outrageously anti-Semitic as often believed.

Jewish survival cannot be satisfactorily explained if the peaceful and productive aspect of Jewish–Gentile relationships is ignored. Furthermore, Jewish history *à la longue durée*, over the centuries and not blinded by short-term, dramatic events, will be ill-understood if Jewish existence is seen only in terms of oppression and suffering. Jewish history is more satisfactorily conceptualized in positive ways. The dean of modern historians of the Jews, Salo Wittmayer Baron, has written that “it is quite likely . . . that even the average medieval Jew, compared to his average Christian contemporary . . . was the less unhappy and destitute creature – less unhappy and destitute not only by his own consciousness, but even if measured by such objective criteria as standards of living, cultural amenities, and protection against individual starvation and disease.”<sup>19</sup> As the following chapters will amply show, similar remarks can also be made about modern times, contrary to widespread belief.

Not only is Jewish survival ill-explained by such one-dimensional approaches, but anti-Semitism also will remain incomprehensible if study of it does not shake off some of the attitudes already described. Revealingly, a few observers have indeed suggested that anti-Semitism is inherently and fundamentally incomprehensible. The popular American writer and humorist Harry Golden has written, “dear reader, let’s face it – anti-Semitism can’t possibly be explained; it can merely be recounted.”<sup>20</sup> Louis Namier, the noted British historian, once wrote: “Understand and explain the problem [of anti-Semitism] as much as you may, there remains a hard, insoluble core, incomprehensible and inexplicable.”<sup>21</sup> These commonly encountered remarks reflect not so much a coherent intellectual position as what might be termed an instinct, one that can be sensed even in some relatively sophisticated

<sup>19</sup> Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1952), vol. 1, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Harry Golden, *The Golden Book of Jewish Humor* (New York, 1972), 122.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Walter Laqueur in *Commentary*, vol. 44, no. 1, July 1967, 84.