

Where Was Love & Mercy? The History of Christian Anti-Semitism - Part 1



- Did you know that the early Church was predominantly Jewish?
 - What happened to disconnect the Church from its Jewish roots and create an almost entirely Gentile Church?
 - Why did the Church enact so many anti-Jewish edicts?
 - Are the Jewish people “Christ killers,” as they have been called in Christian circles?
 - Has the Church replaced Israel?
 - Why did historical events like the Crusades and the Inquisition ultimately focus on persecuting Jews?
 - Did you know that Martin Luther had a very positive relationship with the Jewish community, and then became one of the vilest anti-Semites in history?
- Did you know that Adolph Hitler found precedent for his evil actions against the Jewish people right out of the annals of Church history?
 - What can we do to change the last 1,800 years of historical anti-Jewish attitudes and actions of the Church?

We Christians sing the chorus, “They will know we are Christians, by our love, by our love....” In Romans 11, Paul tells Gentile Christians of our relationship towards the Jewish people. He tells us not to be “arrogant” towards them (v. 20), that they are “beloved for the sake of the Patriarchs” (v. 28) and that “through [our] mercy, they shall obtain mercy” (v. 31). Sadly, the Jewish community, living in close proximity to Christians throughout the last 1,900 years, has rarely felt any love or respect from Christians or Christianity. For the most part, they received hatred, contempt, persecution, and even death at the hands of Christians. Where was love and mercy?

Generally, very little of this very vivid and tragic history is known to most Christians. Yet, it is well-known by the Jewish community, because they remember these sad chapters of history all too well. Instead of showing love and mercy to the Jewish people, many Christians turned the cross into a sword against the Jews. It has been said by Dr. Edward Flannery, in his book, *The Anguish of the Jews*, that the only chapters of Christian history known by the Jews were recorded on pages the Church has torn out of the history books and burned. In researching this article, I checked volume after volume of books, encyclopedias and dictionaries of Church History, and there was barely a reference to be found about the large quantity of material written by the Church against the Jewish people. They exist as part of the proceedings and conclusions of most Church Councils and Edicts up until this century, but most writers preferred not to write about these passages because it was not flattering. Rather, we have simply swept it under the carpet because it is all too uncomfortable to deal with. This is why I want us to do something a little different for the next two Israel Teaching Letters. Instead of looking at a right understanding and interpretation of Scripture, we are going to see the results of wrong interpretation and the havoc it wreaked. Because this is so central to our Christian relationship to Israel and the Jewish community, it is very important to study this together. While it is a lengthy topic, I assure you that you will not be bored.

When we examine the last 2,000 years in historical perspective, I feel it is safe to say that organizations and individual Christians who express Christian solidarity with the Jewish people, and are educating the Church about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, are a historical rarity. Let me put this assessment in perspective: During approximately 1,800 years of the nearly 2,000 years of Church history, any attempt to teach Christians about Jews, Judaism, Jewish roots of Christianity, or even to celebrate the Levitical Feasts, would result in Christians being subject to a good tongue-lashing or excommunication at best, and in many cases, death. And, any member of the Jewish community participating would be considered Judaisers and penalized by Church authorities with punishment and even death. Certainly an article of this kind was not allowed. While history is complex (and there were certain historical moments of religious freedom), this assessment can be

considered an accurate generalization.

Fortunately today, we are free to discuss the Jewish roots of Christianity, as well as our own sad record against the Jews, without retribution. We can even come together with Jews to learn from one another on these topics. The trend is definitely positive. This study is not intended to be a mere history lesson, but a lesson in history. Furthermore, I am not trying to impose guilt on anyone, for we are exceptions to the historical rule. On the other hand, I am trying to instill a sense of responsibility, so that we will not allow history to repeat itself.

In this presentation, I will be referring to early Church Fathers, the Catholic Church, Martin Luther, and other Church leaders and Church edicts. Please don't be offended by the historical facts presented. They are being presented to help us to learn, grow, and move ahead in our faith walk, not to insult any particular denomination or group. So, let's get started on our journey into understanding.

The First Four Centuries A.D.

In the first century AD, the church was well-connected to its Jewish roots, and Jesus did not intend for it to be any other way. After all, Jesus is Jewish and the basis of His teaching is consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures. In Matthew 5:17-18 He states: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

It is also known that the writers of the New Testament, except Luke, were Jewish. The apostles and early disciples were Jewish. They worshipped on Shabbat (Sabbath), celebrated the feasts, and attended Synagogue. Even the membership of the early Church in Jerusalem and surrounding Judea, Samaria, and Galilee was predominately Jewish. We know, for example, that no non-Jewish names appeared in leadership of the Jerusalem church until after AD 135, when a Greek name appears. We will see why this happened in a moment. Congregations in other parts of the Roman Empire also had relatively strong Jewish or Hebraic roots, as they found their source of guidance from the Jerusalem School of Thought. This is illustrated by the names of many of the New Testament epistles: The Letters TO the Corinthians, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, originated from the Jerusalem community. The writers of the other Epistles were also connected to the Judeo-Christian congregation in Jerusalem.

Before the First Jewish Revolt in AD 66, Christianity was basically a sect of Judaism, as were the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. The Christians were also known as Nazarenes. Before the First Jewish Revolt that ended with the Second Temple being destroyed and Jerusalem razed by the Romans in AD 70, there was room for debate within Judaism in the bustling, cosmopolitan city of Jerusalem. So, what happened to cause such a split between the Christian and Jewish communities that exists even unto today?

The Separation Begins: Initially, it began as a result of religious and social differences. According to David Rausch in his book, *A Legacy of Hatred*, there were several contributing factors: 1) the Roman intrusion into Judea, and the widespread acceptance of Christianity by the Gentiles, complicated the history of Jewish Christianity; 2) the Roman wars against the Jews not only destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem, but it also resulted in Jerusalem's relinquishing her position as a center of Christian faith in the Roman world, and; 3) the rapid acceptance of Christianity among the Gentiles led to an early conflict between the Church and Synagogue. Paul's missionary journeys brought the Christian faith to the Gentile world, and as their numbers grew, so did their influence, which ultimately disconnected Christianity from its Jewish roots.

Many Gentile Christians interpreted the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem as a sign that God had abandoned Judaism, and that He had provided the Gentiles freedom to develop their own Christian theology in a setting free from Jerusalem's influence. Unfortunately, the Judeo-Christians had disassociated themselves from the war against the Romans and from the tragedy that had come upon the nation. Believing that the war with the Romans was a sign of the end, they fled to Pella, east of the Jordan River, leaving their fellow Jews to fend for themselves.

After the war and the virtual destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the Jewish sages who managed to survive the Roman victory assembled in Jabneh, a city in the Sharon Plains near Joppa. As they entered the post-Temple period, they realized the need to consolidate the practice of Judaism and halacha, or Law. Judaism adopted the Bet Hillel School of rabbinical practice, which was most closely linked to the Pharisaic sect of Judaism. The Pharisaic teachings were most interested in the relationship of each individual to God, and encouraged the masses to holiness based on a scrupulous observance of the Torah, unlike Sadducean teaching that was more interested in Temple ritual practice. Even though Pharisaic Judaism had shown tolerance to Judeo-Christians or Nazarenes prior to the destruction of the Temple, the assembly at Jabneh called for a separation between Christianity and Judaism.

Hadrian's Contribution: Later, in AD 132, when the Jewish zealot, Bar Kochba, orchestrated the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome, the Judeo-Christians had another reason not to participate. Bar Kochba was proclaimed the Messiah by Rabbi Akiva. Since the Christians saw Jesus (Yeshua) as Messiah, for them to participate in the revolt under the leadership of Bar Kochba would be considered a denial of their beliefs. In AD 135, when the revolt was crushed by the Roman Emperor Hadrian, he expelled all Jews from Jerusalem, allowing them to return only one day each year, on Tisha B'Av, an annual day set aside to mourn the destruction of the Temple. This prohibition was also true for Judeo-Christians, and thus we find recorded the first Greek name in the leadership of the Jerusalem Church. At this point, the Hebraic influence of the Jerusalem Church was lost to world Christianity, which influenced the direction of the Church.

Hadrian also rebuilt Jerusalem into a Roman city, naming it after himself, Aelia Capitolina, his family name being Aelius. As one considered a god by his subjects, this was a supreme insult to the God of Israel who chose Jerusalem as His city. Hadrian also changed the name of Judea, Samaria and Galilee to Syria Palestina (Palestine), ascribing to the land a name connected to the arch-enemies of the Jewish people, the Philistines. Both gestures were done by Hadrian to erase any Jewish connection with the city of Jerusalem and the land of Israel. This legacy is still haunting Israel today.

Christianity and Judaism Separate: By this time, the Church had effectively separated itself from Judaism. Theological and political power moved from Jewish Christian leaders to centers of Gentile Christian leadership such as Alexandria, Rome, and Antioch. It is important to understand this change, because it influenced the early Church Fathers to make anti-Jewish statements as Christianity began to disconnect itself from its Jewish roots. As the Church spread far and wide within the Roman Empire, and its membership grew increasingly non-Jewish, Greek and Roman thought began to creep in and completely change the orientation of Biblical interpretation through a Greek mindset, rather than a Jewish or Hebraic mindset. This would later result in many heresies, some of which the Church is still practicing today.

Once Christianity and Judaism began to take separate paths, the void became greater and greater. The Romans had effectively suppressed Judaism; however, Christianity was spreading quickly. This became a major concern to Rome, and ultimately political pressure became a major factor in the widening rift between Christians and Jews. Under Roman law, Judaism was considered a *religio licita*, a legal religion, as it predated Rome. To unify the Roman Empire, everyone was to worship and

sacrifice to the Roman gods including the Emperor who was considered a god. Obviously, the Christians could not ascribe to this pagan worship and refused, angering the central Roman authority. Christianity post-dated Rome, and therefore was considered a *religio illicita*. The practice of Christianity was a punishable offense. During this time, we find Christians being used for sport in the Roman coliseums and circuses, as gladiators or thrown to the lions and other wild beasts. The Emperor Nero even used Christians as human torches to light up his gardens at night. Christians were dipped in pitch, tied to poles and set afire. For protection against arrest, the symbol of the fish, rather than the obvious symbol of the cross, was used between Christians as a sign of identification during this period. The Greek anagram of the slogan, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” spelled the word, ICTHUS, or fish in Greek.

In an attempt to alleviate this persecution, Christian apologists tried in vain to convince Rome that Christianity was an extension of Judaism. However, Rome was not convinced. The resulting persecutions and frustration of the Christians bred an animosity towards the Jewish community, which was free to worship without persecution. Later, when the Church became the religion of the state, it would pass laws against the Jews in retribution.

Replacement Theology: This animosity was reflected in the writings of the early Church Fathers. For example, Justin Martyr (c. AD160) in speaking to a Jew said: “The Scriptures are not yours, but ours.” Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (c. AD 177) declared: “Jews are disinherited from the grace of God.” Tertullian (AD 160-230), in his treatise, “Against the Jews,” announced that God had rejected the Jews in favor of the Christians.

In the early 4th century, Eusebius wrote that the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures were for Christians and not the Jews, and the curses were for the Jews. He argued that the Church was the continuation of the Old Testament and thus superseded Judaism. The young Church declared itself to be the true Israel, or “Israel according to the Spirit,” heir to the divine promises. They found it essential to discredit the “Israel according to the flesh” to prove that God had cast away His people and transferred His love to the Christians.

In this, we find the beginnings of Replacement Theology, which placed the Church triumphant over the vanquished Judaism and Israel. This Replacement theory became one of the main foundations on which Christian anti-Semitism was based, even to this day. Incidentally, the New Testament speaks of the Church’s relationship to Israel and her covenants as being “grafted in” (Rom. 11:17), “brought near” (Eph. 2:13), “Abraham’s offspring (by faith)” (Rom. 4:16), and “partakers” (Rom. 15:27), NOT as usurpers of the covenant and a replacer of physical Israel. We Gentile Christians joined into what God had been doing in Israel, and God did not break His covenant promises with Israel (Rom. 11:29).

The Church Triumphant: At the beginning of the 4th century, a monumental event occurred for the Church. In AD 306, Constantine became the first Christian Roman Emperor. At first, he had a rather pluralistic view and accorded Jews the same religious rights as Christians. However, in AD 321, he made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. This signaled the end of the persecution of Christians, but the beginning of discrimination and persecution of the Jewish people.

Already at a council in Elvira (Spain) in AD 305, declarations were made to keep Jews and Christians apart, including ordering Christians not to share meals with Jews, not to marry Jews, not to use Jews to bless their fields, and not to observe the Jewish Sabbath. Imperial Rome, in AD 313, issued the Edict of Milan, which granted favor to Christianity, while outlawing synagogues. Then, in AD 315, another edict allowed the burning of Jews if they were convicted of breaking the laws. As Christianity was becoming the religion of the state, further laws were passed against the Jews:

- The ancient privileges granted to the Jews were withdrawn. - Rabbinical jurisdiction was abolished or severely curtailed. - Proselytism was prohibited and made punishable by death. - Jews were excluded from holding high office or a military career.

These and other restrictions were confirmed over and over again by various Church Councils for the next 1,000 years.

In AD 321, Constantine decreed all business should cease on “the honored day of the sun.” By substituting Sunday for Saturday as the day for Christian worship, he further advanced the split. This Jewish Shabbat/ Christian Sunday controversy also came up at the first real ecumenical Council of Nicea (AD 325), which concluded Sunday to be the Christian day of rest, although it was debated for long after that.

Overnight, Christianity was given the power of the Imperial State, and the emperors began to translate the concepts and claims of the Christian theologians against the Jews and Judaism into practice. Instead of the Church taking this opportunity to spread its Gospel message in love, it truly became the Church Triumphant, ready to vanquish its foes. After 321, the writings of the Church Fathers changed in character. No longer was it on the defensive and apologetic, but aggressive, directing its venom at everyone “outside of the flock,” in particular the Jewish people who could be found in almost every community and nation.

The Middle Ages

Now let’s look at the next 700 years of history, from the time of Constantine to the First Crusade in AD 1096. This period is known as the Middle Ages, or Dark Ages. The Holy Roman Empire was seeking to expand the new faith in the pagan tribes of Western Europe, the Ostrogoths in the north and east, the Visigoths in the West, and the Frankish Empire which included an area roughly surrounding France today.

During this period, we find more examples of anti-Jewish bias in Church literature written by church leaders:

- Hilary of Poitiers (AD 291-371) wrote: “Jews are a perverse people accursed by God forever.” - Gregory of Nyssa (died AD 394), Bishop of Cappadocia: “the Jews are a brood of vipers, haters of goodness...” - St. Jerome (AD 347-407) describes the Jews as “... serpents, wearing the image of Judas, their psalms and prayers are the braying of donkeys.”

John Chrysostom: At the end of the 4th century, the Bishop of Antioch, John Chrysostom, the great orator, wrote a series of eight sermons against the Jews. He had seen Christians talking with Jewish people, taking oaths in front of the Ark, and some were keeping the Jewish feasts. He wanted this to stop. In an effort to bring his people back to what he called, “the true faith,” the Jews became the whipping boy for his sermon series. To quote him, “the synagogue is not only a brothel and a theater; it is also a den of robbers and a lodging for wild beasts. No Jew adores God... Jews are inveterate murderers, possessed by the devil, their debauchery and drunkenness gives them the manners of the pig. They kill and maim one another...”

One can easily see that a Judeo-Christian who wanted to hold on to his heritage, or a Gentile Christian who wanted to learn more about the parent of Christianity, would have found it extremely difficult under this pressure. Further, Chrysostom sought to separate Christianity totally from Judaism. He wrote in his 4th Discourse, “I have said enough against those who say they are on our side, but are eager to follow the Jewish rites... it is against the Jews that I wish to draw up my bat”

abandoned by God and for the crime of deicide, there is no expiation possible.”

Chrysostom was known for his fiery preaching against what he saw as threats to his flock, including wealth, entertainment, privilege and outward adornment. However, his preaching against the Jewish community, which he believed had a negative influence on Christians, is inexcusable and blatantly anti-Semitic in its content.

The Christ Killers: Another unfortunate contribution Chrysostom made to Christian anti-Semitism was to hold the whole Jewish people culpable for the killing of Christ. The label of “Christ-killers,” as applied to the Jewish people, was to be reaffirmed by anti-Semites for the next 16 centuries.

Let’s look at this issue for a moment and squash it once and for all. To justify this label of “Christ-killer,” Matthew 27:25 has been cited. In this passage, the Jewish people are shown admitting their collective responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus, “Then answered all the people and said, ‘His blood be upon us, and our children.’” First, the collective responsibility of an entire people for all generations cannot be validated by the words of a few. They were speaking for themselves, not all Israel or all the Jewish people.

Secondly, if they were held responsible for the death of Jesus for their participation, then the non-Jewish world is also guilty of the same responsibility because it was Roman Gentile soldiers who actually carried out the crucifixion and drove the nails into Jesus and hung Him on the cross. Well, if not all Gentiles, at least we can hold it against all Italians!! I think you can see how ludicrous this argument is. Thirdly, Jesus willingly gave Himself up to die for the sins of mankind. So ultimately, it was our sin that nailed Him to the cross — not a Jewish mob, or a Roman army, and, Fourthly, before Jesus died, He said, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:24). If Jesus forgave both the Jewish and Roman players in this event, then who are we to do any less?

The Jews as a Witness People: Moving ahead in this period of the Middle Ages, we find some church leaders perplexed. If the Jews and Judaism were cursed by God, as they had been teaching for centuries, then how can you explain their existence? Augustine tackled this issue in his “Sermon Against the Jews.” He asserts that even though the Jews deserved the most severe punishment for having put Jesus to death, they have been kept alive by Divine Providence to serve, together with their Scriptures, as witnesses to the truth of Christianity. Their existence was further justified by the service they rendered to the Christian truth, in attesting through their humiliation, the triumph of the Church over the Synagogue. They were to be a “Witness people” - slaves and servants who should be humbled.

The monarchs of the Holy Roman Empire thus regarded the Jews as serfs of the chamber (*servi camerae*), and utilized them as slave librarians to maintain Hebrew writings. They also utilized the services of Jews in another enterprise - usury, or money-lending. The loaning of money was necessary to a growing economy. However, usury was considered as endangering to the eternal salvation of the Christian, and thus forbidden. So, the church endorsed the practice of lending by Jews, for according to their reasoning, their Jewish souls were lost in any case. Much later, the Jewish people were utilized by the Western countries as trade agents in commerce, and thus we see how the Jewish people found their way into the fields of banking and commerce.

So, by the Middle Ages, the ideological arsenal of Christian anti-Semitism was completely established. This was further manifested in a variety of precedent-setting events within the Church, such as Patriarch Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria expelling the Jews and giving their property to a Christian mob. From a social standpoint, the deterioration of the Jewish position in society was only beginning its decline. During this early period, the virulent judeophobia was primarily limited to the

clergy who were always trying to keep their flocks away from the Jews. However, later, the rank and file, growing middle class would be the main source of anti-Semitic activity.

Conclusion

While we have only reviewed the first 1,000 years of Christianity, I think you can see the tragedy of a broken relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. Paul says of them in Romans 11:28, 31 “They are beloved for the sakes of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable... [and that] by your mercy, they shall receive mercy.” This is a message the Church never preached until recently. Join me next month when we look at the second 1,000 years of Church history in relation to the Jewish people. We will find out why the Church forced Jews to wear identifying badges, accused them of “blood libel” and “host desecration,” and put them in ghettos. We will also see how the Jews suffered under the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Reformation inspired by Martin Luther’s very anti-Semitic writings, the Pogroms and the ultimate horror of the Holocaust.

While I know this is difficult information to read, we Christians will now know what many Jews already know about Christianity and its relationship to the Jewish people. Is it any wonder that they are afraid of us? This lesson, while historical and post-biblical shows us how we can misuse the Scriptures. And, now that the damage is done, we will see at the conclusion of our next letter, some suggestions about what we can do to present a positive expression of Christianity to Israel and the Jewish community around us.