

Introduction

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ANTI-JUDAISM IN THE PRE-CHRISTIAN WORLD

Antisemitism¹ is a late 19th-century (1870) term based on pseudo-scientific racial theory that was coined to describe in a new way opposition to, and hatred of, the Jewish People and their form of life. Though a relatively recent linguistic and ideological construction, it draws on and extends a much older tradition of anti-Jewish enmity that has its roots in the pre-Christian world of Greece, Rome, and Hellenistic Egypt and was then reinterpreted and radically reconceived in early Christianity beginning with the writings of Paul and the four Gospels that form the core of the New Testament.

Even before the rise of Christianity and its intense anti-Jewish polemic, Jews were presented in the Hellenistic world, and especially in Roman (Latin) and Egyptian literature, as being “strange,” primarily due to their religious beliefs that included having only one God who could not be seen, taking off every seventh day – the Sabbath – from labor, and eating only restricted types of food that excluded pork, shellfish, and birds of prey. In addition, as historian Salo Baron has pointed out:

The ever-noisy and quarrelsome citizenry of a Graeco-Oriental municipality resented, in particular, the peculiarities of the Jewish way of life. The segregated life of the Jewish communities injected further venom into the strained relationship. Already the Jews had a sort of ghetto. At least in Alexandria, Sardes, and Apollinopolis Magna (Edfu), perhaps also in Rome, Oxyrhynchus, Hermopolis and Halicarnassus, there existed predominantly Jewish quarters... Life

¹ In this volume, the word “antisemitism” will appear in this form, following the recent trend in scholarly publications. The older spelling – anti-Semitism – is rejected because it suggests that there is such a thing as Semitism, meaning a particular Jewish racial character and distinguishable set of attributes.

within these quarters, proceeding in strange and incomprehensible ways, filled the superficial Gentile observer with awe and suspicion, or with abhorrence and contempt.²

That is, Jews were perceived, for many different reasons, as aliens who were destroying local social customs, pagan family life, and local religious tradition.

This led to a widespread view that Jews were misanthropic, superstitious, and arrogant, believing themselves to have a special covenantal relationship with their unseen Deity, while the gods of the pagan traditions were idols. (See Erich Gruen's essay for full details.) This negative view is present, for example, in Haman's critique of Jews in the *Book of Esther* 3:8–9:

Haman then said to King Ahasuerus: "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore, it is not fitting for the king to let them remain. If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries." (New King James Version, *Esther* 3:8–9)

This paradigmatic statement, representative of pre-Christian anti-Judaism, is not only significant in itself but also important because its employment in the *Book of Esther* suggests that this theme was well known to the contemporary readers of the story (between 400 and 300 BCE is the probable date of composition). It would appear that this negative appraisal was a common idea among non-Jews, as indicated by the fact that one finds it in the writings of the Egyptian priest Manetho (early 3rd century BCE), who criticized Moses and the Jewish version of the Exodus story; in the hostile accusations made by Cicero; and in the critique of the Roman historian Lysimachus, who argued that the Jews "have no good intentions towards any man, to give not the best but the worst advice, to tear down the temples and altars of the gods." Similarly, Tacitus (c. 56–120 CE) asserts that Jews are so hostile and perverse that, "although as a race [Jews] are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women."³ It was, thus,

² Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 1 (New York, 1952), 188.

³ *Ibid.*, 194.

not surprising that a major pogrom took place in Alexandria in 88 BCE, and another occurred in 38 CE.⁴

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On reflection, it is evident that this hatred, while genuine and destructive, can reasonably be labeled “sociological” and “anthropological.” That is, it operates in our world, appeals to human characteristics and actions, and explains the offenses of the “other” in terms that make no appeal to transcendental forces. This situation changed with the momentous shift introduced by the coming of Christianity and its powerful, metaphysical polemic against Judaism.

To begin to understand the profound and pervasive legacy of pre-modern anti-Judaism requires that one turn to early Christianity, which supplied the religious foundation of this tradition. For despite the various competing and supporting ancillary theories of the causes of this malignancy, its base, its strength, its endurance, and its dissemination in Western culture are primarily, though not solely, rooted in religious claims.

It is impossible to read the Pauline epistles, the synoptic Gospels, and later patristic sources, that is, the writings of the Church Fathers, without seeing them as affirming two salient claims: (1) Judaism is, since the coming of Christ, a spiritual cadaver, and (2) Jews and Judaism stand in dishonoring opposition, at least since the first Easter, to God’s salvific plan for humankind. In these two theses lie the roots of that religious anti-Judaism that has reverberated through the last two millennia and that has laid the basis for modern antisemitism.

To appreciate what this denigration of Judaism signifies and why its civilizational legacy is so wounding, one must grasp the dynamics of early Christian anti-Jewish writings. The struggle between the nascent church and the established Jewish community was over the entitlement to the “promises” of the Torah and their meaning. Who are the “children of the promise,” the “Israel” in whom “all the nations will be blessed”? Was it the “Israel of the Flesh,” the biological descendants of Abraham? Or was it the new messianic community of those faithful to

⁴ Readers need to remember that criticism of Jews in different times and places is influenced by the context, that is, the intellectual and religious civilization, of the period in question. Thus, the “Jew” criticized by Cicero and Tacitus is not exactly like the “Jew” of Paul, or Matthew, or the Quran. Nor is Luther’s “Jew” the same as the “Jew” imagined in the current BDS movement or by contemporary white, right-wing nationalists.

Jesus? Self-evidently, it was the second, and accordingly, in self-justification, it was necessary to impugn the religious integrity of Judaism for were the “Israel of the Flesh” faithful, the Jewish reading of Torah valid, the Hebraic account of salvation correct, then what reason would there be for the “promises” passing to a new, gentile Israel? Only if the Torah were *not* a source of “righteousness,” of “justification,” and the “Old” Israel found unfaithful and guilty, could there be cause for God to seek a new covenantal partner. As Paul famously insists: “If justification were through the law [Torah], then Christ died in vain. . . . For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (*Galatians* 3:10–14 and see also 3:21).

As a consequence of the spiritual darkness in which Jews live, due to their rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah, they are, according to Paul, “a rebellious and apostate people” (*Romans* 10:21). He has God say, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (*ibid.*). Stephen in *Acts of the Apostles* is still more explicit: “You stiff-necked people uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those that beforehand announced the coming of the Righteous One” (*Acts* 7:51–53). Not only is the “Israel of the Flesh” corrupt, but it consciously chooses its corruption. Not only does it fatally follow a law that is dysfunctional, but it persists in maintaining this rebellious course even when God would open the eyes of the Jewish People and return them to Himself. Israel is not only blind but radically disobedient; not only does it not know God’s true purpose, but it wills not to know it. So “the Jew” becomes the enemy of man and God, and the main root of the development that leads to medieval and modern antisemitism is set in place.

This heinous tradition of apostasy, according to the synoptic (Gospel) authors writing in the decades after Paul’s death, reaches its climax in the key role that Israel is said to have played in the Crucifixion. According to Mark:

And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?” And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.” So, Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (*Mark* 15:12–15)

Matthew retells this same sinister tale nearly exactly but adds the pregnant, enduring phrase, so costly in Jewish lives, “[Pilate said] I am

innocent of this man's blood . . . and all the [Jewish] people answered, 'His blood be upon us and our children'" (27:15–26). John, writing most probably in the early 2nd century, goes even further, emphasizing that the Jews themselves crucified Jesus: "Then [Pilate] handed him over to them [the priests] to be crucified" (19:16). The full perversity, the unrestricted obstinacy of Israel as manifest in this titanic act of treason against heaven, must be properly and completely understood. When the Almighty, in his great mercy, sent the prophets to call the Jews to keep the law, they persecuted and killed them. Now, when God, in his infinite graciousness, sends his only Son to free the Jews from "the curse of the law," perverse community that they are, they kill him and continue to keep the law. Whatever Heaven wills, the Jewish people will choose the opposite. The consequence of this final, overwhelming act of disobedience, of deicide, is the rejection of the Jews by God. The "new covenant," therefore, is with the gentiles.

This censure reaches a climax in the metaphysical revaluations of the Gospel of John. Here "the Jew" is seen as a wholly negative "other." "You [Jews] are of your Father, the devil," John affirms, "and your will is to do your Father's desires" (8:43–44). However one reads this Johannine description of the tragic encounter of Christ and "the Jews," there can be no denying that in John's harsh rendition the clash has come to be seen as the temporal locus of more than historical actualities. The unconscionable role that the Jews, as the Devil's henchmen, play in the Crucifixion proves, as John has Jesus say, "[The Jews] do not belong to God" (8:47).

One, therefore, discerns in the New Testament – in this anti-Jewish theology of fulfillment, displacement, and negation, in these accusations of apostasy and deicide (deciphered more completely in the essay by Adele Reinhartz) – the origination of the abiding and tragic conflict between Judaism and Christianity.⁵

The early, post–New Testament Christian sources – primarily the product of gentile authors unconnected to Jews and Judaism by ties of biology, family, sociology, or common political needs – continued to amplify the anti-Jewish critique that they had inherited. The famous

⁵ On the growing friction as seen from the Jewish perspective, see Steven T. Katz, "Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity after 70 CE: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103.1 (April 1984), 43–76; and Steven T. Katz, "The Rabbinic Response to Christianity," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4: *The Late Roman Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge, 2006), 259–298.

Church Father, Justin Martyr (d. c. 165), chastised Israel in what became paradigmatic terms:

For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem.⁶

“Accordingly,” claimed Justin, “these things have happened to you in fairness and justice, for you have slain the Just One.” What transpires, what has transpired, is a new revelation through which the Jewish people are recognized as God’s enemies, their outcast political status a sign of rejection: “The city where Jesus suffered was necessarily destroyed, the Jewish nation was driven from its country, and another people called by God to the blessed election.”⁷

By the patristic era – as analyzed in the contributions by Joshua Garroway, Andrew Jacobs, and Steven Bowman – the encounter between Jew and Christian, between synagogue and church, was perceived as the embodiment of Satan’s clash with Jesus, of Evil’s rebellion against the Good, of the assault of the Sons of Darkness against the Sons of Light, of the Powers of Hell arrayed in deadly opposition to the Powers of Heaven. “If a person,” John Chrysostom wrote in the 4th century, “should call the Synagogue a brothel today, or a criminals’ hangout, or a resort of demons, or a citadel of the Devil, or the ruin of souls, or a cliff and a pit of complete destruction, or any other name whatever, he would speak more kindly than the place deserves.”⁸ “The Jews” had become and were to remain perfidious, more than human, opponents of God Himself. “The demons inhabit the very souls of the Jews.”⁹ They are the very “devil’s teeth” who snatch away God’s people and make sacrifice of them to the Devil.

What is all-important about these theological caricatures is that they continue to consign the conflict between synagogue and church to the realm of myth and metaphysics. Though the patristic writers did

⁶ Thomas Halton, Thomas Falls, and Michael Slusser, eds., *Dialogue with Trypho* (Washington, DC, 2003), 202.

⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, 1965), 4:23.

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos* [*Eight Homilies against the Jews*], 4:23, trans. C. M. Maxwell, PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1967. There are also standard published translations available.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:3.

not invent this interpretive form – the authors of the New Testament already spoke in these idioms, for example, John on the link between Jews and the Devil – they gave it extensive room for growth, heartily nurtured its most unsavory elements, and consciously assured that it would become the fixed pattern for all subsequent readings of the Jewish–Christian encounter. After the combined hermeneutical assault of the New Testament and the patristic writings, the Jew is never again to be “a man like other men.” He has become a *mythic* creature. (See the essay by Pierluigi Piovanelli.)

These theological images and understandings, not surprisingly, would come to have weighty and enduring practical and legal consequences with the conversion of Constantine the Great in 312 CE and the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the first quarter of the 4th century. Jews now were legally defined as theological enemies and “outsiders” relative to all the main private and communal areas of life, as explained in Chapter 5 by Andrew Jacobs.

As the Church expanded significantly in the first three centuries after the Crucifixion of Jesus, and eventually gained real power with the conversion of Constantine, its hostility toward Jews and Judaism grew in every direction, including, most importantly, in its political influence within the Roman Empire. Now the Jewish–Christian conflict was not simply rhetorical. The Church had the power to translate its anti-Jewish views into concrete legislation that increasingly marginalized the Jew. Accordingly, Jews were pushed out of the mainstream of the social, economic, and political order.

Among the Church Fathers there is one whose understanding of Jewish–Christian relations requires separate consideration given its historical consequence in limiting anti-Jewish violence. This, of course, is Augustine (354–430 CE). Over against the extremism of John Chrysostom and other Christian writers of the 2nd to 5th centuries, Augustine’s position was more constrained and his revisionist position significantly influenced the Church’s official teaching on the Jews from the 5th century onward.

Augustine’s analysis of the Jewish situation represents a creative conservative innovativeness. Its conservatism is reflected in its doctrinal Paulinism and in its inherited, shared anti-Judaism. His representative tract, *Contra judaeos*, his derogatory pronouncements in *Contra faustum*, and his eschatological observations on Jewish apostasy and its eventual overcoming in the *City of God* (books 18 and 20), are all, on one level, unoriginal recyclings of the unforgiving patristic idiom.

On a second level, however, amid this dogmatic continuity, Augustine contributes an important innovation as to how the Church should understand and correspondingly react to the Jewish people. He does this by emphasizing in a new and central way the meaning of the seminal doctrine of the “wandering Jew.” Though he does not invent this idea, his ideological reinterpretation of it proves historically consequential for the actual practices embodied in Christian anti-Judaism. According to Augustine’s ironic reading, “the Jews,” above all else, are seen as a people who, in their homelessness, constitute the strange, theologically fertile, “witness of unbelief.” Furthermore, he interpreted the Cain and Abel story (Genesis 4:1–16) as an allegory of the relationship that obtains between “the Jews” (Cain) and Christ (Abel) – “the Jews” (Cain) find their offering to God rejected, whereas the faith of Abel is preferred on high. But in the same way that God warned the generation of Cain and Abel that Cain was not to be harmed by man as God would supply the retribution, so, too, Christians should not do evil to the Jews.

Moreover, the rejection of “the Jews” is, in some mysterious way, a gift that makes it possible for the gentiles to become part of the covenantal community of the elect. Israel’s apostasy and subsequent punishment, as well as its continued proclamation of the Torah – even though blind to its supreme meaning (Christ Jesus) – reveal important lessons for Christian society. Just as Cain’s treachery verified and exalted Abel’s faithfulness, so the skepticism of “the Jews,” their consequent fall from favor, the destruction of their Temple, and their exile, reinforce the truth of Christianity in an overwhelmingly visible and experiential way.¹⁰ Accordingly, “the Jews” (real Jews) are not to be harmed by Christians but, rather, are to wander the earth as proof of their rejected status.¹¹ In God’s good time, as part of the eschaton, in conjunction with the return of Christ in glory, this exilic status will end as the ultimate sign of Christ’s power and graciousness. In this accounting, Jewish survival thus becomes, paradoxically, a Christian theological imperative. Both Jewry’s present exile and its final redemption play central, inescapable roles in this influential version of Christian belief. Until today, as seen among Christian fundamentalists, though no less part of the dogmatics of mainline Protestants and the Catholic and Orthodox churches, this connection of Jewish wandering, Jewish survival, and Christian eschatological hope remains alive.

¹⁰ See here Augustine’s *The City of God* 18.46, trans. John Healy (London, 1931).

¹¹ The scenario is described in Augustine’s *The Reply to Faustus*, ed. and trans. Frank Talmage in his *Disputation and Dialogue* (New York, 1975).

The Theodosian Code created in 438 CE, and the Justinian Code, or *Corpus juris civilis* of 534 CE, formalized this exclusion of Jews from the main centers of civil society and set the foundations for the anti-Judaism – social, economic, political, cultural, and theological – of the medieval and modern eras. (The many crucial developments in the Christian medieval period are discussed in chapters by Robert Chazan, Emily Rose, Julie Mell, Miri Rubin, and Debra Higgs Strickland). By the 6th century CE, disabilities and exclusions vis-à-vis Jews were the norm in the Roman Empire and then in the Byzantine era (described by Steven Bowman). And this became the common existential and political circumstance of Jews in Christian society until the 18th century.¹² (See the essay by Jeremy Cohen.)

Christianity's anti-Jewish understanding, along with its state power, would continue to grow, especially with the encouragement of Martin Luther (as explained by Debra Kaplan) until the Age of Enlightenment and the late 18th-century debate over Jewish Emancipation (analyzed by Allan Arkush). But even in the post-emancipation era, as fundamental changes in the status of Jews and Judaism were inaugurated, the toxic teaching of the "Jew" as diabolical and more than an ordinary human enemy remained – and still remains – within segments of Western cultural and political traditions. So powerful was this antisemitic inheritance that it ultimately generated new social and economic doctrines that, for example, explained the older anti-Jewish restrictions by the conception of *racial* antisemitism. According to this new explanation, race not only decided one's physical features – tall or short, black or white – but also predetermined one's character and moral virtues, as well as the rise and fall of nations. Moreover, while the earlier, theological anti-Judaism allowed for conversion and hence a change in political and theological status, race was immutable and allowed no escape. This eventually became the doctrine that led to and supported antisemitic political parties and state actions, and, ultimately, Nazi Death Camps. (This crucial issue is analyzed in my "Weimar" essay and in the essays of Shulamit Volkov and Laura Engelstein.)

Consider as evidence of this "staying power" the following facts:

- (1) Jews in the modern era, as was widely believed in the medieval era, are negatively associated with disease. Today, in 2021, the internet

¹² On these significant developments, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Decline of the Ancient World* (London, 1960), 945–947; and Marcel Simon, *Versus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (AD 135–425)* (Paris, 1983; New York, 1986).

is saturated with articles linking the medieval myth that Jews caused the Black Death in 1348–1349 with the claim that Jews are the cause and prime spreaders of COVID-19. There are thousands of items on the Web spreading this lie.

- (2) Jews are said to be continuing their practice of killing non-Jewish children for their blood, especially using it in the making of Passover matzoh (unleavened bread). This falsehood continued to circulate in modern, that is, post-1800, history in famous cases like those in Tiszaeszlár, Hungary (1882–1883), and Damascus, Syria (1840). It was recycled in Czarist Russia in the notorious Beilis trial in 1913, and again in Poland after the Holocaust – in Kielce on July 4, 1946, in Rzeszow on June 12, 1945, and then in Krakow shortly thereafter.¹³ Today, this idea has been recycled in the libelous claim that Israeli soldiers are killing Palestinian children in order to harvest their organs.
- (3) The blood libel was the theme of a fifty-two-part series on Syrian TV sponsored by the Syrian government.¹⁴
- (4) The belief that Jews are physically misshapen, understood as a sign of their moral and spiritual degeneracy, played a part in the hotly contested, January 5, 2021, US Senate runoff in Georgia. Some political advertisements against the Jewish Democratic Party candidate, Jon Ossoff, pictured him with an elongated “Jewish” nose.¹⁵
- (5) The continual emphasis on the connection between Jews and money that began to circulate in the medieval era, centered around usury, received a major boost in the mid-19th century from Karl Marx (whose controversial position is deciphered by Jack Jacobs). Marx wrote: “What is the object of the Jew’s worship in this world: Usury. What is his worldly god? Money.” This theme has reverberated in both left-wing and right-wing circles: see, for example, the caricaturing of candidate Ossoff with the theme of “buying Georgia” employed by his rival, Republican Senator David Perdue, in political advertisements. Similarly, Louis Farrakhan, in a speech in Dallas, asked his audience: “Is the Federal Reserve owned by the

¹³ On the Blood Libel, see Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), and Elissa Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (Oxford, 2019).

¹⁴ Robert Wistrich, *Muslim Anti-Semitism: A Clear and Present Danger* (New York, 2002), 31.

¹⁵ Dave Schechter, “Perdue Campaign Removes Ad Ossoff Called ‘Anti-Semitic,’” *Atlanta Jewish Times*, July 28, 2020: <https://atlantajewishtimes.timesofisrael.com/2020-yir-perdue-campaign-removes-ad-ossoff-called-anti-semitic/>.