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978-1-107-04074-8 - Anti-Semitism and Its Metaphysical Origins

David Patterson

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Anti-Semitism and Its Metaphysical Origins

This book articulates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of Jew hatred as a metaphysical aspect of the human soul. Proceeding from the Jewish thinking that the anti-Semites oppose, David Patterson argues that anti-Semitism arises from the most ancient of temptations, the temptation to be as God, and thus to flee from an absolute accountability to and for the other human being.

David Patterson holds the Hillel Feinberg Chair in Holocaust Studies at the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. A winner of the National Jewish Book Award and the Koret Jewish Book Award, he has published more than thirty books and 150 articles and book chapters. His most recent books include *Genocide in Jewish Thought* (Cambridge, 2012), *A Genealogy of Evil: Anti-Semitism from Nazism to Islamic Jihad* (Cambridge, 2010), *Emil L. Fackenheim: A Jewish Philosopher's Response to the Holocaust* (2008), *Open Wounds: The Crisis of Jewish Thought in the Aftermath of Auschwitz* (2006), *Wrestling with the Angel* (2006), *Along the Edge of Annihilation* (1999), and *Sun Turned to Darkness* (1998). He is the editor and translator of *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry* (2002) and the coeditor (with Alan L. Berger) of the *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature* (2002).

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For Zsuzsanna and Pista Ozsváth

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Preface

In the pages that follow I use the term *anti-Semitism* to refer to the phenomenon of Jew hatred throughout the centuries, even though the term did not come into popular usage until Wilhelm Marr founded the League of Anti-Semites in 1879. It should also be stressed that the usage of the words *anti-Semitism* or *anti-Semite* refers to a spectrum of phenomena and modes of thought. Rather than posing an either/or condition – either Jew hater or not a Jew hater – it is rather like asking whether a room is light or dark: there are degrees. I use the hyphenated form of the word as a matter of convention; it hardly need be said that anti-Semitism is about hatred of the Jews, and not about hatred of Semites in general. Hatred of Akkadians, Phoenicians, or Nabataeans is not a pressing issue. Hatred of the Jews, however, is not only pressing – it is deeply revealing. Exactly what it reveals is among the things to be examined in this book.

This book differs from other attempts to get at the essence and the origin of anti-Semitism. Although I draw on many of the existing studies on the history of anti-Semitism and make some use of a chronological organization, I have not written a history book. The centuries-old phenomenon of Jew hatred has been well documented by scholars such as Leon Poliakov, Joshua Trachtenberg, John Gager, Robert Wistrich, Walter Laqueur, Edward Flannery, George Mosse, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Robert Michael, Paul Grosser, and Edwin Halperin. Although the present volume draws on their valuable work, these authors do not address the metaphysical origins of anti-Semitism. Indeed, some of them reject the very notion of a metaphysical origin of anything; adopting the strict methods of historical studies and social

sciences, their work is defined by strictly ontological parameters. One of the first to attempt to explain the cause of the phenomenon was Bernard Lazare, who was followed by Constantin Bruner, Peretz Bernstein, and Albert Lindemann; much more widely known attempts have been made by Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Maritain, Bernard Lewis, Joel Carmichael, and Theodore Isaac Rubin. All of these efforts to get at the core of anti-Semitism are discussed in what follows. None of them, however, adopts the method that I have adopted in this work.

In contrast to almost all other studies of the origins of anti-Semitism, this book takes a conscientiously Jewish approach to understanding Jew hatred. Such an approach is rooted in the texts and the teachings of the Jewish tradition, including the Torah, Talmud, Midrash, the commentaries, writings of modern Jewish thinkers, and even some elements of Kabbalah. My reason for taking such an approach is calculated: the categories of thought and the teachings that guide this study are precisely what the anti-Semite is against. The overarching question to be answered in this volume, then, is this: How might the origins of Jew hatred be understood from the standpoint of the Judaism that the anti-Semites seek to eliminate? I shall show that anti-Semitism arises both from within and from beyond the human being, from a realm that transcends the contingencies of ethnic, religious, racial, or sociological differences. Having a metaphysical origin, anti-Semitism lurks in every soul, whether *in potentia* or *in actu*. It is not a question of We versus They; rather, it is a question of We – and, by extension, a question of *me*. To sound the depths of anti-Semitism, then, is to sound the depths of one's own soul.

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