

The Moral Failure of Christian Theology

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The road from here to Auschwitz is long and may not be direct, but one can get there from here.

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Tertullian's Anti-Judaism Judaism and Its Role in His Theology

Christian antisemitism is almost as old as Christianity itself. Its story is much too long to be narrated in a single chapter. The point is not to tell the whole story here, but to highlight the theological flaws that so strongly contributed to it. What follows will be hard for many to read, but history's voice wants to be heard. It is telling us that if Christianity is to survive morally intact, it must be rebuilt on a new theological foundation.

This chapter's epigraph mentions the road to Auschwitz. The Holocaust is the greatest tragedy in the history of the Jewish people. When the topic of Christianity's connection to the Holocaust comes up, the response is often defensive. "Nazism was anti-Christian as well as anti-Jewish," one often hears. But can Christianity really say "I am innocent of this blood" (Matthew 27:24)? The historical record provides the answer.

The notion that Nazism had nothing to do with Christianity is a myth. The Nazi regime received strong support from the German Protestant churches, and hardly any opposition from the Catholic church. There were exceptions, the most notable being the Confessing Church, which arose in opposition to the established churches that were supporting Hitler. Its best known members were Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller. Its founding document, the Barmen Declaration, was mostly written by theologian Karl Barth. The declaration, however, did not mention antisemitism and was mostly a protest against state control of the churches by the Nazis. There was even a movement to form a universal, pro-Nazi church answerable to the Reich, which the Confessing Church specifically opposed.

And so many Christians actually became allies of the Nazis, who welcomed their support. The only Christians the Nazis persecuted were those who

stood in opposition to them. In fact, the Nazi Party declared itself the representative of “Positive Christianity,” a radical blend of Christianity and racist ideology. It was not entirely new, and bore a striking similarity to the second-century Marcionite heresy.

To understand how all this happened, we cannot just start with the 20th century. We will find that a journey through history, to the origins of Christianity itself, makes the connection between Christianity and Nazism far more comprehensible. Christianity’s influence on Nazism was considerable (to say the least). The revelations of such a quest will make many of us uncomfortable, but it is history, and deserves our attention.

This subject area is vast and has been covered well by experts. In this short presentation I cannot hope to give more than an introductory glance at the history and its implications. More specialized resources will be found in a reading list at the end.

Tensions between Jews and the Jesus movement can be traced back to the New Testament itself. In the Synoptic Gospels we have some bitter clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees (class of teachers who accepted the Oral Law), and the Saducees (the Temple and priestly authorities). We need to keep in mind, however, that the New Testament, with one possible exception, was written by Jews. That possible exception is Luke. Many scholars consider Luke to have been a Gentile, but other scholars, with whom I happen to agree, believe Luke was Jewish. The New Testament is really a Jewish document (or more accurately, a diverse set of documents).

More serious problems surface in the Gospel of John. There the term “Jews” is used as a pejorative. Jesus even calls them children of the devil (John 8:44). Apparently, by that time, or in that locality, “Jews” was used to designate Jewish people who did not accept Christ. (It cannot be rationalized as applying only to “Judeans,” or to “Jewish leaders,” as some have tried to do.¹) Unfortunately, read centuries later, this Gospel can sound like an indictment of the Jewish people. It can be used antisemitically, even though to consider it antisemitic in origin would be anachronistic. The New Testament, including even the Gospel of John, including the Letter to the Hebrews, and even the Book of Revelation with

¹ See e.g. Adele Reinhartz, “‘Jews’ and Jews in the Fourth Gospel,” in Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vaneuville, eds., *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 213-227).

its talk of “the synagogue of Satan,” records conflicts within Judaism between groups of Jews. This was easily forgotten once these writings passed into Gentile hands.

The Letter of Barnabas

The first important collection of Christian writings after the New Testament is called the *Apostolic Fathers*. It received this name because of the belief that the authors were personally acquainted with Jesus’s apostles. Scholars no longer hold this view, since a number of the writings are pseudepigraphic and appear to have been written too late. Most of them date from the early to mid-second century.

One of these in particular, the Letter of Barnabas, shows how soon Christian antipathy toward Judaism and Jews began to grow. It was attributed to Barnabas the companion of Paul, and early church fathers believed he was the author, although now scholars maintain that the author is unknown and that the letter comes from the early second century. Its content is strongly anti-Jewish. It is preserved in the Codex Sinaiticus, one of the most important New Testament manuscripts, indicating that at some point Christians valued it and considered it scriptural.

If we look at just a few excerpts, we can see the seeds of antisemitic themes that became very prominent as Jewish-Christian relations deteriorated.

You ought, therefore, to understand. Moreover, I also ask you this, as one who is one of you and who in a special way loves all of you more than my own soul: be on your guard now, and do not be like certain people; that is, do not continue to pile up your sins while claiming, “Our covenant remains valid.” In fact, those people lost it completely. (Barnabas 4:6)²

Yes, indeed. But let us see if he has actually given the covenant that he swore to the fathers he would give to the people. He has indeed given it; but they were not worthy to receive it because of their sins. (Barnabas 14:1)

What began as a fight between two Jewish groups over which was faithful to the covenant became, in later years, Gentile Christians’ claim that they

² Selections from the Letter of Barnabas are taken from Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

were now the true heirs of the covenant, replacing the Jews, whom God has disinherited. And a people rejected by God was fair game for persecution.

Therefore, inasmuch as he was about to be revealed and to suffer in the flesh, his suffering was revealed in advance. For the prophet says concerning Israel: “Woe to their soul, for they have plotted an evil plot against themselves by saying, ‘Let us bind the righteous one, because he is troublesome to us.’” (Barnabas 6:7)

This verse quotes from Isaiah 3:9-10 (LXX). It is an example of what became a very common antisemitic maneuver in both Christianity and Islam: quoting Jewish scripture against the Jews. The Hebrew scriptures, especially the Prophets, are remarkable not only in recording and preserving national self-criticism – something unprecedented either before or since – but in displaying it to the world. Jews have paid a heavy price for this. Their enemies have used the Jewish sources themselves to “prove” how faithless and evil the Jewish people are – for even their own prophets condemn them! And of course, people who use the Hebrew scriptures in this way never bother to quote the numerous prophetic criticisms of other nations. They only focus on the prophetic criticisms of Jews.

We see something related in the following passage:

But the circumcision in which they have trusted has been abolished, for he declared that circumcision was not a matter of the flesh. But they disobeyed, because an evil angel “enlightened” them. (Barnabas 9:4)

And again in another prophet he says: “All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient people who oppose my righteous way.” (Barnabas 12:4)

Israel is castigated as stubborn and disobedient. This echoes Exodus 32:9, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are.’” This self-criticism was often weaponized by Gentiles and turned against Jews. We see this explicitly in the use in Barnabas of Deuteronomy 10:16 (“Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer”), and Jeremiah 9:26 (“For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart”):

“Behold, says the Lord, all the nations have uncircumcised foreskins, but this people has an uncircumcised heart!” (Barnabas 9:5)

The Jeremiah passage is twisted to show that Jews are worse than all the other nations, and bear some kind of special unique guilt.

The Jewish scriptures are also utilized to delegitimize Judaism itself:

Finally, he says to them: "I cannot stand your new moons and sabbaths." You see what he means: it is not the present sabbaths that are acceptable to me, but the one that I have made; on that sabbath, after I have set everything at rest, I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of another world. This is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven. (Barnabas 15:8-9)

The reference here is to Isaiah:

“ Bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. (Isaiah 1:13)

Notice the subtle but extremely consequential twist Barnabas gives to this text. The words “with iniquity” are omitted (these words do not occur in LXX, from which Barnabas quotes). This new context gives the impression that God’s hatred of Jewish observance is absolute. But Isaiah’s intention was only to condemn empty, hypocritical observance “with iniquity”; that is, observance means nothing if the people observing do not behave ethically. The condemnation of observance in Barnabas, however, is not conditional but global.

Here is more replacement theology in Barnabas:

For the scripture says: “And Moses was on the mountain fasting for forty days and forty nights, and he received the covenant from the Lord, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of the hand of the Lord.” But by turning to idols they lost it. For thus says the Lord: “Moses, Moses, go down quickly, because your people, whom you led out of Egypt, have broken the law.” And Moses understood and hurled the two tablets from his hands, and their covenant was shattered, in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed in our heart, in hope inspired by faith in him. (Barnabas 4:7-8)

Thus we see replacement on many levels. Christians replace Jews as God's covenant people – the Jews have lost their covenant, so now it belongs to the Gentiles. They also replace Jews as owners of the Hebrew scriptures. And the “eighth day” (Sunday) replaces the Jewish sabbath.

Ignatius of Antioch

Another Apostolic Father, Ignatius Bishop of Antioch, lived at the turn of the second century. He mentions Judaism in two of his letters:

But if anyone expounds Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from a man who is circumcised than about Judaism from one who is not. But if either of them fails to speak about Jesus Christ, I look on them as tombstones and graves of the dead, upon which only the names of people are inscribed. Flee, therefore, the evil tricks and traps of the ruler of this age, lest you be worn out by his schemes and grow weak in love. Instead gather together, all of you, with an undivided heart. (Letter to the Philadelphians 6:1-2)³

Do not be deceived by strange doctrines or antiquated myths, since they are worthless. For if we continue to live in accordance with Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace. For the most godly prophets lived in accordance with Christ Jesus. This is why they were persecuted, being inspired as they were by his grace in order that those who are disobedient might be fully convinced that there is one God who revealed himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word that came forth from silence, who in every respect pleased the one who sent him. (Letter to the Magnesians 8:1-2)

This is a key phrase: “For if we continue to live in accordance with Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace.” Early Christianity saw itself in opposition to Judaism, playing a zero-sum game. If Judaism is correct or even legitimate, Christianity must be false. If Judaism is a path to God, then Christ died for nothing. This belief set Christianity against Judaism practically from the beginning.

Justin Martyr

The next generation of Christian writers after the Apostolic Fathers are known as the Apologists, who lived during the second century and turn of the third. One of these was Justin Martyr, who acquired his title after being tortured and executed by the Romans. He is best known for his *Dialogue*

³ Selections from the Letters of Ignatius are taken from Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

with Trypho, an invented Jewish antagonist who may or may not have actually existed. Justin is considered relatively mild, compared to writers who came after him. Yet this dialogue is peppered with frequent castigations not only of Judaism but of the Jewish people. Justin is especially known for explicitly asserting the doctrine of *supersessionism*: that Christians are the new Israel and Jews are no longer God's people. (There are some – I am not one of them – who trace the supersessionist doctrine as far back as the Letter to the Hebrews.)

Here is Justin on supersessionism (replacement theology):

Now, law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one; and an eternal and final law—namely, Christ—has been given to us.... For the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 11)⁴

And here are just a few of Justin's other anti-Jewish comments:

This same law you have despised, and His new holy covenant you have slighted; and now you neither receive it, nor repent of your evil deeds. "For your ears are closed, your eyes are blinded, and the heart is hardened," Jeremiah has cried; yet not even then do you listen. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 12)

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. For you are not recognized among the rest of men by any other mark than your fleshly circumcision. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 16)

This circumcision is not, however, necessary for all men, but for you alone, in order that, as I have already said, you may suffer these things which you now justly suffer. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 19)

You do not tremble at God's threats, for you are a people foolish and hard-hearted. "Therefore, behold, I will proceed to remove this people," says the Lord;

⁴ Selections from Justin Martyr are taken from Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, in Alexander Roberts, Sir James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 1885.

“and I will remove them, and destroy the wisdom of the wise, and hide the understanding of the prudent” (Isaiah 29:14.) Deservedly too: for you are neither wise nor prudent, but crafty and unscrupulous; wise only to do evil, but utterly incompetent to know the hidden counsel of God, or the faithful covenant of the Lord, or to find out the everlasting paths. “Therefore, says the Lord, I will raise up to Israel and to Judah the seed of men and the seed of beasts” (Jeremiah 31:27). (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 123)

Note once again the quotation of Jewish scripture against the Jewish people, a very common antisemitic tactic throughout history. Some try to defend Justin by claiming that before Constantine Christianity was not that powerful, and needed to be aggressive in its rivalry with Judaism for legitimacy and attracting Gentile converts. It is still hard to excuse this kind of hatred, even as a rhetorical device, and it has reverberated throughout history, gathering momentum with each succeeding generation.

Melito of Sardis

The same can be said of another second-century apologist, Melito, Bishop of Sardis. His is the first recorded charge of deicide against the Jewish people – the accusation that the Jews killed Christ. We already find some hint of this in the New Testament. Here are two translations of one relevant passage:

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God’s wrath has overtaken them at last. (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 NRSV)

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators^a of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last. (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 NIV)

There is a very tiny but highly significant difference between these two translations. The NRSV has a comma after “Jews” at the end of verse 14, and the NIV does not. This makes the clause following “Jews” (“who

killed...”) nonrestrictive in the NRSV and restrictive in the NIV, the NRSV version applying to Jews in general, while the NIV only refers to that subset of Jews who actually engaged in any activity against Jesus (presumably the Temple authorities who tried and betrayed him). With the comma, the statement becomes openly antisemitic, especially considering that it was the Romans who actually executed Jesus; Jews under Roman rule could not exercise capital punishment, and certainly not by crucifixion.

We cannot know for certain which of these two versions best reflects the meaning originally intended. The New Testament manuscripts we have do not come with punctuation. The most highly respected critical editions of the Greek New Testament, Nestle-Aland 28 and United Bible Societies 5, both insert a comma, but there are scholars who disagree.

The next part, about killing the prophets, is a charge that became very common in anti-Jewish invective. It may have its origin in Nehemiah 9:26, where Ezra is praying to God and saying: “Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.” We do not know to which “prophets” this text may refer, since none of the three major or twelve minor prophets in the Hebrew Bible is recorded as having suffered a violent death (although there are two obscure references to prophets who were killed in Jeremiah 26:20-24 and 2 Chronicles 24:20-21). Perhaps more relevant is a verse from 1 Kings 19:10 and 14 that Paul quotes in his Letter to the Romans:

Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” (Romans 11:2-3)

This charge is amplified in the speech of Stephen in Acts just before he was stoned:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it. (Acts 7:51-53)

There is ambiguity here as well. Stephen was addressing the members of the Sanhedrin, yet his accusations sound global, indicting their ancestors and possibly the Jewish people as a whole. But while the original contexts might be nuanced, both this passage and that from Thessalonians have had unfortunate repercussions throughout history. Later Christian writers found the accusation of killing prophets a potent weapon in their attacks on Jews, and it surfaces frequently in their work.

While the references in Paul and Acts may have some ambiguity and cannot be considered antisemitic, there is no such ambiguity with Melito of Sardis. He could hardly have been clearer in his condemnation of the Jewish people for the death of Christ. His one intact work that comes down to us is *On the Pascha*, a lengthy sermon on the mystery of Easter. With this work, anti-Jewish Christian invective takes a new step forward. Melito's denunciation of the Jews goes on for many pages; here is just some of it:

This is the one who has been murdered. And where murdered? In the middle of Jerusalem. By whom? By Israel. Why? Because he healed their lame, and cleansed their lepers, and enlightened their blind, and raised up their dead; and therefore he died. (*On the Pascha*, 72)⁵

What strange injustice have you done, O Israel? You have dishonored the one who honored you, you have disgraced the one who glorified you, you have denied the one who owned you, you have ignored the one who made you known, you have murdered the one who gave you life. O Israel, what have you done? Is it not written for you: "You shall not spill innocent blood" so that you might not die the death of the wicked? "I," said Israel. "I killed the Lord." Why? "Because he had to die." You have erred, O Israel, to reason so about the slaughter of the Lord. (*On the Pascha*, 73-74)

You put these things to one side, you hurried to the slaughter of the Lord. You prepared for him sharp nails and false witnesses, and ropes and whips, and vinegar and gall, and a sword and torture as against a murderous thief. You brought forth a flogging for his body, and thorns for his head; and you bound his goodly hands, which formed you from the earth. And you fed with gall his goodly mouth which fed you with life. And you killed your Lord at the great feast. And while you were rejoicing he was starving. You were drinking wine and eating bread; he had vinegar and gall. Your face was bright whereas his was cast down. You were triumphant while he was afflicted. You were making music while he was being judged. You were proposing toasts; he was being nailed in place. You

⁵ Selections from Melito of Sardis are taken from Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, trans. Alistair C. Stewart (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016).

were dancing, he was buried. You were reclining on a cushioned couch, he in grave and coffin. (*On the Pascha*, 79-80)

He it is who, coming to you, healed your suffering and raised your dead. He it is whom you outraged, he it is whom you blasphemed, he it is whom you oppressed, he it is whom you killed, he it is whom you extorted, demanding from him two drachmas as the price of his head. Ungrateful Israel, come to trial with me concerning your ingratitude. (*On the Pascha*, 86-87)

He who hung the earth is hanging. He who fixed the heavens in place has been fixed in place. He who laid the foundations of the universe has been laid on a tree. The master has been profaned. God has been murdered. The King of Israel has been destroyed by an Israelite right hand. (*On the Pascha*, 96)

Tertullian

Tertullian lived in Carthage at the turn of the third century, and was the first theologian of importance to write extensively in Latin. His treatise *An Answer to the Jews* is an extensive polemic against Judaism that veers into antisemitism. It treats a number of anti-Jewish themes. Note his repeated use of Jewish scripture against the Jewish people, in this case Genesis 25:23:

For God ordained "two peoples and two nations" as about to proceed out of the womb of one woman: nor did grace make distinction in the nuncupative appellation, but in the order of birth; to the effect that, which ever was to be prior in proceeding from the womb, should be subjected to "the less," that is, the posterior. For thus unto Rebecca did God speak: "Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be divided from thy bowels; and people shall overcome people, and the greater shall serve the less." Accordingly, since the people or nation of the Jews is anterior in time, and "greater" through the grace of primary favour in the Law, whereas ours is understood to be "less" in the age of times, as having in the last era of the world attained the knowledge of divine mercy: beyond doubt, through the edict of the divine utterance, the prior and "greater" people--that is, the Jewish--must necessarily serve the "less;" and the "less" people--that is, the Christian--overcome the "greater." (*An Answer to the Jews*, 1)⁶

Here are more instances of the use of Jewish scripture to attack the Jewish people:

⁶ Selections from Tertullian are taken from Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, trans. S. Thelwall, in Roberts et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

For circumcision had to be given; but as "a sign," whence Israel in the last time would have to be distinguished, when, in accordance with their deserts, they should be prohibited from entering the holy city, as we see through the words of the prophets, saying, "Your land is desert; your cities utterly burnt with fire; your country, in your sight, strangers shall eat up; and, deserted and subverted by strange peoples, the daughter of Zion shall be derelict, like a shed in a vineyard, and like a watchhouse in a cucumber-field, and as it were a city which is being stormed" [Isaiah 1:7-8]. Why so? Because the subsequent discourse of the prophet reproaches them, saying, "Sons have I begotten and upraised, but they have reprobated me" [Isaiah 1:2] and again, "And if ye shall have outstretched hands, I will avert my face from you; and if ye shall have multiplied prayers, I will not hear you: for your hands are full of blood" [Isaiah 1:15] and again, "Woe! sinful nation; a people full of sins; wicked sons; ye have quite forsaken God, and have provoked unto indignation the Holy One of Israel" [Isaiah 1:4]. This, therefore, was God's foresight,--that of giving circumcision to Israel, for a sign whence they might be distinguished when the time should arrive wherein their above-mentioned deserts should prohibit their admission into Jerusalem: which circumstance, because it was to be, used to be announced; and, because we see it accomplished, is recognised by us. For, as the carnal circumcision, which was temporary, was wrought for "a sign" in a contumacious people, so the spiritual has been given for salvation to an obedient people. (*An Answer to the Jews*, 3)

In the preceding excerpt we see hints of another theme destined to become all too common: the divine rejection of the "disobedient" Jews and their replacement by the "obedient" Christian church. Here is more in that regard:

And so there is incumbent on us a necessity binding us, since we have premised that a new law was predicted by the prophets, and that not such as had been already given to their fathers at the time when He led them forth from the land of Egypt, to show and prove, on the one hand, that that old Law has ceased, and on the other, that the promised new law is now in operation. (*An Answer to the Jews*, 6)

Jews are also responsible for killing Christ:

When Jacob pronounced a blessing on Simeon and Levi, he prophesies of the scribes and Pharisees; for from them is derived their origin. For (his blessing) interprets spiritually thus: "Simeon and Levi perfected iniquity out of their sect," -- whereby, to wit, they persecuted Christ: "into their counsel come not my soul! and upon their station rest not my heart! because in their indignation they slew men"--that is, prophets--"and in their concupiscence they hamstrung a bull!" -- that is, Christ, whom--after the slaughter of prophets--they slew, and exhausted

their savagery by transfixing His sinews with nails. Else it is idle if, after the murder already committed by them, he upbraids others, and not them, with butchery. (*An Answer to the Jews*, 10)

And so because of their faithlessness and crimes, Jews need to be punished:

Therefore, since the Jews still contend that the Christ is not yet come, whom we have in so many ways approved to be come, let the Jews recognise their own fate,--a fate which they were constantly foretold as destined to incur after the advent of the Christ, on account of the impiety with which they despised and slew Him. (*An Answer to the Jews*, 13)

And because they had committed these crimes, and had failed to understand that Christ "was to be found" in "the time of their visitation," their land has been made "desert, and their cities utterly burnt with fire, while strangers devour their region in their sight: the daughter of Sion is derelict, as a watch-tower in a vineyard, or as a shed in a cucumber garden,"--ever since the time, to wit, when "Israel knew not" the Lord, and "the People understood Him not;" but rather "quite forsook, and provoked unto indignation, the Holy One of Israel." (*An Answer to the Jews*, 13)

Since, therefore, the Jews were predicted as destined to suffer these calamities on Christ's account, and we find that they have suffered them, and see them sent into dispersion and abiding in it, manifest it is that it is on Christ's account that these things have befallen the Jews. (*An Answer to the Jews*, 13)

We can see the anti-Jewish rhetoric escalating. There is no longer any ambiguity about "some Jews" or "all Jews." Simply through their refusal to embrace the Christian faith, Jews become guilty of deicide and deserve a fate of suffering.

John Chrysostom

Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom lived at the turn of the fourth century. He had a reputation as an eloquent speaker, hence the name "Chrysostom," meaning "golden-mouthed." The Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches all consider him a saint. He was a prolific writer as well as a popular speaker. His *Eight Homilies Against the Jews* represent a new level of anti-Jewish diatribe. These are eight lengthy sermons of incessant anti-Jewish hatred. There are some who have tried to make excuses for him: he felt Judaism to be in competition with Christianity, and wanted to discourage Christian interest in

Jewish ceremonies and celebrations. This all may be true, but as we will see, cannot in any way be considered a justification or even an explanation of the rhetorical excess. The kind of language found in these homilies did much to condition Christian minds against the Jewish people, eventually eliciting a murderous rage.

Here are words spoken from the “golden mouth” of St. John.

Jews are thoroughly evil:

But do not be surprised that I called the Jews pitiable. They really are pitiable and miserable. When so many blessings from heaven came into their hands, they thrust them aside and were at great pains to reject them. The morning Sun of Justice arose for them, but they thrust aside its rays and still sit in darkness. (*Homilies 1:2:1*)⁷

When brute animals feed from a full manger, they grow plump and become more obstinate and hard to hold in check; they endure neither the yoke, the reins, nor the hand of the charioteer. Just so the Jewish people were driven by their drunkenness and plumpness to the ultimate evil; they kicked about, they failed to accept the yoke of Christ, nor did they pull the plow of his teaching. (*Homilies 1:2:5*)

If, then, the Jews fail to know the Father, if they crucified the Son, if they thrust off the help of the Spirit, who should not make bold to declare plainly that the synagogue is a dwelling of demons? God is not worshipped there. Heaven forbid! From now on it remains a place of idolatry. But still some people pay it honor as a holy place. (*Homilies 1:3:3*)

They live for their bellies, they gape for the things of this world, their condition is not better than that of pigs or goats because of their wanton ways and excessive gluttony. They know but one thing: to fill their bellies and be drunk, to get all cut and bruised, to be hurt and wounded while fighting for their favorite charioteers. (*Homilies 1:4:1*)

Do you see that demons dwell in their souls and that these demons are more dangerous than the ones of old? And this is very reasonable. In the old days the Jews acted impiously toward the prophets; now they outrage the Master of the prophets. (*Homilies 1:6:7*)

Have they not come to every form of wickedness? Have not all the prophets spent themselves making many and long speeches of accusation against them?

⁷ Selections from John Chrysostom are taken from John Chrysostom, *Eight Homilies Against the Jews* (Good Press, 2021).

What tragedy, what manner of lawlessness have they not eclipsed by their blood-guiltiness? They sacrificed their own sons and daughters to demons. (*Homilies* 1:6:7)

What else do you wish me to tell you? Shall I tell you of their plundering, their covetousness, their abandonment of the poor, their thefts, their cheating in trade? the whole day long will not be enough to give you an account of these things. (*Homilies* 1:7:1)

Jews are Christ-killers:

Tell me this. If a man were to have slain your son, would you endure to look upon him, or accept his greeting? Would you not shun him as a wicked demon, as the devil himself? They slew the Son of your Lord; do you have the boldness to enter with them under the same roof? (*Homilies* 1:7:5)

For I am persuaded to call the fasting of the Jews a table of demons because they slew God. If the Jews are acting against God, must they not be serving the demons? (*Homilies* 1:7:5)

What does the Jew say? "The man who said this is my foe. I crucified him. so how am I to accept his testimony?" But this is the marvel of it. You Jews did crucify him. But after he died on the cross, he then destroyed your city; it was then that he dispersed your people; it was then that he scattered your nation over the face of the earth. In doing this, he teaches us that he is risen, alive, and in heaven. (*Homilies* 5:1:7)

We have already seen the Christian use of Jewish scripture against the Jewish people. In this too Chrysostom does not disappoint:

If the present captivity of the Jews were going to come to an end, the prophets would not have remained silent on this but would have foretold it. I gave adequate proof of this when I showed that all their bondages were brought upon them after they had been predicted: the bondage in Egypt, the bondage in Babylon, and the bondage in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. I proved that for each of these the Sacred Scriptures had proclaimed beforehand both a time and a place. But no prophet defined a duration for the present bondage, although Daniel did predict that it would come, that it would bring total desolation, that it would change their old commonwealth and way of life, and how long after the return from Babylon it would come to pass. (*Homilies* 6:2:1)

But Daniel did not reveal that it would come to an end nor that these troubles would ever stop. Nor did any other prophet. Daniel did, however, predict the

opposite, namely, that this bondage would hold them in slavery until the end of time. (Homilies 6:2:2)

It is remarkable how often this device is used against Jews, even today. "If Jews say such things about themselves, why should we not quote it?" How often I have heard this.

So because of their evil deeds and evil nature, God will cast the Jews out and replace them with Gentiles:

From their childhood they read the prophets, but they crucified him whom the prophets had foretold. We did not hear the divine prophecies but we did worship him of whom they prophesied. And so they are pitiful because they rejected the blessings which were sent to them, while others seized hold of these blessings and drew them to themselves. Although those Jews had been called to the adoption of sons, they fell to kinship with dogs. (*Homilies 1:2:1*)

But see how thereafter the order was changed about: they became dogs, and we became the children. Paul said of the Jews: "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the mutilation. For we are the circumcision." Do you see how those who at first were children became dogs? (*Homilies 1:2:2*)

Last but not least, the offenses of the Jews make them fit to be slaughtered:

Although such beasts are unfit for work, they are fit for killing. And this is what happened to the Jews: while they were making themselves unfit for work, they grew fit for slaughter. This is why Christ said: "But as for these my enemies, who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and slay them." (*Homilies 1:2:6*)

We can see a progression from vilification to dehumanization to absolute condemnation. Jews are arch-criminals, they are enemies of God, and so they are not even human. They are no better than dogs or beasts. Even killing them would be justified. Such sentiments toward Jews became commonplace in the Christian world. Anti-Jewish riots perpetrated by Christians inflamed by such ideas became a frequent occurrence throughout Europe.

Martin Luther

As lengthy as this collection of homilies is – and imagine the cumulative effect of listening to page after page after page of this invective – an even lengthier and more influential treatise was penned by Martin Luther. He called it *On the Jews and Their Lies*.

If Protestants had saints, Luther would be at the very top. Nothing he wrote about Jews seems to have diminished his appeal. (One wonders if that would be true had he written such things about any other group, but at some point Christian antisemitism seems to have been taken for granted.) In the beginning of his career Luther's approach to the Jews was more benign. He seemed to sympathize with them, but also had hopes of making them Protestants. When those hopes were not fulfilled, Luther began to express a truly venomous antisemitism. His tract reads like a supercharged Chrysostom: chapter upon chapter of unrelenting hate.

Nothing can substitute for the experience of reading the entire treatise and experiencing its toxic flow without letup. In the excerpts to follow, one can discern a number of recurring themes: the Jews deserve their suffering because God hates them, they misunderstand and distort their own scriptures, and God's having chosen them has gone to their heads.

This last one is very revealing. It becomes clear that Luther resents the Jews for having the very tradition he wants to appropriate as his own, the history and scriptures that produced his Messiah Jesus Christ. He cannot forgive the Jews for having that tradition and especially for still wanting to hold onto it. This is without doubt a strong motivating factor for much Christian antisemitism:

They are very conceited because God spoke with them and issued them the law of Moses on Mount Sinai. Here we arrive at the right spot, here God really has to let himself be tortured, here he must listen as they tire him with their songs and praises because he hallowed them with his holy law, set them apart from other nations, and led them out of Egypt. (*On the Jews, Part III*)⁸

One can neither express nor understand the obstinate, unbridled, incorrigible arrogance of this people, springing from this advantage—that God himself spoke to them. (*On the Jews, Part III*)

And here is just a sample of Luther's general hatred of the Jews:

⁸ Selections from Martin Luther are taken from Martin Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (Eulenspiegel Press, 2014).

In brief, he says in the first commandment that he will be their God. Then, how do you explain that he will not listen to these Jews? They must assuredly be the base, whoring people, that is, no people of God, and their boast of lineage, circumcision, and law must be accounted as filth. If there were a single pious Jew among them who observed these, he would have to be heard; for God cannot let his saints pray in vain, as Scripture demonstrates by many examples. This is conclusive evidence that they cannot be pious Jews, but must be the multitude of the whoring and murderous people. (*On the Jews, Part III*)

Therefore be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously. (*On the Jews, Part III*)

The devil with all his angels has taken possession of this people, so that they always exalt external things their gifts, their deeds, their works before God, which is tantamount to offering God the empty shells without the kernels. These they expect God to esteem and by reason of them accept them as his people, and exalt and bless them above all Gentiles. But that he wants his laws observed and wants to be honored by them as God, this they do not want to consider. (*On the Jews, Part IV*)

Such a desperate, thoroughly evil poisonous, and devilish lot are these Jews, who for these fourteen hundred years have been and still are our plague, our pestilence, and our misfortune. (*On the Jews, Part XIV*)

Some themes very common in antisemitic diatribes appear in Luther. One is the so-called blood libel: that Jews poison Christians' food and water, and especially that they kidnap Christian children and use their blood for cooking.

I have read and heard many stories about the Jews which agree with this judgment of Christ, namely, how they have poisoned wells, made assassinations, kidnapped children, as related before. I have heard that one Jew sent another Jew, and this by means of a Christian, a pot of blood, together with a barrel of wine, in which when drunk empty, a dead Jew was found. There are many other similar stories. For their kidnapping of children they have often been burned at the stake or banished (as we already heard). I am well aware that they deny all of this. However, it all coincides with the judgment of Christ which declares that they are venomous, bitter, vindictive, tricky serpents, assassins, and children of the devil who sting and work harm stealthily wherever they cannot do it openly. For this reason I should like to see them where there are no Christians. (*On the Jews, Part XIV*)

Another very common one is that the Jews killed their prophets. We have already seen this with Melito of Sardis. Here it is in Luther:

For they are the ones who constantly have pursued godless ways, idolatry, false doctrine, and who have had uncircumcised hearts, as Moses himself and all the prophets cry out and lament. But in all this they always claimed to be pleasing to God and they slew all the prophets on this account. They are the malicious, stiff-necked people that would not be converted from evil to good works by the preaching, reproof, and teaching of the prophets. (*On the Jews, Part II*)

The entire course of the history of Israel and Judah is pervaded by blasphemy of God's word, by persecution, derision, and murder of the prophets. Judging them by history, these people must be called wanton murderers of the prophets and enemies of God's word. Whoever reads the Bible cannot draw any other conclusion. (*On the Jews, Part II*)

For just as Korah persecuted Moses, they have never subsequently left a prophet alive or unpersecuted, much less have they obeyed him. So it became apparent that they were a defiled bride, yes, an incorrigible whore and an evil slut with whom God ever had to wrangle, scuffle, and fight. If he chastised and struck them with his word through the prophets, they contradicted him, killed his prophets, or, like a mad dog, bit the stick with which they were struck. (*On the Jews, Part III*)

Another very common antisemitic theme we have seen before is quoting Jewish scripture against the Jewish people. Luther engages in this extensively.

Now, who wishes to accuse God of an injustice? Tell me, anyone who is reasonable, whether it is fitting that God regard the works of those who refuse to hear his word, or if he should consider them to be his people when they do not want to regard him as their God? With all justice and good reason God may say, as the psalm declares: "Israel would have none of me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels." And in DEUTERONOMY 32:21, Moses states, "They have stirred me to jealousy with what is no god.... So I will stir them to jealousy with those who are no people." (*On the Jews, Part II*)

Thus PSALM 95: 10 declares: "For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'They are a people who err in heart, and they do not regard my ways.'" And Moses himself says in DEUTERONOMY 31: 27: "For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are; behold, while I am yet alive with you, today you have been rebellious against the Lord; how much more after my death!" And ISAIAH 48: 4: "Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass..." And so on; anyone who is interested may read more of this. The Jews are well aware that the prophets upbraided the children of Israel from

beginning to end as a disobedient, evil people and as the vilest whore, although they boasted so much of the law of Moses, or circumcision, and of their ancestry. (*On the Jews*, Part III)

Furthermore, if they are pious Jews and not the whoring people, as the prophets call them, how does it happen that their piety is so concealed that God himself is not aware of it, and they are not aware of it either? For they have, as we said, prayed, cried, and suffered almost fifteen hundred years already, and yet God refuses to listen to them. (*On the Jews*, Part III)

This abuse of scripture is very common in antisemitic writing. Luther takes it even one step further. He distorts scripture by reading into it Christological meanings that are clearly not original, then accuses Jews of perverting their own Bible by not accepting those meanings and by staying faithful to the original text.

The example of the Jews demonstrates clearly how easily the devil can mislead people, after they once have digressed from the proper understanding of Scripture, into such blindness and darkness that it can be readily grasped and perceived simply by natural reason, yes, even by irrational beasts. (*On the Jews*, Part XII)

Luther gives many examples, and belabors them for pages upon pages upon pages, to the point where it becomes mind-numbing. Here is just a sample.

Just to vex us, they corrupt the sayings of Scripture. We do not at all desire or require their conversion for any advantage, usefulness, or help accruing to us therefrom. All that we do in this regard is prompted rather by a concern for their welfare. If they do not want it, they can disregard it; we are excused and can easily dispense with them, together with all that they are, have, and can do for salvation. We have a better knowledge of Scripture, thanks be to God; this we are certain of, and all the devils shall never deprive us of it, much less the miserable Jews. (*On the Jews*, Part IV)

First we want to submit the verse found in GENESIS 49:10: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah... until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." This saying of the holy patriarch Jacob, spoken at the very end of his life, has been tortured and crucified in many ways down to the present day by the modern, strange Jews, in violation of their own conscience. For they realize fully that their twisting and perverting is nothing but wanton mischief. Their glosses remind me very much of an evil, stubborn shrew who clamorously contradicts her husband and insists on having the last word although she knows she is in the wrong. Thus these blinded people also suppose that it suffices to bark and to prattle against the text and its true meaning; they are entirely

indifferent to the fact that they are lying impudently. I believe they would be happier if this verse had never been written rather than that they should change their mind. (*On the Jews, Part V*)

If anyone has tortured this text, it is Luther. Nowhere in either testament is “Shiloh” used as a Messianic title. The only Shiloh known in the Bible is an ancient city in Samaria, the place of central worship that preceded Jerusalem. The original Hebrew is obscure, but literally means “until he comes to Shiloh.” Yet according to Luther, Jews are “lying impudently” by not accepting his distortion of the verse.

This is what God, too, has done. He instated his Son Jesus Christ in Jerusalem in his place and commanded that he be paid homage, according to PSALM 2:11-12: "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way." Some of the Jews would not hear of this. God bore witness by the various tongues of the apostles and by all sorts of miraculous signs, and cited the statements of the prophets in testimony. However, they did then what they still do now; they were obstinate, and absolutely refused to give ear to it. (*On the Jews, Part XV*)

Of course the Jews would not hear of it, because this rendering of Psalm 2 is a notorious mistranslation. It translates the Hebrew word *bar* in verse 12, which means “purity,” as if it were an Aramaic word that sounds exactly the same and that means “son.” But this psalm is not written in Aramaic; it is written in Hebrew. The exact meaning of this phrase is uncertain, but probably means something like “worship in purity.” It has absolutely nothing to do with a “son,” whether son of man or Son of God. Yet unfortunately, and shamefully, this mistranslation survives even today in many Christian English bibles.

I will mention just one more, though readers who wish to subject themselves to this will find no shortage of other examples in Luther’s treatise:

For he had had it proclaimed in advance (DANIEL 9:26 and ISAIAH 53:2 and 52:14) that "his Servant, who will startle the kings, will be smitten and afflicted"; but all of this will occur because "God laid on him the sins of us all and wounded him for our transgressions, but he was to make himself an offering for sin, intercede for the transgressors, and by his knowledge make many to be accounted righteous." Such the text clearly states. But the sun has never seen or heard anything more disgraceful than the abuse of this passage by these blasphemous Jews. They apply it to themselves in their exile. At the present we lack the time to deal with this. (*On the Jews, Part XV*)

Of course Israel would apply the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah 53 to themselves, because Isaiah says in several places that the Suffering Servant is Israel! (For an in-depth analysis of Isaiah 53 see my article “How Should Christians Read the Hebrew Bible?” elsewhere on this web site.) Isaiah 53 is not even a Messianic prophecy, much less one about Jesus. Christians have used this passage *homiletically* to describe Jesus, but it is carrying things way too far to insist this is the actual, original meaning of the text and to vilify Jews for not accepting that interpretation. It is important to understand the original meaning of a text before going to a homiletical meaning. This is unfortunately forgotten by many Christian exegetes. It is a badly neglected principle of good biblical exegesis.

The passage from Daniel also has nothing to do with Jesus, but the point has been made and requires no further elaboration. By Luther’s time, Christianity had swallowed Jewish tradition whole, yet could not abide Jews continuing to practice their own tradition on their own terms.

So what are the practical implications of all this? If the Jews really are a satanic people rebelling against God and Christ, what should be done with them? Here we reach the culmination of Luther’s work.

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming. (*On the Jews, Part XIV*)

I shall give you my sincere advice: First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians. (*On the Jews, Part XIV*)

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them the fact that they are not masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are living in exile and in captivity, as they incessantly wail and lament about us before God. (*On the Jews, Part XIV*)

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them. (*On the Jews, Part XIV*)

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. (*On the Jews*, Part XIV)

Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home. (*On the Jews*, Part XIV)

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. The reason for such a measure is that, as said above, they have no other means of earning a livelihood than usury, and by it they have stolen and robbed from us all they possess. (*On the Jews*, Part XIV)

That is because means of earning a living other than money lending were denied to them.

Seventh, I recommend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam. (*On the Jews*, Part XIV)

Such a desperate, thoroughly evil poisonous, and devilish lot are these Jews, who for these fourteen hundred years have been and still are our plague, our pestilence, and our misfortune. (*On the Jews*, Part XIV)

As if this were not enough, Luther repeats his solution to the Jewish problem in Part XVI, with the added flourish that “all who are able toss in sulfur and pitch,” and that “it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire.” No punishment, it seems, is bad enough for the Jews, including murder: “We are at fault in not slaying them” (*On the Jews*, Part XIII).

As extreme as these views are, they are not the sole property of Martin Luther. Neither is this simply rhetorical excess. The measures Luther recommends be taken against the Jews were in fact carried out, time and time again. Religiously based violence against Jews became widespread all over Europe. The accusation that Jews were collectively responsible for the death of Christ, and the refusal of Jews to convert to Christianity, were strong motivating factors. As they were established, both Catholic and Protestant Christianity were intolerant of any persistent presence of the Jewish religion, finding it a defiant and insufferable challenge to the Christian message. If Christ did indeed establish a “new covenant” with the

Gentiles, then the continued existence of the “old covenant” could only be thought of as a rebellion against the will of God.

The ultimate destination of this campaign of hate was almost inevitable. Christian domination of Europe came with widespread, even murderous antipathy toward Jews, all of whom were suspected of complicity in the killing of Christ. Europe became fertile soil for the Nazis’ antisemitic policies. In fact, the Nazis found *On the Jews and their Lies* of such practical value that they publicized and distributed it. A better blueprint for the implementation of their policies could hardly be found.

Adolph Hitler

The Nazis’ war against the Jews is well known. Not so well known may be the origin of Hitler’s antisemitism. There have been vigorous efforts to separate the Nazi program from anything having to do with Christianity. That, unfortunately, is not true to history. Nazi antisemitism, as it turns out, has Christian roots.

Hitler is often presented as some kind of neo-pagan who hated Christianity as well as Judaism. Whatever his feelings about Christianity may have become – and this is debated – it seems that Hitler inherited his hatred of Jews from Christianity itself. There is no question that Martin Luther influenced him. Hitler praises Luther in *Mein Kampf*:

For the greater a man's works for the future, the less the present can comprehend them; the harder his fight, and the rarer success. If, however, once in centuries success does come to a man, perhaps in his latter days a faint beam of his coming glory may shine upon him. To be sure, these great men are only the Marathon runners of history; the laurel wreath of the present touches only the brow of the dying hero.

Among them must be counted the great warriors in this world who, though not understood by the present, are nevertheless prepared to carry the fight for their ideas and ideals to their end. They are the men who some day will be closest to the heart of the people; it almost seems as though every individual feels the duty of compensating in the past for the sins which the present once committed against the great.' Their life and work are followed with admiring gratitude and emotion, and especially in days of gloom they have the power to raise up broken hearts and despairing souls.

To them belong, not only the truly great statesmen, but all other great reformers as well. Beside Frederick the Great stands Martin Luther as well as Richard Wagner.⁹

Frederick the Great instituted oppressive measures against the Jewish population. Richard Wagner was known for his antisemitism. And while Luther himself did not carry out all the hateful actions against Jews that he prescribed as quoted above, Hitler did. It is as if Luther wrote Hitler's playbook, from burning Jewish homes, schools, and synagogues (*Kristallnacht*) to "letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow" as forced laborers in concentration camps.

Thus it is surely no coincidence that Hitler targeted the very same group of people, Jews, whom Christians had by then been persecuting for centuries. In a very early speech (April 12, 1922) Hitler laments Germany's ruined state after the first world war. He blames Jews for a good part of it. Jews, Hitler thought, brought the scourges of the race problem and Marxism to the world, causing great suffering especially in Germany. This is not a unique occurrence among Hitler's writings; he takes the same position in *Mein Kampf*. What is distinctive in this speech is that Hitler draws an explicit connection between his hatred of Jews and Christianity.

And finally, we were also the first to point the people on any large scale to a danger which insinuated itself into our midst - a danger which millions failed to realize and which will nonetheless lead us all into ruin - the Jewish danger. And today people are saying yet again that we were "agitators."

I would like here to appeal to a greater than I, Count Lerchenfeld. He said in the last session of the Laandtag that his feeling "as a man and a Christian" prevented him from being an anti-Semite. I say: *my feeling as a Christian points me to my Lord and Saviour as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded only by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned men to the fight against them and who, God's truth! was greatest not as sufferer but as fighter.* In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and of adders. How terrific was His fight for the world against the Jewish poison. Today, after two thousand years, with deepest emotion I recognize more profoundly than ever before the fact that it was for this that He had to shed His blood upon the Cross. As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice. And as a man I have the duty to see to it

⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 212-213.

that human society does not suffer the same catastrophic collapse as did the civilization of the ancient world some two thousand years ago - a civilization which was driven to its ruin through this same Jewish people.¹⁰

There is no way to separate Hitler's antisemitism from its Christian origins. The tone of Hitler's writing about Jews is very similar to Luther's. Hitler took Luther one critical step further: he actually implemented Luther's anti-Jewish agenda, adding his own brutal embellishments.

The claim that Hitler was anti-Christian, and that his antisemitism had nothing to do with Christianity, is not credible. However his view of Christianity may have evolved, surely the seeds of his antisemitism were implanted within him by his Catholic upbringing. There is no doubt that Christianity deeply influenced Hitler; in a speech on March 23, 1933 he called Christianity "the unshakable foundation of the morals and moral code of the nation."¹¹ Church theology already came to see Jews as a social contaminant. Hitler took that perception to the nth degree.

Without Christianity, the Holocaust could not have happened. Christian hatred of Jews had been growing for centuries, preparing European soil as fertile ground for Hitler's anti-Jewish project. Conditions in Europe were perfect for the execution of Hitler's hateful ideas. Many in Europe not only failed to oppose Hitler's genocidal scheme, they welcomed it.

Hitler's antisemitism did not spring all of a sudden from nowhere. It was the logical progression of nearly two thousand years of irrational Christian hatred justified by the Christian religion as it developed up to Hitler's time. I have not even touched upon the long antisemitic tradition among Roman Catholic popes. But I think the material presented here is enough to make the point.

Christianity was supposed to bring good news to the world, but for the Jewish people it truly became a curse.

So What Happened?

¹⁰ Adolf Hitler, *My New Order*, ed. Raoul de Roussy de Sales (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941), 25-26 (italics in original).

¹¹ Hitler, *My New Order*, 157.

So how did a teaching based upon self-transcending love evolve into a demonic faith with murderous consequences for Jews? And is antisemitism necessarily a part of Christian faith, or is it an aberration?

It might be possible to trace the problem to a radical split between two interpretations of first-century Jewish apocalypticism. Apocalyptic theology grew from the Jewish experience of persecution and occupation by foreign powers. We find traces of it in the Hebrew Bible, especially in Daniel, but it really flourished in the intertestamental period and during the time of Jesus. Central to apocalypticism was an expectation of God's judgment of the world: a just God certainly could not allow these terrible things to go on indefinitely, and would put an end to them and finally set the world right. The agent of change would be a redemptive figure known as the Messiah, who would bring with him a transformation of the world and with it a final judgment.

This theology carried with it a fateful ambiguity. It grew specifically as a response to Jewish suffering. At the same time, the Messiah was expected to judge and redeem the entire world. It was not always clear how those two fit together.

These two sides were represented on the one hand by Jewish followers of Jesus, led by James, and on the other by Paul. The Jewish disciples, later to be known as Jewish Christians, for the most part felt that anyone joining their group naturally had to become Jewish, since their movement was a Jewish one. Paul focused on the universality of the message, and felt that it applied to all people regardless of background.

This led to a clash of differing perceptions. The Jewish Christians felt that Paul was making converts to Judaism, a faith now including the Jewish messianic expectation centered around Jesus, without requiring them to follow Jewish observances. That, to these Jewish Christians, was a serious breach of Jewish law. Paul, on the other hand, saw these Jewish Christians, who became known under the demonizing label of "Judaizers," as limiting the covenant to themselves and standing in the way of salvation history.

I do not believe Paul saw himself as founding a new religion, and certainly not one that was supposed to replace Judaism. Paul was content to let Jews remain Jews, observing their Torah. He just did not think this

observance would be of help in escaping the final judgment – and in this he was at odds with many of his fellow Jews. He also was adamantly opposed to mandating Jewish observance for Gentiles.

It was important to both Jewish Christians and Pauline Christians that the message of Christ be preached to all, and so at the Jerusalem Council narrated in Acts 15 they reached a compromise. Gentiles would not have to become Jewish, but only agree to a few fundamental requirements, and Paul would be in charge of that mission. The Christian faith was not to be thought of as a new religion replacing Judaism, but as a way to salvation encompassing everyone, Jews as well as Gentiles, Jews remaining Jews and Gentiles remaining Gentiles.

The word “salvation” is pivotal. It did not mean to Paul what it means to most of us today. Today we think of salvation as escape from the tortures of an everlasting hell through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul never speaks about hell. For Paul, salvation meant acquittal at the last judgment, which he believed was soon to arrive. Those who survived the last judgment would participate fully in the general resurrection, which was expected to accompany the new messianic age.

We tend to forget that Paul expected the end very soon, probably within his lifetime, but this is important. Paul felt the coming of the new age was imminent (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, 1 Corinthians 15:51). And so he felt a sense of urgency, to spread the message as far and as wide as quickly as possible. While Paul quotes Jesus directly only very rarely, there is evidence in his letters that he did absorb Jesus’s teachings and tried to implement them in his spiritual communities. However, driven as he was by apocalyptic urgency, he did not make those teachings his main selling point when trying to win converts. Rather, he preached the need for baptism into the new faith, to be joined to Jesus Christ as the messianic agent who would secure the forgiveness of sins. His message was, in fact, parallel to that of John the Baptist: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4).

Note that, just like John’s message, *Paul’s message did not imply a doctrine of penal substitution*. The doctrine that Jesus’s death on the cross was vicarious punishment for all of our sins was, later on, read back into Paul’s writings, and the way they are often translated seems to favor it, but the doctrine is not Pauline. For Paul, we are saved through participation in

Jesus's righteousness and faithfulness (*pistis Christou*), joining with him so that we might be saved with him.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.
(Romans 6:3-5)

We can see now why most Jews did not accept Paul's message. There are at least two important reasons:

1. Judaism already offered a mechanism for the forgiveness of sins. No Messiah, especially not one who died, was necessary for that.
2. The Messiah was expected to preside over the defeat of the ruling powers and to transform the world, bringing universal peace and harmony. This Jesus did not accomplish.

So we have three groups: Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah, Jews who did, and Gentiles who did. Among the second group there were some, like Paul, who believed Gentiles could enter the new faith just as they were. But there were also more traditional Jews who saw the Messiah as coming to save the Jewish people (which included anyone willing to convert to Judaism), and who believed that those wishing to join the messianic community must, according to Jewish law, become Jewish. Apparently at first James held this view (Galatians 2:12), but later, after the Jerusalem council, he changed his mind (Acts 15:19).

At the time, Paul's theology seemed sufficiently plausible to gain a sizeable following. But as time passed, adjustments had to be made. The expected end, together with the final judgment, did not arrive. And so, as the years went by and the Christian movement became predominantly Gentile, the meaning of salvation changed, to the way most Christians now tend to think of it.

Gentiles did not read the Jewish scriptures (which include not only the Hebrew Bible but the New Testament as well since it was written by Jews) the same way Jews did. They took them much more literally than a Jewish audience would have. Jews had and were developing a tradition of

midrash, which may be understood as the use of symbol, allegory, and legend to express spiritual truth. Many New Testament passages, particularly in the Gospels but also in Paul and Hebrews, are written in midrashic style. Jewish and Gentile audiences naturally would have understood such passages differently.

So Gentile Christians began to think of a literal hell with real fire. (Augustine's descriptions of hell in the *City of God* are particularly horrendous.) And salvation became detached from the coming of the messianic age, and instead was thought of as relating to the fate of the individual after death. This last point is central. The original salvation in apocalyptic theology was *corporate*, relating to the people as a whole. The later idea of salvation was *individual*, and became much more a personal concern.

Conclusion: The Failure of Christian Theology

This shift in emphasis contributed heavily to the divergence of Christian theology from the original content and intent of scripture. It influenced the way Christians interpreted scripture, especially Paul. Many saw Paul's writings, and particularly his Letter to the Romans, as setting forth a program for individual salvation, which is not what Paul intended. By "predestined" (Romans 8:29) Paul meant the people of God, for whom God planned a saving path through the ministry of Christ, and whom anyone could join by coming within the orbit of Christ's influence and becoming his disciples. But Calvinists especially (and also Augustinians) took this very literally, believing that God chose in advance only a select few to be saved, and among them only Christians. Instead of universalizing the covenant, Christianity in its orthodox form merely replaced one "chosen people" with another, and then radicalized the concept to refer to one's eternal destiny.

This led to an ironic situation in which Christianity, and especially Protestantism, proclaimed a faith diametrically opposite to what Jesus taught. A key watchword of Protestantism is *sola fide*: "salvation through grace by faith alone" and "apart from works of the law." This came to be understood as belief in Christ as Lord, God, and savior is everything, and nothing we can do, not even our best good deeds, count for anything in God's sight when assessing our worthiness for salvation.

But what did Jesus teach? Here is Jesus's pathway to eternal life:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." (Luke 10:25-28)

This is a thoroughly Jewish response, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus also said: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Clearly what we do, and especially how we treat others, is critical to how we will be judged.

And what about faith? Jesus said this: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Just believing in Jesus will avail you nothing, if you don't actually *do* the will of God.

Judaism is a religion based upon right action. A new religion based upon faith and downplaying the importance of acting rightly could not be expected to have widespread appeal among the Jewish people. And especially not a faith in a Messiah who did not transform the world.

So once Christianity began to crystallize in the direction it eventually took, it became irrevocably at odds with Judaism. But could they not at least peacefully coexist? The way Christian theology evolved made that impossible.

In defining itself apart from Judaism. Christianity swallowed Jewish tradition whole. It appropriated Jewish history and scripture as its own, and completely redefined the Hebrew Bible, transforming it into a new book called the "Old Testament." It ignored the historical context of many passages in the Hebrew scriptures, reinterpreting them as predictions of Jesus Christ. It even rearranged the order of the books to end with Malachi's messianic prediction of Elijah the prophet announcing the great day of the Lord, to be followed by John the Baptist's proclamation in Matthew's Gospel.

And it did not stop there. Christian theology turned the Jewish Bible into an anti-Jewish document. The church found in Hebrew scripture proof that the

Jews are an unworthy, rebellious people who broke their covenant and whom God has rejected, to replace them with Gentile Christians as the new people of promise. As we have seen over and over again, the church developed a habit of quoting Jewish scripture against the Jewish people. It is as if the church had to marginalize Jews in order to justify its own existence.

Thus the entire Hebrew Bible assumed a new identity as little more than an introduction to the New Testament and a prefiguring of the advent of Christ. It was also used to justify Christian replacement theology. And as we have seen in the excerpts quoted above, Jews were viciously attacked if they did not accept this reconstitution of their holy scriptures.

There is an even deeper reason why Judaism and Christianity could not coexist. We find a hint of it right here in Paul: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). Christians understood this to imply that if Judaism, the religion of Christ's own people no less, could deny Christ's divinity and resurrection yet continue as a legitimate path toward God and the forgiveness of sins, then Christ died for nothing. A Judaism that survived threatened the foundations of Christianity: this is critical in understanding Christian antisemitism. Therefore Judaism had to be delegitimized. Christianity could not tolerate a faith whose very existence testified that Christ's suffering and death were unnecessary after all, just another of life's myriad senseless tragedies.

Therefore Christianity had to convince itself and demonstrate to the world that without Christ the Jews were cursed. And so attacks on Judaism, and inevitably on the Jewish people, increased in intensity. Christianity, as it evolved in the Catholic and Protestant churches, needed to damn the Jews to save itself.

And so "one can get there from here": there is a traceable line from the anti-Judaism of the early church fathers to the Holocaust. Orthodox church theology has failed. It is based upon misreading both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and it is morally bankrupt. It needs to be reworked from top to bottom. In particular, classic doctrines such as the Divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the Atonement ("Christ died for our sins"), and the nature of salvation need to be reevaluated and changed to be more faithful to Jesus's ministry and teaching. That will be the subject of the following chapters. We will take a critical look at orthodox Christian theology, and

then consider a better alternative in a new vision for Christianity more faithful to what Jesus actually taught and more respectful of his Jewishness. Without this reevaluation there will always be an antisemitism problem within Christianity.

We must do this without losing the real vision. Discussions of this type tend to polarize into apologists, who defend everything traditional regardless of historical and exegetical inaccuracies and adverse ethical consequences, vs. antagonists, who just want to tear down everything, leaving only a spiritual vacuum. I am neither. I am very sympathetic to the Christian message, *rightly understood*, and see it as an extension of Jewish prophecy. Preserving that message while avoiding the ethical problems attached to it in its orthodox form is the purpose of this book.