

JEWISH CHRISTIAN RELATIONS PAST AND PRESENT

THE JEWS IN THE PAGAN-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO THE EMPEROR JULIAN

by

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Introduction

The introduction presents biographical sketches of the Pagans and Christians who played the most important and active part in their polemic against each other. On the Pagan side mention is made of Celsus, Porphyry, the Emperor Julian and Symmachus; on the Christian side, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Origen, Eusebius, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Arnobius, the *Acta Martyrum*, Ambrosius, Orosius and Augustinus. An attempt is made to reveal their character by studying their attitude towards sacrifices and demons.

Chapter One - The Jewish Factor in the Polemic

This chapter is devoted to a general analysis of the place of the Jews in the Polemic. Scholarly literature dealing with the Polemic presents the opinion that the Jews participated in it during the period from the Bar-Kochba revolt to the days of the Emperor Julian (and even afterwards) in no less a degree than in the Hellenistic period and during the first hundred years of Christianity. Some scholars (e. g. J. Parkes) suggest that the Jews were fighting the Church for the souls of the pagans; others (e. g. J. Vogel) argue that there existed a pagan-Jewish alliance to fight Christianity, their common foe. Still other scholars (e. g. Y. Baer) admit the existence of a Christian-Jewish polemic, but emphasise that while the Christians and Jews fought each other, both were waging a fierce battle against idolatry. Reading the sources themselves, however, I reached the conclusion that such explanations are not compatible with the simple meaning of the pagan writings, and that even the character of the Christian treatises "*Adversus Judaeos*" does not necessarily testify to the existence of a Christian-Jewish polemic.

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The pagans contributed a realistic character to the literary polemic by turning it into part of their political and police activity directed towards the liquidation of Christian cells or defence against them. One must deal, therefore, with the pagan point of view in the period before the rise of Christianity as well as in that after, showing their motives and what changed in their attitude towards the Jews. There is no reason to suppose that the pagans were "born" anti-Semites, though Jewish monotheism seemed weird to polytheists, and the Jews' contempt for idolatry and idolaters might have awakened feelings of resentment and hatred. But if one looks into the relations of Palestinian and Diaspora Jews with pagan neighbours and governments, there appears a parallel between the political-social sphere and the spiritual. The generally positive attitude concerning Jews that dominated pagan thinking of the third century B. C. E. yields place to a negative and hostile one. The change derived from several causes: the emergence and actions of the Hasmonean kingdom; the struggle of the Jews of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt for civil rights; and, not least, the intensive propaganda campaign conducted by Hellenistic Jewry against the polytheistic religions. This last, with the help of the spiritual atmosphere that existed in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, must have brought about the conversion to Judaism of pagans in such numbers as to worry the adherents of polytheism, and was a constant factor in attracting their animosity. Pagans such as Tacitus saw in conversion to Judaism the cause of the corruption of virtues and the decline of morals in the Empire. Furthermore, Jewish rebelliousness in Palestine and the Diaspora (the great revolt of 66 C. E., the rebellions of Trajan's and Hadrian's reigns) constituted a danger to the security and integrity of the Empire. If all the above-mentioned factors created the pagan-Jewish polemic, one might expect its decline or even cessation with their disappearance. And indeed, from the middle of the second century C. E. there is a recognisable change in pagan-Jewish relations. This may be ascribed to the spread of a spirit of moderation and acquiescence among the Jews as regards their subjugation by the Romans, and also to the seeming subsidence of the conversion wave, most probably due to the physical destruction of Hellenistic and Palestinian Jewry.

But Judaism produced a replacement that came forth to conquer the pagan world. From the middle of the second century C. E., the activity of the Christian "mission" was intensified. This phenomenon, and the social separatism of the Christians which caused their evasion of military and civil service, was viewed with increasing alarm by the authorities. The pagan polemical literature against the Christians testifies that the threat to the Roman state played a major part in its creation; factors similar to those which elicited the pagan polemic against the Jews produced a pagan polemic against the Christians. This theory about the transmutation of the pagan-Jewish polemic into a pagan-Christian one receives further support from an *argumentum*

e silentio. In the Hellenistic-Roman period the pagans composed special polemical treatises against the Jews, and were answered by them, whereas from the second century C. E. no work of such a character is extant, and not even the title of such a work is mentioned in the sources. This hiatus is filled by pagan and Christian polemical-apologetic writings. It is difficult to explain this fact unless one assumes that it reflects the polemical reality. This analogy is somewhat weakened by the existence of the Christian writings "*Adversus Judaeos*"; however, no Jewish work has been preserved which might have caused their composition or which reacted to them. If one examines the content of these writings against the Jews and their schematic construction, it becomes clear that their title is misleading and that they were not addressed to the Jews in particular but to pagans, sectarians, heretics and even catechumens. The fact that the existence of the Jews and their keeping of the Law constituted an internal difficulty for the Church – because of their "objective" attraction for Christians and would-be Christians – does not prove that a real Christian-Jewish polemic existed. This impression is strengthened by the nature of the exchanges between the *Minim* (heretics), sometimes obviously Christians, and the Jews in the Talmudic sources. In Talmudic literature, the *Minim* are depicted as the initiators of questions concerning scriptural passages, and are lightly dismissed by the sages. The disputes seem to be more of a nuisance and academic in character rather than of actual or crucial importance to the disputants.

The importance of the Jewish factor in the Polemic was different for each side. The Christians sought by the help of the Old Testament to escape the accusation of revolutionary renewal; but, apart from ancient roots, the Old Testament offered them a text for building their theology and ethics as a counterweight to pagan doctrines. From Hellenistic Judaism, Christianity acquired the allegorical system of biblical exposition and a whole body of apologetic arguments and proofs. The pagans, on the other hand, tried to sever this connection of the Christians and the Holy Scriptures by emphasising the position of the Jews against them. Each side could use all things relevant to Judaism without being handicapped by the counter-argument that the Jews were partial to it, since the position of the Jews was thought to be hostile "neutrality" towards Christians and pagans alike. One must therefore understand that the praises and recriminations that pagans and Christians alike heaped upon the Jews and their doctrines were but instruments for attacking an opponent. The pagans recognised that the basic teaching of the Christian religion originated in the Law of Moses (cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, 33, 65), whereas the Christians were conscious that the pagans intended to "prove Christianity to be untrue" through showing "its falsehood by attacking its origin in Judaism" (ibid. I, 22. Chadwick's translation).

This chapter traces the development of the Polemic around a central theological problem, the religious myth, and examines the Jewish factor in it. It is worth noting that the polemic was not a theoretical dispute among theologians but an endeavour to defend the doctrines and traditions upon which the missionary propaganda of each side was based. The success of their preaching depended upon proving their superiority and credibility.

For a discussion to take place, there must be certain premises accepted by both sides. Among pagans and Christians (as well as among rabbis and Hellenistic Jews), it was taken for granted that recognition of God is inherent in every person or that he arrives at it by contemplation of the workings of the universe. The heavenly bodies are even regarded as divinities by pagans.

There is also no difference of opinion as regards the existence and necessity of a divine revelation. For a Christian this revelation was embodied in the Bible, whereas the pagan one was scattered in books of poetry, oracles, laws and so on, the rituals being a question of custom and tradition. Although this material had its limitations, arising from the mythical frame of thought in which it was formed, both sides adhered to it as it was. They were nevertheless obliged to have recourse to a greater or lesser amount of allegorical exposition in order to demonstrate their opinions and beliefs. And even though each side denied the other the right to allegorise its own writings, the legitimacy of allegory for the solution of problems arising from the religious myth was accepted by all. (Arnobius is in this respect extraordinary, but then he did not pay any attention to the “biblical myth” and the problems of its adaptation by the Church). Josephus served the Christians as a model, especially in his attacks on pagan mythology and in the question of antiquity, while Philo put in their hands the tools for constructing their theology and for defending themselves against the attacks of pagans whose point of departure was Greek philosophy.

Examples of positive and negative attitude towards the “biblical myth”, which appear indiscriminately in the polemical writings of the pagans, are cited. The pagans argue on scriptural grounds against the rejection of the injunctions (*mitzvot*) by the Christians and praise the Jews for keeping them, and reject – again on scriptural grounds – the special status with which the Christians endowed Jesus, making him the foundation of their belief. On the other hand, they belittle the biblical cosmogony, and complain bitterly of the degradation of God’s image caused by the description of deeds such as that of Phinehas. In all these cases, one must remember that the treatises are directed against the Christians, and that the use made of anything connected with Judaism is only a means and not an end by itself.

Another theological-philosophical problem in the Polemic, divine providence, is here considered. As regards the question, who is an impious man and what is impiety, there existed full agreement among Jews, pagans and Christians, as we have seen. They all emphasised that the most impious man is not he who denies the existence of god or the gods, but the Epicurean type who denies the existence of Providence as concerns the world, nature, nations and individuals. The aims of the Polemic forced the adoption of an anti-Epicurean, popular concept of Providence, in spite of the fact that the Polemicists themselves might have held a very different view. Examples of this are found in the Jewish (Philo), Christian (Origen) and pagan (Julian) camps. The work of Providence is described as a spiritual relationship or intellectual contact between man and his Creator (Julian); the value of the goods of this world is so belittled that it is of no importance whether the impious enjoy them, since they are valueless in the eyes of God and the righteous (Philo); it is explained that there is no graver punishment for the atheists than the fact that they do not know God (Origen). All these theories about Providence are in contradiction to the conceptions expressed by the same men in their polemical treatises, and it is worth noting that Philo's and Julian's unusual statements appear in writings that were not intended directly for the Polemic.

In contrast to the agreement on this principle, there is a sharp divergence between pagans and Christians about the powers implementing divine providence. The pagans were of the opinion that the demons were the gods of the nations who supervised and cared for those entrusted to them. The Christians, on the other hand, believed the demons to be wicked powers of darkness, and exerted themselves to prove that the demons were identical with the gods mentioned in pagan mythology. The Christians time and again repeated, as an irrefutable statement, the Psalmist's verse "that all the gods of the nations are idols"; "idols" was translated by the Septuagint as "demonic powers", and this authority put aside the distinction made by the pagans themselves between good and evil demons.

The Jewish people's claim to be the elect can be seen as evidence of a special and particular care on the part of an all-embracing Providence; this is why it appeared in the discussion of Providence. The pagan attitude on this question testifies clearly to the change that the Polemic underwent. At first, when the pagans were involved in polemical exchange with the Jews, they unequivocally rejected this presumption. This stand altered when the Church, whose adherents now came mostly from pagan circles, began to dispute the election of Israel, saying it was only temporary and that it had passed to the Church, the True Israel. Celsus (Origen, *ibid.* V, 25) dismissed the Jewish pretensions to election adopted by the Christians when

he stated that they (the Jews) did not differ in any respect from other nations maintaining the ancestral traditions delivered to them by their special god. Julian even used the Old Testament in his attacks upon Christianity, citing biblical verses to show that the Jews were indeed elected by their particular national god – just as other nations were. Such a god was entitled to order them “Thou shalt not worship other gods”. If, on the other hand, the Jews and Christians insist that the god of the Old Testament is the supreme god and not merely a national one, then, retorts Julian, their false notions about his jealousy of the lesser gods and their worship denigrate from his highness and are much inferior to the pagan conception. (See *Contra Galilaeos*, 99E ff; 148 B ff.)

Chapter Four – Culture and Subjugation, the Religious Inference of Human History

These polemical motifs, culture and subjugation, derived directly from the general consensus about the existence of a divine providence in the world, as shown in the preceding chapter. There was a continuity in the usage of these motifs at least from the second century B. C. E. Just as the Neo-Platonic polemicists of the Empire depended upon their pagan predecessors of the Hellenistic period, so did the Church Fathers make use of the apologists of Hellenistic Judaism. Only one thing changed – the object; in the Hellenistic period, the Jews served as a target for pagan missiles; now the Christians occupied the place of the Jews.

The motifs can be summarised thus: the Jews were culturally inferior to the Hellenes; the Jews were subjugated to the Hellenes. Later this latter motif was amplified to include the present condition of the Jews and the persecutions that befell the Christians. The pagans argued that the Greeks and Romans were endowed by the gods with an extensive empire, and that the arts and sciences were developed by their talented men with divine help. And since the benefits of the gods are bestowed in proportion to man's piety and correct worship, the self-evident conclusion is that the religion of the Jews (and of their Christian “heirs”) is defective, whereas pagan worship is the true one. In treating the theme of subjugation, the Church Fathers arbitrarily divided Jewish history into two periods: before, and after, the coming of Jesus; this division they needed also for internal theological reasons. As far as the culture motif was concerned, the Christians adopted the arguments developed in early Jewish-Hellenistic circles and by Philo and Josephus according to which the forefathers of the Jewish people were also the progenitors of the sciences, and in which there was no doubt as to the religious and ethical superiority of the Law of Moses to other nations' constitutions. In some cases, the Christians even surpassed the Jews in their praises.

The culture motif was connected in the Polemic with a wider question: is the status of the Barbarians, who according to a general consensus were the inventors of culture, superior to that of their pupils, the Hellenes, who developed it and brought it to perfection? Since the Christians put themselves on the side of the Hebrew-Barbarians as against the Hellenes, Julian was forced as a last resort to replace a racial antagonism with a religious one, viz. polytheism, both Barbaric and Hellenic, as opposed to Jewish-Christian monotheism.

Reviewing the Talmudic sources, one realises that the rabbis saw no need to react to the cultural motif; the Talmudic expression *Chokhmat Yewanit* (Greek Wisdom) does not signify Greek philosophy and literature but only the art of the Greek language. The motif of subjugation, however, was an internal problem that the rabbis had to face whether or not "nations were chastising Israel" about it. Rabbinical reactions to this challenge had no systematic character, i. e. they did not emerge from an attempt to explain human history in general after contemplation, but were intended only to solve a religious difficulty in such a way as to satisfy the people and to instil in it a spirit of hope and encouragement.

Summary by the author

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