

The Development of Anti-Jewish Christian Theology

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Some Definitions

The Holocaust and the *Shoah*. “Holocaust” is the common word describing the mass destruction of six million Jews during Hitler’s Third Reich. Yet, the Hebrew word *Shoah* is a preferable term. The word “Holocaust” might have been originally coined by the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel to name the horror of Auschwitz. It is derived from the biblical concept of a burnt offering to God. To apply the word “holocaust” with its positive connotation to denote the suffering of Jews is seen by some to be inappropriate. Many thus prefer *Shoah* as Jews remember the tragic event on *Yom haShoah*, which means the Day of Tempest.

Anti-Judaism. Anti-Judaism refers to theological attitudes, arguments, and polemics that distort and disparage Judaism in order to support the Christian claim of superiority. Anti-Judaism is not just a matter of hermeneutical views. Centuries of negative appraisal of Judaism and defamatory taught Christians to think of their Jewish neighbors as sinful, even demonic. Anti-Judaism is a dangerous theological attitude that fueled the development of modern antisemitism, to which the Nazis added a deadly component.

Antisemitism. Antisemitism is a term coined by Wilhelm Marr in the late nineteenth century that depicts Jews as an inferior ethnic group. Modern antisemitism does not require a theological rationale, though the long legacy of anti-Judaism has created a fertile soil for antisemitism. I am mindful that there is no difference between anti-Judaism and antisemitism from the perspective of the Jewish victims; and rejection of Judaism can easily “slide over” into antisemitism. Yet, this distinction is made for the purpose of probing Christian theological reflection. Christians who with their utmost sincerity claim that they are not antisemites can turn around and make anti-Jewish theological claims. This happens because supersessionism (see below) runs deeply in Christian understanding of religious identity, and it has been powerfully transmitted for centuries through Christian doctrines, legislations, practices of Christian worship, and educational materials. Even though antisemitism does not require theological rationale, Christians must confront centuries of anti-Jewish theology that provided the seedbed for the development of antisemitism and of the *Shoah*.

Supersessionism (Latin, *supersedere*, to sit upon and preside over), is a theological claim that Christians have replaced Jews as God’s people. Christianity is regarded as having achieved special status as the “fulfillment” of Judaism. Supersessionism assumes many forms. The classic expression is to split the New Testament from the Old, making a theological claim that says the Law is against grace. Hermeneutically, the Old Testament is argued as the preparation for the New Testament, that is, for the coming of Christ. As a result, the common interpretive mode among Christian fundamentalists is to look for Christ in every Old Testament text. Moreover, supersessionism helps Christians to read the Christian Bible as a whole. Supersessionism functions in Christian theology as an interpretive mode in which it provides the interpretive instrument to hold the Old Testament and the New Testament together as a *single* canonical construal. A canonical construal is an interpretative instrument that provides a framework for reading the Christian Bible as a theological and narrative unity. That is, it “hangs together” the complex biblical texts as a whole with its center of this overarching plot: Jesus Christ. Supersessionism became the standard canonical interpretive lens in which it fosters a triumphalist posture toward Jewish people.

Examples of supersessionism:

- The God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath. The God of the New Testament is a God of love.
- The Jews rejected as their Messiah because they were waiting for a royal, glorious messiah and could not recognize Jesus as a suffering messiah.
- The self-righteous and hypocritical Pharisees show how legalistic Judaism had become by Jesus' day.
- The Jews were unfaithful to their covenant with God, so their covenant has ended. Christians are now the people of God.

Anti-Jewish Polemics. Polemics are common literary tactics in sacred scriptures of religious communities. As siblings derived their identities from the same religious resources, ancient people used polemic to belittle mercilessly other members of the same tradition regarding their distinctive views and interpretation. In general, closer the family ties, the greater the denunciations. The gospel accounts contain numerous anti-Jewish polemics, ridiculing other family members in the gospel accounts. As scholars have pointed out, anti-Jewish polemics were quarrels within the *same* family. When the early Christian church in the second century with its membership comprised primarily of non-Jews, anti-Jewish polemics became a convenient way for non-Jewish Christians to charge Judaism as inferior

Second Temple Period. This period encompasses approximately the return from the Babylonian Exile in the Sixth century B.C.E. (ca. 540) to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. It was an important period for the development of early Christianity and Judaism and was the crucial social environment for the ministry of Jesus.

Seedbed of the Holocaust (*Shoah*): Anti-Jewish Christian Theology

The *Shoah* is significant for Christian reflection because Christian tradition provided the seedbed for the development of modern antisemitism. Nazi motivations for mass murder of Jews were inspired by the myth that the Jewish people is satanic in character and a menace to societies. Jewish scholar Yehuda Bauer argues that the Christian church over many centuries shaped this anti-Judaic myth that had fueled Europeans' impenitent attitudes toward Jews. The Nazi regime was anti-Christian, yet, the Nazi's antisemitic policies adopted the anti-Semitic images fashioned by supersessionism while rejecting the Christian theology. That is what Bauer calls: "Christian antisemitism without Christianity." For centuries, Christian theologians portrayed Jews and Judaism as unfaithful and the cursed subject of God. Supersessionism has been (and still is for some) the standard interpretative mode for Christian theologizing. As the Christian story spread gradually and eventually dominated Europe, it became the seedbed for the development of the modern racial antisemitism. Christian theology is deeply infected with the "virus" of anti-Judaism. Even though Hitler's racist vision of a *Judenrein* world and the racist intellectual theories of the late nineteenth century are much to blame for the suffering of European Jewry, Hitler could not have accomplished what he did without two thousand years of Christian anti-Jewish teaching as the foundation for genocide. The following is a succinct summary of that development.

1. Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Bible

Many theologians have pointed out the popular oversimplification that there was a single, normative Judaism during the time of Jesus. Based on this oversimplification, the emergence of Christianity was said to be against an "orthodox" Judaism. Rather, contemporary research in

Jewish-Christian relations indicates that it is more accurate to talk about “Judaisms” in the plural. As shown in the gospel accounts, there were different Jewish sects or schools of thought, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots. To depict a single Judaism and also a single Christianity oversimplifies the complexity of the Palestinian region in the first century as well as Judaism in the Diaspora. Today, we know that there were many voices and religious interpretations competing for leadership. The complex social and political reality was the pretext for the rise of charismatic religious leaders and sects. These Jewish sects competed for leadership and public trust in their ways of envisioning the future of Judaism. This is the socio-political backdrop for understanding the anti-Jewish polemics contained in the New Testament. In telling the story of Jesus, all four gospels generally present the Pharisees, Jewish authorities and sometimes, Jews in general, as foils for the teaching of Jesus. There were several factors that affected their telling of the Christian origin: the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.; the insecurity of the early Jewish Christians; and the suspicions of the Roman officials.

2. The Destruction of the Second Temple. It is almost impossible to understand the gospel writers’ message without simultaneously understanding the impact of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. Since the Second Temple was a significant center of Jewish life, its destruction raised serious question for the continuation of the Temple cult. That is: What does it mean to be Jewish when the Temple is no longer there? This question fueled the already acrimonious debate among various Jewish sects of how to cope with the demolition of the Temple. Biblical scholars have pointed out that the bulk of the gospel accounts were composed during the period or shortly after the destruction of the Temple. The destruction of the Temple formed the socio-political context for the written gospel accounts. Since the destruction of the Temple set the stage for the canonical narratives, it explains the presence of anti-Jewish polemics in the biblical texts. An example is the Epistle to the Hebrews: The author of the Epistle argues the first covenant as “old,” “obsolete,” and ready to disappear (8:13). When the author of the epistle talked about the old covenant as obsolete, he was referring to the destruction of the Temple. Its demolition made it easier for the author to talk about the centuries-old divinely inspired sacrificial system as useless.

3. An Insecure Minor Jewish Sect. We must remember that the “Jesus’ Movement” originated as an insignificant Jewish sect within early Judaism from the first century and it remained insignificant until the late fourth century. In its beginning years, from the perspective of an outsider, Jewish Christians and Jews were indistinguishable. In order to create space, set boundaries and spread the message of the newly formed sect, polemics played a powerful role. Taking the Gospel of Matthew as an example:

- The Pharisees and Sadducees are called poisonous snakes (3:7)
- The Pharisees are called blind guides leading the blind (15:12-14)
- “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees...” (16:6)
- The house of Jerusalem is to be forsaken and desolate (23:38)

4. The Suspicions of Roman Authorities. The destruction of the Temple by the Roman army indicated the social tension between Imperial Rome and Jews. Even during the revolt, Jewish Christians disassociated themselves from the nationalistic Jews who were involved in the crisis. Since Jewish Christians believed that Jesus is the Messiah, they desired some distance from non-confessing Jews. After 70 C.E., tensions and mistrust between Jews and Roman officials remained. Even though life appeared to continue as usual after the Temple was demolished, Jewish Christians

found themselves struggling to tell the story of Jesus without alarming the Roman government. During the years before and after the destruction of the Second Temple, Roman authorities were suspicious of any new organization. At the same time, Roman authorities started to recognize Christians as a distinguishable Jewish subgroup. From the perspective of the Roman authorities, Christians were seen as an illegal association promoting disloyalty, disrupting the established order and fomenting conspiracy. As a result, they walked a fine line as they made theological claims that they were the true heirs of the biblical Israel and at the same time different from those Jews who did not confess Jesus. As an insecure minority without legal recognition by Imperial Rome, together with the continual disapproval of the powerful Jewish authorities, early Jewish Christians relied on the power of polemic to release their anxieties.

As I have argued, there are clear anti-Jewish passages in the Christian texts, yet, they resulted from *internal* argument among Jews about the future of Judaism. Informed by the scholarship of the Second Temple period, Christian and Jewish scholars today argue that the anti-Jewish texts represent the acrimonious familial relationship among various Jewish sects. Polemics were the rhetorical tool of the time, serving as boundary markers as well as reasons for staying in the Christian faith. Today, we understand Christianity as a distinct world religion, but it was originally a Jewish renewal movement with Jewish values and customs to its core. The polemic found in the New Testament was the result of the intense rivalry relationship among siblings. Because the gospel message was written with a defamatory form of speech, it creates a challenge for contemporary Christians, to read the gospel accounts without denigrating Judaism.

Anti-Judaism: A Dangerous Theological Attitude

When Christianity gained ascendancy in the Roman Empire in 379 C.E., the fate of Jews worsened. As a minority movement in the first three centuries, Christians had always needed to fight against the dominance of Jewish culture, practice and thought. However, the table was turned when Constantine the Emperor showed favoritism toward Christianity, making it a licit religion in the Roman Empire. From the fourth century onward, the Christian church, almost solely Gentile in membership, came to enjoy political ascendancy. The Christian church exercised dominance by proclaiming its theology as the only legitimate theology. The anti-Jewish polemics in the Christian Scriptures which originated as internal disputes among Jews, became an excellent resource for the early church to defame the Jewish people.

In addition, Emperor Justin invited the ecclesiastical authorities to oversee laws affecting Jews' status and rights. Its effect is shown by one of the laws passed on February 5, 553 C.E., which stated that Jews who denied the resurrection or the last judgment shall suffer "the harshest punishment." Although Jews in Christian Europe were subjected to the same laws as Christians, the Christian lawmakers made sure that the "perfidious" Jews who were the Christ killers, could never occupy a status of equality with Christians. Instead, the Jewish people, a minority in Christian Europe were forced to let Christian opinion and culture intrude in all facets of their lives. From the medieval period onward, many, if not most, Christians viewed Judaism not only as its inferior, but also the enemy of the church and a menace to society. Jewish life deteriorated significantly in the twelfth and thirteenth century as the Fourth Lateran Council of the Church in 1215 prescribed the absolute segregation of Jews and decreed that all Jews should wear a yellow label as an emblem of their exilic status. As a way to eternal hope, Christian authorities offered Jews freedom through conversion. This is why Jewish scholar Jules Isaac called Christianity "the teaching of contempt."