

Robert Chazan, THE JEWS OF MEDIEVAL WESTERN CHRISTENDOM

THE CHRISTIAN LEGACY

Understanding about the Islamic legacy gives us an understanding of the background of Jewish life after the year 1000 in western Christendom as so many immigrants came from a Muslim society with a rich cultural heritage and brought with them certain political, social and cultural expectations. In addition, knowledge of the Islamic treatment of Jews shows us interesting contrasts with the treatment in Christian lands. It helps us understand the Jewish experience in the Christian world, how uncomfortable the relationship between the Jewish and Christian people has been, and also how Christianity encountered its Jewish rival with complex viewpoints.

Firstly, the differences are connected to the different origins of the two religions and their rise to power. Islam originated from early on as a system that incorporated both politics and religion in an inseparable, integrated way. Muhammad fulfilled both the role of a prophet and a military conqueror. However, the founder of Christianity, Jesus, possessed no worldly power, but merely sent his followers to teach the world a new truth. It was only centuries later that the message of Christianity became so successful that it took over the Roman Empire.

As Christianity provides no religiously prescribed way for running the politics of a society, the Jewish community found themselves in an environment with two separate systems of power: the leadership of the church (which reflected a certain level of continuation) and worldly powers (being more temporal and fluctuating). In a sense, this division of authority provided a small benefit for Jews as they could play off one authority against the other. On the other hand, the ecclesiastic (i.e. Church-related) authorities, as they were to some level detached from worldly power and responsibilities, could afford to impose limitations on Jews without worrying about the negative economic implications. In any case, the Jews had to struggle with the reality of divided and sometimes opposing authorities.

What had a much more important impact on the fate of the Jews was the importance for Christians to missionize and convert others to their faith. Christianity had spread through persuasion and this is an inherent and essential feature of the Christian faith. There were of course times where this drive to missionize was put on hold, but that never lasted long. There were good reasons not to target the Jews too much: they were such a small number anyway, and they were known for not being responsive to missionary effort. On the other hand, there were also reasons why Jews should be a missionizing priority.

A second difference between Islam and Christianity has to do with how they relate to Judaism in historical perspective. Islam was established on the Arabian Peninsula, in a new place, among a new group of people, with an entirely new revelation, and a new Holy Book. While acknowledging the prior

religions, Judaism and Christianity, as authentic, it nonetheless claimed to have replaced it. Christianity on the other hand, developed *out of* Judaism. Being in some ways still connected to its Jewish origins but at the same time rejecting them, Christianity developed a complicated and troublesome relationship with Judaism. This attitude greatly impacted the development of Jewish communities in medieval Christendom. Initially, before Jewish communities were present, this complex relationship was merely theoretical thinking, with little practical effect on the Jews who were mostly absent, being located within the Muslim realm. With the increase of Jews in the Christian world, this complex relationship stopped being mere theory, and became practically important for the Christian majority, thereby actually affecting the history of the Jews.

Because of its origins, Christianity had a complicated and ambivalent relationship with Judaism which included both elements of deep respect as well as deep hostility. Within Christian tradition, Jews have been viewed in some ways as the noblest of people, and in others as the most wicked.

Let's now trace the origins and early development of this ambivalent Christian attitude. One might think that it was only the teachings and policies of the Roman Church that affected the Jews of Medieval Western Christendom. However, at the same time, it was also the ideas that the common Christian population harbored about their Jewish neighbors. In other words, both the political decisions from the top and the images of the general population about Jews influenced Jewish life.

It is important to understand that Christian and Jewish relationships were not static between 1000 and 1500. Religious thinking generally develops and changes. We will see that both ecclesiastical policies and the general image of Judaism among the population gradually deteriorated, bringing about a decline of Jewish circumstances. But first, let's look at the period before the year 1000, which would determine the circumstances for Jews in medieval Christendom.

Because of the lack of objective data, we cannot describe the history of Jesus in a scholarly manner. The sources we do have all date from many decades after Jesus which was after the understanding of his message had gone through considerable change. But, one may ask, if we don't have objective sources, why are scholars so sure that Jesus' original message had been altered by the time it was written down in Christian scriptures? This insight is based on several historical facts.

It seems quite obvious that Jesus and his followers were an integral part of the Jewish community of first century Palestine, and shared its assumptions, its concerns, and its uncertainties. The Jews in that time and place lived under Roman domination. Some were comfortable with Roman rules, while others could not tolerate it. The Jewish community was politically and religiously divided.

Fortunately, we do have some texts from the time of Jesus. First century Jewish historian Josephus informs us about the factions that were competing during that period. Furthermore, we have the writings of the Dead Sea Sect, a split-off group of Jews who were wiped out by the Romans during the suppression of the Jewish revolt which began in the year 66. Their writings inform us that this

community reinterpreted the age-old writings of the prophets as specifically relating to their community and predicting events in their time.

In the time of this Dead Sea community, Jesus of Nazareth preached his vision of the spiritual bond between God and Israel. His message was conveyed in the language of his (Jewish) community. Like the Dead Sea group, he may have been dissatisfied with the religious leadership, but he was considered a Jew by both friends and foes. However, unlike the Dead Sea community, Jesus and his followers did not leave us any of their writings.

The first writings from the Jesus movement were written by a Greek speaking diaspora Jew (i.e. who lived outside of the ancient homeland). His name was Saul of Tarsus, but once he was accepted to the vision of Jesus he took the name Paul. Having never encountered Jesus first hand, Paul did not write in the Hebrew or Aramaic that Jesus and his followers had spoken. Most of his teaching was addressed to Jews outside of the land of Israel or to non-Jews. While not familiar with Jesus' original message, Paul's transfer of Jesus' perceived message to another language and another social circle signifies a deviation from the teachings of Jesus and his Palestinian Jewish followers. Moreover, Paul's writings and his life as described in the Book of Acts show considerable disagreement between him and with the original followers of Jesus.

Paul's attitude towards Jews is both complicated and ambiguous. From the information on Paul provided by the New Testament we see both respectful and degrading elements towards Judaism. While respecting Judaism's past greatness and believing in its future redemption, Paul nonetheless condemns the Jews who refuse the truth of Christianity.

Gradually the Jewish component within the (originally Jewish) Christian movement dwindled, while the non-Jewish Christians came to dominate the new religion. This brought about certain changes, not just socially, but also culturally, linguistically and even spiritually. It is important to realize that the Gospels, from which we derive our information about Jesus, were written after these changes had taken place. As a result, the description of Jesus in the Gospels does not fully depict him anymore in his original Palestinian context.

The newly founded Christian faith perceived itself as somehow still connected to its Jewish origins. Aspects of Jewish thinking had been integrated into Christianity. Christians realized that Jesus and his initial followers all had been Jews, that they abided by the Hebrew Bible, and that they expected the fulfillment of the Jewish prophets' predictions. On the other hand, Jesus had criticized the established Jewish leadership, which naturally did not mean he wasn't part of Judaism anymore.

While the original Jesus movement had identified themselves as Jewish, this rapidly changed when the movement evolved into an overwhelmingly gentile Christendom. When it became clear that the vast majority of Jews rejected Jesus' message and did not accept its followers and leaders, adherents to the new movement felt the need to break away from Judaism, define themselves as a separate religion, and to prove the superiority of their new faith over the old one. What follows was the

conviction that the Jews were was in error, unable to recognize evident proofs that Jesus was the Messiah.

The Jewish refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the predicted Messiah was exacerbated by the Jews' involvement in Jesus' death. Even though the crucifixion of Jesus was brought about by the Romans, the accounts in the Gospels minimize the role of the Romans and place the responsibility on the Jews. From Christian perspective Jews' refusal of Jesus was not an internal Jewish affair anymore; instead the Jews committed an unprecedented grave sin which evoked divine anger. God rejected his initially chosen people and transferred his blessings unto his new people, the Christians.

The decision Christian scholars ultimately made (called Canonization) which writings to include in their Scripture, strengthened the ambivalent attitude of Christianity towards Judaism even more. The Christian Bible was now composed of both an Old Testament (the Jewish Bible) which provided the predictions of what was to happen in the later part, the New Testament. The first part however, centered around the Jews as God's covenantal people while the New Testament contested the Jewish understand of the Old Testament, i.e. the Jewish Scriptures. In Christian perception, Christianity came to teach the true meaning of the Hebrew Bible which the Jews failed to understand correctly. In comparison, Islam had produced an entirely new Holy Book and did thus not feel the necessity to bother with Jewish (and Christian) Scripture.

As Christians identified their belief system as superior to Judaism, this came with a negative imagery of Judaism and Jews. Before the year 1000, when most Jews lived under Islamic rule, this negative Christian attitude had minimal impact on Jews¹. However, as a larger number of Jews settled in the lands of Christendom, this attitude had an ever-bigger impact. Jews were considered the people who once were cherished by God, but who had lost their spiritual position and mission. Especially recalling the crucifixion² generated strong anti-Jewish feelings.

On another topic besides religious arguments and images, by the early fourth century, the Christian community had grown considerably, and was ready to organize itself and protect its interests. At the Council of Elvira, several decrees were issued to curtail the influence of the Jews. They were not to cohabit with Christians, nor to bless Christian fields. Eventually, any possible situation in which Jews could exercise power over Christians was removed, such as slave-owning, public office, and marriage.

It was perceived that the Jews could incur special dangers upon the Christian faith, the reason being that the Christian faith had its roots in the Jewish scriptures. Due to this, it was feared that Christians could be open to the Jewish arguments for rejecting the Christian message. If Christians were exposed to Jewish thought, they might be influenced and lured away from the true (Christian) faith. Therefore, the Christian community had to be protected against this Jewish threat.

¹ Even though in Islam too, there is a negative imagery of Judaism as being corrupted. Yet somehow, before the year 1000, the effect on Jews of this imagery had often been less under Muslim rule than it would be under Christendom.

² Islam doesn't believe that Jesus was crucified, so this argument did not play a role in Islam. However, in anti-Jewish texts and polemics you do find the imagery that Jews have killed prophets, and tried to kill Muhammad.

A radical change took place when the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (who ruled from 324 to 337) changed from persecuting the Christians to converting to Christianity, thereby paving the way for Christian power over the entire empire. When the Roman Empire turned into a vast state ruled in the name of Christianity, one of the decisions that had to be made was how to deal with the Jewish minority. Judaism remained a tolerated religion (as it had been before Constantine), but certain restrictions were put in place to protect the Christian community from Jewish influence. Jews were not allowed to accept converts, and they were not allowed to circumcise their slaves³. On the other hand, converts from Judaism to Christianity were enjoyed legal protection. The situation created within the context of the now Christian Roman Empire in which the Jewish rights were both recognized and restricted, became a blueprint for the future of Jewish life in western Christendom.

Very important in defining a way forward was the influential bishop of Hippo, Augustine. He formulated a Christian theology and a political theory based on a combination of Greco-Roman, Israelite and Christian principles. Augustine is much clearer than Paul was in his approach to Judaism, but he did incorporate Paul's ambiguous statements. Augustine understood Constantine's need to legitimize a Jewish presence within the Christian world, and he provided him with a theological foundation.

Augustine was aware of the greatness of early Jewish history. Because the Jews had recognizing the one true God, their history was blessed, especially as they positively stood out against Greek and Roman paganism. On the other hand, the Jews had misunderstood God's plans, which led them to reject Jesus as the Messiah and to insist on his execution. Both these positive and negative aspects are part of Augustine's teachings.

Augustine's theology provided the Roman Empire with a way to allowing Jewish presence within a Christian society. According to his theology God had punished the Jews, not by killing them but by expelling them from their homeland and scattering them. God did this for a specific purpose. Therefore, Jews should not be killed, but allowed to live as a minority among Christians.

According to Augustine, God wanted the Jewish people to be preserved as a living proof of the truth of Christianity. This would work in two ways. Firstly, as all the predictions of Jesus had come from Jewish prophets, the Jews were the ones who could vouch for the divine origin of their prophecies. However, the Jews themselves did not accurately understand the meaning of these prophecies.

Secondly, the Jews showed the world what it means to be rejected by God. As a result of their sinful refusal to accept Jesus, God had punished them with their loss of independence, the destruction of their holy city, and with being exile from their promised land. Thus, the Jews were a living illustration of the principles of sin and divine punishment.

Finally, Augustine makes the point that God is a God of mercy. Even though God has become furious with the Jews for their failures and has taken away their conventional role in history and given

³ As Jewish law requires

them over to harsh punishment, nonetheless, He still offers love and hope even for those He has severely punished. Therefore, the Jews must be preserved within Christian society because eventually they will repent and embrace the Christian truth. Once again, we see Paul's ambivalence continued in Augustine's teaching: There is an attitude of compassion in the expectation that God will once again embrace the Jewish people, but this comes at the price of them giving up their Jewish heritage.

Missionizing among the Jews thus was presented by Augustine as an act of love and a human extension of God's mercy towards the Jewish people. However, missionizing also had another motivation. By not being responsive to Christianity's mission, the Jews were perceived as an undermining threat. Successful missionizing would be the most effective way to remove this threat.

In short, Christianity's legacy in relation to Judaism was extremely complex and two-sided. It was both respectful of the Jewish past but also looked forward to a future in which Judaism would be surpassed. It did acknowledge Jewish rights within Christian society and at the same time set up limitations to these rights. Finally, it committed itself to preach among the Jews in an effort to dissuade them from their religious identity.