

UNDERSTANDING THE HOLOCAUST

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☆ CHAPTER ONE

Religious Anti-Semitism

ANTI-JEWISH FEELINGS DURING ANCIENT TIMES (to the Mid-Fourth Century)

Pagan Resentment

The writings of the Greeks and Romans tell us that anti-Jewish feelings existed in those ancient civilizations. As pagans, or idol worshippers, most early peoples held polytheistic beliefs that included the worship of not only many gods and goddesses but also of emperors who claimed to be “divine.”

Judaism, in contrast, is based on the belief in one spiritual God in heaven, whom Jews serve in part by honoring many laws governing behavior. Trouble and hard feelings arose between Jews and their neighbors whenever these laws prevented Jews from participating in community activities such as bowing down to pay homage to emperors or idols, eating certain foods during festivals, or working on the Jewish sabbath. Occasionally, proud emperors punished them. Their Roman and Greek neighbors frequently called the Jews atheists, or complained that they were lazy, superstitious, and unfriendly.

However, except for this type of occasional rumble, Jews got along fairly well with their ancient neighbors. Outright attacks on Jews rarely occurred. Many leading statesmen who cared little about their subjects’ religious practices gave Jews permission to practice their Juda-

ism. Some Roman nobles, in fact, accepted the Jewish faith themselves. And as of A.D. 212, Jews were fully qualified Roman citizens. Many even held public office.

Early Christians and Jews

While some emperors granted Jews privileges, early Christians did not fare as well.

The first Christians had been practicing Jews. Jesus Christ and his twelve apostles were Jews. The Old Testament, too, was written by Jews. Judaism, however, had split into two groups. One group came to believe that Christ was the Messiah, or savior. They became Christians, or the followers of Christ.

The other group refused to accept Christ as the Messiah. These Jews who rejected Christianity are the persecuted group who have clung to their Judaism to this day.

When Christianity became a distinct, separate religion from Judaism, the Romans began to persecute the Christians as heretics, or believers in an unacceptable faith. For three centuries Christians suffered horrible punishments. Romans accused them of blasphemy, or contempt for God. They blamed Christians for causing droughts and famines and other calamities. To punish them, Roman authorities destroyed churches and holy books. Many Christians were killed—some by being thrown to the lions in the Roman sports arenas.

Despite pressure from Roman authorities,

Christianity began to take hold and eventually spread to many parts of the Roman Empire. Then in A.D. 312 the tables were turned for Christians and Jews. From that point on, Judaism, not Christianity, was out of favor with the Roman authorities.

Discussion Explain how Judaism is the “parent” religion of Christianity.

CHRISTIAN PERSECUTIONS DURING THE MIDDLE AGES IN WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE (to A.D. 1500)

Introduction

In 312, Emperor Constantine the Great made Christianity the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire. This now meant the government was responsible for carrying out Church affairs. Even after the Roman Empire fell in the late 400’s, Church and government remained tied together for the next 1,200 years. For Jews, as well as for other nonbelievers, this spelled trouble.

Attempts to Convert Jews

In the newly Christianized Roman Empire, Church and state authorities expected all citizens to accept Christianity. Church leaders who took over the responsibility of converting Jews did so in earnest, for they believed Christianity to be the only true faith.

Conflict soon arose, for few Jews were willing to give up their own religion. Angry Church leaders began to regard Jews as evil people.

At the end of the fourth century, a new charge blackened the Jews’ “evil” image even further. They were blamed for having caused the crucifixion of Christ. This charge was to create

much suffering for Jews throughout the Middle Ages, for now the name of “Christ-killer” followed them wherever they went.

Throughout the medieval period, Christians continued to pressure Jews to convert. In some cases, Jews were even forced to be baptized, or to undergo the rite of admission to the Christian Church. Once baptized, whether by force or consent, a Jew was fully accepted into the Christian community. However, state and Church law strictly prohibited a baptized Jew from ever returning to his original faith of Judaism. If he did, he was condemned and tried in court as a heretic. Heresy, or opposition to Church teachings, was a major crime against Church and state. The penalty was death.

In the sixth century, Pope Gregory I (590–604) forbade the practice of forced baptism. He urged Christians to use peaceful means to convert Jews. Many Christians followed his advice. They constantly exposed Jews to Christian teachings but at the same time protected them from harm. On the other hand, there were Christians who believed Jews should be made to live in shame as punishment for their stubbornness. And in some places, the forced baptisms continued.

Laws Against Jews

Some Church leaders became anxious that Jews might sway Christians against Church beliefs. They urged Christians to stay away from Jews. Finally, to segregate both groups, both Church and state passed anti-Jewish laws. Another reason for the laws was that the authorities hoped the restrictions would make Jews so uncomfortable that they would change their minds about becoming Christians.

These discriminatory laws made Jews second-class citizens. They were not allowed to hold public office, to be in the army, to own land, to engage in any craft or profession, or to marry Christians. No Jew could testify in court against a Christian, but the reverse was not true.

Furthermore, Jews were forbidden to own Christian slaves. Since agriculture was the leading occupation of these times, and everyone routinely used slaves as the main source of labor, this law put Jews, many of whom were important farmers, right out of business. In addition, all Jewish property was taken and given away to others. And Jews had to pay taxes just for being Jewish!

Jewish religious activities were curtailed, too. The celebration of the festival of Purim was outlawed, and Passover had to be postponed until after Easter. The building of new synagogues was also forbidden. Furthermore, any Jew caught trying to convert a Christian to Judaism received the death penalty.

Jews soon became social outcasts. Denied of all rights to own property and to earn a living, they went off by themselves to live in separate communities called **ghettos**. There they engaged in many crafts to support themselves. But in the outside world, they had no choice of jobs.

They turned to trading. At first, they dealt only with other Jewish communities in widely scattered areas. Later, they developed and expanded trade routes across Europe to Asia and North Africa and peddled their wares between medieval cities. Because cities were the places where Jews earned their livelihood, they became urban rather than rural residents.

In spite of the harsh anti-Jewish laws, there was not too much hostility between Jews and most Christians during the so-called Dark Ages (500–1000) of the medieval period. Although they were outsiders, Jewish traders fulfilled a need in the Christian community, for they were the only ones who dared foreign trade routes. Business dealings created much interaction between the two groups. Moreover, in some medieval cities, Christians and Jews still lived side by side.

The strongest anti-Jewish feelings came mainly from the higher-ups, the Church and state authorities. Yet they too recognized the

positive effect Jewish trading had on the economies in their lands.

Discussion Even though the Jewish trader had business dealings with the Christian community, how was he still an outsider?

The Crusades Lead to Pogroms

Eventually anti-Semitism began to infect the masses. By 1096, the relatively calm relationship that Jews had enjoyed with the general population had broken down completely. This was not only the year of the first Crusade but also the real beginning of the pogroms, or violent attacks on Jews by angry mobs of non-Jews.

The Crusades, a series of wars waged by Christian leaders between 1096 and 1271 to reclaim the Holy Land of Jerusalem from the Muslims, became a nightmare of persecution for Jews.

Christians thought that Muslims, as infidels or nonbelievers in the “true faith,” had no right to occupy the Holy Land, the birthplace of Christianity. In 1096, as European knights from France and Germany set out to recapture it, great throngs of people—monks, nobles, commoners—joined them. Some were inspired by the holy cause. But the greater number of Crusaders were peasants looking not only for an excuse to break away from their feudal landlords but also for a chance to adventure and plunder.

The Crusaders began a mass march down the Rhine River Valley in France and Germany, through Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), and across the continent. An important trade route, the Rhine Valley was the center of the Western European Jewish community.

All along the way, troublemakers and fanatics whipped up the mobs to a religious frenzy. “Why wait to get to Jerusalem to kill the Muslim infidels? What about the Jewish infidels in our midst? Hep! Hep! Death to the Jews!” the

Crusaders shouted. The unruly mobs began a wave of attacks. The synagogue, or Jewish temple, which always stood at the center of Jewish communities, made Jews easy to find.

Jews tried to battle the mobs but were overpowered. Church and government leaders also tried to protect them. Local bishops worked out “protection contracts” promising to send out their militias. They hid Jews in their castles. Kindhearted town leaders and townspeople also opened their homes up as shelters. Often these friendly gestures saved lives. In other instances, however, the frightened bishops’ militias deserted Jews whenever the mobs became too great. Then the crowds massacred the Jews.

Sometimes the mobs gave the Jews an ultimatum: baptism or death. But most Jews remained steadfast to their faith. Some even committed suicide to avoid baptism.

Thousands were massacred. Synagogues were burned down, homes were looted, and entire Jewish communities were destroyed. Within a six-month period during the first Crusade alone, the Crusaders wiped out nearly one fourth of the Jewish population living in Germany and France—approximately 12,000 lives. The wildest massacres occurred in cities such as Speier, Worms, Cologne, Metz, Ratisborn, Treves, and Prague.

Surviving Jews reacted to the bitter experience of the Crusades in two ways: (1) Thousands left German lands and headed toward Central and Eastern Europe. Many made new homes in Poland, where King Casimir, eager for the expansion of trade and commerce in his domain, had invited them to settle. (2) Those who stayed behind sought greater protection from future pogroms. Realizing the protection contracts with the bishops’ militias had been ineffective, they turned to kings and noblemen whose authority and stronger armies offered greater security.

The price was high. Before long, the royalty began to drain as much “protection” money out

of Jews as they could. Some Jews became the “private purses of kings.” It became common for a king to give “his Jews” to his creditors as a way of paying off his debts!

- Discussion Questions:**
1. Even in the face of persecution, why do you think some Jews decided to remain at home?
 2. How would those who fled to the East also face many hazards?

Libels Lead to More Pogroms

During the twelfth century Jews also became victims of hideous libels, or false charges. These myths grew out of the ignorance, folklore, and superstition common to the Middle Ages, a time of witchcraft, demons, and spells.

One charge, which began in England and spread to Germany and France, accused Jews of ritual murder. This “ceremony” supposedly involved the kidnapping of a Christian child in order to drain him of his blood. This Christian blood was reportedly used as a wine substitute and for baking **matzo**, or unleavened bread, for Jewish Passover services. The blood was also said to remove a foul body odor from Jews. This rumor spread panic among gullible people, who reacted by drawing their blinds and keeping their children under lock and key during Passover time each year.

Another libel originating in Germany charged Jews with host desecration: stealing the wafer that is used to represent the body of Christ in the communion service of Christian churches, and then stabbing or puncturing it. There were rumors that the host bled, or became whole again, or caused the Jew who stabbed it to convert to Christianity.

As non-Christians, Jews also were accused of being devils or devils’ agents out to destroy and take over the Christian world. In Vienna during the twelfth century, Jews were compelled to wear

hats with horns. Medieval paintings actually show Jews with horns growing out of their heads and long pointed tails trailing behind them.

Of course, all these charges were barbaric and ridiculous. Many popes and government leaders urged the masses to ignore the myths. Nevertheless, superstitious people didn't listen. Now viewed as child-killers, devils, and religious enemies, Jewish communities came under attack every time a child was missing in a community or other disasters occurred. Jews were dragged off to secret trials and tortured until they "confessed." The torturers used the confessions to keep the myths alive. Then violent pogroms wiped out more thousands of innocent lives.

These libels forced many fearful Jews to leave their homes in Western Europe and seek refuge elsewhere. Many joined the trek to Central and Eastern Europe.

Discussion How do all the libels reflect
Question: religious bias?

Moneylending, Another Black Mark Against Jews

After the eleventh century, Jews lost their important role as traders. Non-Jews, motivated by the new trade routes and new markets the Crusades had created, took over. The medieval economy was also changing. New markets had stimulated industry. Growing cities were replacing the old feudal manors. And money was becoming the most important ingredient in the newer economy.

With no choice of jobs open to him, the Jewish trader turned to an occupation no one else wanted—moneylending. Condemned by the Church as wicked and immoral because it did not represent an honest day's work or the sweat of a man's brow, usury, or collecting interest on loans, was considered an "un-Christian" practice.

In spite of this attitude, more and more people began to need and to borrow money. This increased demand only made money more

scarce. Everyone began to approach the Jewish moneylender for loans: merchants who needed capital, peasants whose crops had failed, kings who needed funds to pay mercenary soldiers, and even churchmen who wanted to build large cathedrals. Soon many people were in the Jewish banker's debt.

The Jewish banker was no longer an outsider. He was a very important part of an ever-growing money economy. However, this new "inside" role worked against him. Envious people began to look upon him as a competitor. He had what everyone else wanted—money.

Selfish kings and noblemen added to the moneylenders' problems. They not only demanded a percentage of the Jews' profits earned on interest but also continually pressed them for money for big loans, money for "Jewish taxes," and money for protection. To meet these demands, Jews were forced to charge higher and higher interest rates. Then outraged borrowers complained that Jews were greedy and money-hungry.

Kings and noblemen used Jews to cover up their own greed in yet another way. They raised taxes. And they assigned the unpopular role of tax collector to the Jewish financiers. Now anger about high taxes fell not on the upper classes who were the real villains, but on the unfortunate Jewish bill collectors.

All this activity put the Jew into a vicious money-circle. The rich grew richer, the poor grew poorer, and resentment toward the Jew as the middleman grew stronger and stronger. Oftentimes moneylenders were not even paid back. Some Crusaders who joined the movement to the Holy Land did so simply to get out of debt, for leaders of the Crusades had used the cancellation of all debts to Jews as an incentive to get people to join the cause. Borrowers or tax-weary subjects sometimes went to extremes. They even killed Jewish moneylenders.

By the end of the thirteenth century, kings in debt, with an eye on Jewish wealth, used a new

anti-Semitic weapon: total expulsion of Jews from their countries. All Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from France in 1306 and 1394, from some parts of Germany in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century. By doing this, the monarchs had simply erased their debts and had filled their royal treasuries with Jewish monies.

With expulsion, anti-Semitism took on a new dimension. Jews were now persecuted not just for religious reasons, but for their economic position as well.

Jews did not return to France and England until the seventeenth century. Not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did they begin to migrate back to Spain and Portugal. By this time, non-Jews had long since taken over banking.

Discussion If the Jewish moneylender rendered a valuable service, why did he become unpopular in the Christian community?

The Black Plague, “A Jewish Conspiracy”

Early in the fourteenth century, a folktale that took root in France accused the Jewish people of conspiring to subvert and take over the Christian world. One rumor had it that Jews had appointed lepers to poison all the wells of Europe. Another story depicted the Muslim King of Spain as the villain who persuaded Jews to poison the wells.

When the black plague struck Europe in 1347, it killed one of every three Europeans. Now the world conspiracy myth exploded again. Fearful, superstitious people pinned the blame for the black death on “Jewish well-poisoners.”

“Hep! Hep! Death to the Jews!” again rang out in the streets. Jews were dragged off to questioners who used vile tortures to make them “confess.” The “confessions” supposedly

revealed that Spanish Jews had worked with other European Jews to poison all the wells in order to exterminate the entire Christian community. The poison? A typical witch’s brew of frogs, lizards, spiders, pieces of human hearts and, believe it or not, sacred host wafers.

For two long years, a violent wave of pogroms swept over Europe. The mobs used the popular execution method of the time: death by fire or hanging. Hundreds of communities in France and Germany were wiped out. Tens of thousands of Jews were killed.

And all for nothing. The truth was that (1) many Jews had died of the plague themselves, and that (2) the plague is not a water-borne disease but one carried by rat fleas.

As before, Church and government authorities had tried very hard to put a stop to the persecutions. Yet once again their words had gone unheeded.

The Jewish Badge Singles Out the Jew

The idea of marking the Jew with a badge or special piece of clothing began in medieval Europe in 1215 with Church law. For religious reasons, authorities wanted to prevent contact between Christians and Jews. By identifying the Jews with a symbol, Christians were more easily able to avoid them.

The use of a Jewish marker spread across Europe, varying in color, shape, and form from place to place. In France and Germany, where it was worn first, it was a yellow circle of felt—representing a gold coin, the symbol of Jewish involvement with money. In some areas, Jewish men were required to grow beards. Other identifying articles included a belt, a pointed hat, a black wide-brimmed hat, a long black cloak, a yellow star, a green or white patch, or other things, depending upon the place.

All Jews—men, women, and children—were compelled to wear the distinguishing badge or article of clothing. If caught not wearing it, a

Jew was heavily fined. In Sicily, even Jewish shops were marked with a circle.

Wearing the badges created many problems for Jews. No longer could they roam the countryside as free men. They became easy targets for abuse. The only others to wear such markings in the medieval communities were heretics and prostitutes. This badge was a wedge that drove Christians and Jews further and further apart.

The Ghetto Segregates Jews

By the fifteenth century, most Jewish communities in Western Europe had vanished. Pressured by the Crusades, libels, pogroms, and badges, many Jews had fled to lands east of the Rhine River. Kings had also expelled them from England, France, Spain, Portugal, and some German lands.

The reason Jews were not expelled from German lands altogether was that at this time there was no German nation as such. Germany was a group of “little Germanies,” a widely scattered patchwork of German lands each inhabited by German-speaking peoples and ruled over by a king or noble. While some German kings expelled Jews from certain sections, others allowed many to remain or to resettle in their neighboring lands.

From the twelfth century on, the Church law forbidding Christians and Jews to dwell together had not been strictly observed. However, starting in 1555 this old law requiring separate living quarters was again enforced. A Church decree from Rome forced Jews living in the Papal States, or Church-controlled areas around Rome, to be confined to ghettos—Jewish sections of cities. The ghetto idea then spread to Jews in German lands. Eventually it affected Jews living in other Christian lands, too.

In some ways, ghettos were like prisons. Many were surrounded by high walls. Only two gates were permitted and both were guarded by Christian sentries. No Jew was allowed past the

gates during the daytime except for business dealings in the Christian communities, and never without a Jewish badge. At night and always during Christian holidays, the ghetto gates were tightly locked. After curfew, any Jew caught in the city was severely punished.

In some cities, the ghetto consisted of only a few streets barred by gates. Most others, however, were small towns within the larger cities. Inside the ghetto walls lay homes, shops, a hospital, the school, and the synagogue. Synagogues were never permitted to be built higher than the surrounding churches of the outer city. But the houses of the ghetto were another matter.

The ghetto was never allowed to expand. Over the centuries, the Jewish population increased many times over, of course. To compensate for lack of space, Jews were forced to build upward, often adding as many as ten stories per building. Thus, from the Jewish ghetto arose Europe’s first skyscrapers. But the overcrowding led to many problems. The ghettos became firetraps. Raging infernos often took many lives. So did improperly supported buildings that collapsed from too much weight and strain. Diseases spread into epidemics.

How did Jews in ghettos earn a living? Forbidden to trade, to lend large sums of money, or to enter any of the professions, some Jews became usurers for the poor of the Christian cities. Others became hucksters and peddlers who left the ghetto gates each day to call out and sell their wares in city streets. A Jewish huckster was permitted to sell only secondhand goods, never anything new.

Within the ghetto walls, however, Jews went about their daily routines. They participated in many trades and professions to fulfill their own needs. Denied education in Christian schools, they created their own schools within the ghetto, for the Jewish love of learning was a most important value. And although still forced to attend Christian services from time to time, they were able to practice their Judaism without

interference.

Contact with the outside world remained open for business purposes, but at times it became unfriendly. Pogroms and expulsions still occasionally took place. Fanatics, roused by libelous rumors or during religious holidays such as Easter, led mobs to attack the ghettos. And Jews continued to be taxed severely. They had to pay not only overly high rents for living in ghetto homes, but also taxes for entering and leaving Christian cities, taxes to get married, taxes for the birth of every child, and taxes to bury their dead. Money still remained the Jewish ticket to life.

In the beginning, some Jews looked upon enforced ghetto life with relief. The walls and guarded gates offered at least some protection from attackers. As time went on, however, life in the ghettos became stifling, monotonous, and dreary. Many Jews, especially young ones eager for life's experiences, became bitter about being penned up. This bitterness was, of course, directed at the Christian world that kept them there.

As the Middle Ages drew to a close, the rift between Jews and Christians had become complete. Jews were to remain shut out from the mainstream of European life for several generations. This sad period between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries is sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages of European Jewish history.

Discussion Imagine yourself as a Jew living
Question: in a medieval ghetto. Describe your feelings.

A Look Backward

We've come to the end of the Middle Ages. We've taken a very brief look at more than a thousand years of Jewish life under Christian rule in Western Europe. It is a sad story of separation. What began as a religious separation ended up as a wide separation of two peoples. Jews were on one side, Christians on the other.

After so long a time of so little contact, neither group was able to judge the other as real flesh and blood people. The thinking of the times had a lot to do with this tragic gap. Superstition, fear, and emotions ruled people's minds. Reason, common sense, and toleration had not yet entered the scene.

The Negative Stereotype of the Jew

Years of religious prejudice had produced a negative stereotype of the Jew in most Christian minds. No consideration was given to individual differences; all Jews supposedly had the following characteristics:

1. *Not a part of the regular community, Jews were strange outsiders, wanderers, without allegiance to any land. They couldn't be trusted.*
2. *Jews were devils or devils' agents who had rejected Christianity and crucified Christ. God had therefore condemned them to wander homeless all over the world and to suffer. They deserved all the punishment coming to them.*
3. *Evil Jews were out to take over the Christian world. That was why they spread out and developed "connections" everywhere. They were well-poisoners, child-killers, religious enemies.*
4. *All Jews cared about was money. They cheated and grabbed all they could get. They did not work for a living.*

Jewish Response to Christians

Naturally, Jews developed negative attitudes toward Christians, too. Memories from past pogroms made them wary, fearful, and suspicious of Christians. They clung together because they viewed the Christian world as cruel and

hostile. They also came to believe that the only time Christians showed them any kindness whatsoever was when money was involved. In short, they viewed Christians as enemies.

RELIGIOUS ANTI-SEMITISM SLOWLY FADES IN THE MODERN WESTERN WORLD (from A.D. 1500 on)

Introduction

With the discovery of America in 1492, the world “opened up.” Great changes that began to affect mankind drew the dark Middle Ages to a close. And while life for Jews in the ghettos remained frozen until the nineteenth century, the changes in the outside world gradually affected them, too. Religious anti-Semitism slowly slipped by the wayside. The ghettos opened up. However, among German-speaking peoples, all these changes occurred slowly. Consequently, religious anti-Semitism there was not only slower to die but also quicker to grow in a new form.

Great Changes Affect People’s Thinking

The agricultural feudal system, with its landlords and peasants, had broken up in most of Western Europe by 1500. Cities had grown. Trade and travel were expanding. And the number of factory workers and middle-class merchants was ever increasing.

The monarchs of Spain, France, and England had united their feudal lands to form nation-states. Their subjects now showed loyalty to one king and one nation. Nationalism, or a feeling of pride in one’s country and cultural traditions, began to take hold among the peoples in these new nations.

The Renaissance, or a renewed interest in learning and books, spread beyond the educated clergy and nobility to the common man. Startling scientific discoveries and new inventions began to usher in a Machine Age and an Industrial Revolution. The fear, ignorance, and superstition of the medieval period began to fade.

The Power of the Church Is Weakened

Industrialization brought about a newer mercantile economy in which the power of the new nation-states became totally dependent on wealth, gold, land, trading, commerce, and productivity. As this happened, kings soon decided that the business of the state should be not the saving of souls but the gathering of money. This thinking led to a conflict of Church and state interests.

There was dissension within the Church, too. A German priest named Martin Luther (1483–1546) bickered with the Church over certain practices. By the sixteenth century, most of the German part of the Holy Roman Empire had broken away from the control of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome.

Soon other reformers within the Church began to question Church practices. At this point, the unity of the Church was shattered. These religious arguments led to the Reformation, the period during which Christianity split into the Protestant and Catholic churches.

The Reformation Leads to Religious Tolerance

A separation of Church and state affairs followed. The Reformation was plagued by over one hundred years of terrible religious wars waged between Catholic and Protestant monarchs. Jews played no part in these religious struggles. However, after the Thirty Years’ War