

ANTI-JUDAISM IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

by DAVID ROKEAH

In a recent article, Norman Ravitch surveyed the continuing debate among Catholic and Protestant theologians and scholars over Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. He notes that

According to the leading participants in this reassessment of Christian-Jewish relations, two events, closely related, have led to the theological revolution: the attempt, albeit somewhat belated, to assimilate the meaning of the genocide of European Jews during what the Germans often call *die Hitlerzeit*: and the subsequent establishment of the state of Israel in the contemporary Middle East.¹

The theological revolution, writes Ravitch, is best exemplified by the position of Father Gregory Baum who was “in the 1960’s, the author of a book designed to deny the still somewhat ‘underground’ allegation that the New Testament was anti-Semitic.”² But by 1974, when Rosemary Radford Ruether completed her book, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, “Father Baum had been shaken to his very depths by the theological revolution over the Christian-Jewish nexus and was now willing publicly to write [in his “introspective” introduction to Ruether’s book] that he had been mistaken. Simply put, he was now convinced by Mrs. Ruether and her fellow theological revolutionaries

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1. Norman Ravitch, “The Problem of Christian Anti-Semitism,” *Commentary* 73:4 (April 1982), 41–52: p. 41.

2. *Ibid.*

that anti-Semitism was as native to Christianity as mother's milk to a new-born babe."³

Mrs. Ruether's argument runs as follows:

The anti-Judaic tradition in Christianity grew as a negative and alienated expression of a need to legitimate its revelation in Jewish terms... *It continues on in the Church Fathers*, and even to this day, as an ongoing expression of this same need by the Church to legitimate its Christological midrash by insisting that this actually represents the true meaning of the Jewish Scriptures and is the divinely intended fulfillment of Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets. It is not enough for the Christian tradition to hold this opinion... As long as "the Jews," that is, the Jewish religious tradition itself, continues to reject this interpretation, the validity of the Christian view is in question.⁴

And Ravitch adds:

All the hatred and persecution of the Jewish people Mrs. Ruether finds explicated by this need to make the Jews finally admit that the Church is right and they wrong about the coming of the savior foretold in the Scriptures. A suffering Israel is needed by the Church for its own self-understanding and justification.⁵

One not insignificant factor that contributed to the hostile attitude of early Christianity towards Judaism was the acute pagan-Christian polemic and the related persecutions. In my recent book, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict*,⁶ I took up this rather neglected matter and suggested a new presentation of the interreligious conflict based on a reinterpretation of the sources. I now propose to examine in more detail the various elements that created and shaped the familiar ancient — and consequently the modern — attitude of Christianity towards Judaism.

I

Just as the homilies of the Sages generally reveal faithfulness to the Biblical approach,⁷ so was it natural that the Church Fathers expressed their solidarity with the position of the New Testament towards the Jews. And although one may find in the Gospels positive statements and a favourable attitude towards the Jewish people and the Jewish Torah, the dominant note is still negative and hostile. This was indeed to be expected, if we remember that the Gospels were compiled in the Yavneh (Jamnia) period, which saw a sharp conflict between the Jewish Pharisaic leadership and the Christian sect. On the other hand, the Church strove to improve its image in the eyes of the Roman authorities and, because of this, we can

3. *Ibid.*; see Ruether (n. 4), pp. 1–22. esp. p. 6.

4. R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1974), p. 94.

5. *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

6. Jerusalem, Leiden, 1982. [A review of this book will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Immanuel* — Ed.]

7. Compare my article, "On the Attitude of the Sages towards Gentiles and Proselytes," (Heb.) in *Mahalkhim* 5 (1971), pp. 72–73.

observe *inter alia* the Church's efforts to soften the severe impression of the Crucifixion by transferring the guilt as well as the responsibility for it from the governor Pontius Pilate to the Jews—even though, as is well known, crucifixion was a punishment inflicted on rebels by the Roman authorities as a matter of course. But this handicapped the Church in attracting pagans, particularly those in governmental positions. The process of rehabilitating Pilate, and thereby the Roman Empire, was intensified in the second and third centuries. Were it not for the fact that the (Catholic) Church had reached a ruling position in the Empire, Pilate would have become a saint of the Church; Pilate and his wife are, indeed, enumerated among the saints of the Coptic Church.

How did the relations that prevailed between the Roman authorities and the Christians throughout our period, that is, until the accession of Constantine the Great, contribute to the attitude of the Church towards Judaism? The problem of these relations was excellently analysed and summarized in the dissertation of J. Molthagen.⁸ Without presenting his discussions here in detail, we may epitomize these as follows: the imposition of the death penalty for adherence to Christianity dates most probably from 64 C.E., when Nero attempted to blame the Christians for setting Rome, on fire. The relevant order (*mandatum*), sent by Nero to the magistrates of the city of Rome, was later inserted into the collection of instructions (*mandata*) received by the governors before they left for their provinces.⁹ From the correspondence between Pliny the Younger and the emperor Trajan in the year 112 C.E., we learn that this order was still being observed by the governors. In the second half of the second century, however, we find governors attempting to persuade the Christians who were handed over to them to renounce Christianity and thereby save themselves. Nero's "Mandate" classified the Christians as a subversive group, both politically dangerous to the State and an enemy of the emperor and the Empire. Therefore, members of this group were condemned to death even though they had not committed any crime.¹⁰ The only change introduced by Trajan in this policy was implemented following the sending of his rescript to Pliny, and *not* primarily made for the benefit of the Christians: Trajan ruled against the admissibility of anonymous accusations as a matter of general policy.¹¹

The short reign of the emperor Decius (249–251 C.E.) caused trouble for Christians all over the Empire. Decius issued an edict according to which all the inhabitants of the Empire were to sacrifice to the gods of the State. Committees were even established by him whose duty it was to supervise the offering of these sacrifices. Decius wished to attract the favour of the gods for the Empire through this form of worship; his was a political-religious move. While this edict was *not*

8. *Der römische Staat und die Christen im zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1970).

9. *Ibid.* p. 23 ff.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–33.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

intended to serve as a means of persecuting the Christians, such indeed was the result.¹²

In the year 257, the emperor Valerian and his son Gallienus issued an edict repeating exactly Decius' demand that all worship the gods of the State.¹³ This time, however, it was directed against the Christian clergy, probably because Valerian and Gallienus realized that the most stubborn resistance to such worship was concentrated in the leadership of the Church. In any event, Gallienus cancelled the edict in 260 C.E.

It must be remembered that, during the time of Decius and Valerian, as well as after the repeal of the edict by Gallienus, the legal status of Christianity underwent no basic change: *adherence to Christianity was prohibited and made subject to the death sentence.*

The last persecutions of Christianity began in 303 C.E., when Diocletian began a war of annihilation against the Church. He ordered the destruction of churches and the burning of Christian holy writings. In his fourth edict, issued in 304, Diocletian again raised the demand that all the inhabitants of the Empire worship the gods. (The Jews were absolved from obeying this decree, as is evident from the tradition in the Jerusalem Talmud |Avodah Zarah44d (ch. 5): "When King Diocletian arrived here he decreed and said: All the nations shall pour out libations apart from the Jews...")

In the year 311, shortly before his death, Galerius published an edict which not only ended the persecutions of the Christians, but even surpassed the tolerance of Gallienus in that, for the first time, *Christians were allowed to be Christians.* In other words, for the first time since the days of Nero, there was a decisive change in the legal status of Christians.

II

In view of the above, it is clear why the leaders of the Church wished to change its image in the eyes of the Roman authorities. One possible way was by rehabilitating Jesus, the founder of the sect, an end which might be achieved by freeing Pontius Pilate from the charge of responsibility for the crucifixion. As I have already noted, this process of describing Pilate as wishing to spare the life of Jesus and to save him from the hands of the Jews had already begun in the Gospels.¹⁴ Such a description of Pilate is completely different from the descrip-

12. *Ibid.*, p. 61 ff.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 85–88.

14. See especially Luke 23:25; John 19:16.

tion of his character and deeds in Josephus Flavius. Philo summarizes Pilate's behaviour by saying that he was callous and merciless.¹⁵ As was to be expected, the Church Fathers followed the inclination of the Gospels, and blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus. Tertullian even found it appropriate to remark that, when Pilate allegedly reported to the emperor Tiberius about Christ, Pilate was himself already a Christian in his heart.¹⁶

This tendency was explicitly expressed in Melito's *Homily On the Passion*. On the one hand, Pilate was mentioned only once in this treatise, despite his decisive part in the events that led to the crucifixion; on the other hand, Melito expanded the tradition of the Gospels to ascribe to the Jews both the preparations for the crucifixion (such as the preparing of the nails, the rods, the vinegar and the gall), and the actions involved in it (such as the flogging, the crowning with thorns, the chaining, and the offering of the gall to drink).¹⁷ Melito's forgiving of Pilate agrees with the favourable attitude towards the Roman Empire expressed in the fragments of Melito's *Apology*, which stressed that, of all the emperors, only the infamous Nero and Domitian believed the slanderous stories circulated about the Christians. On the other hand, Melito, like most Church-writers, did not tire of mentioning the supposed connection between the birth of Christianity and the foundation of the Principate by Augustus. According to Melito, this conjunction was a good omen for the Romans, who thereafter grew stronger and flourished, enjoying an age of peace and prosperity for the Empire.¹⁸

The third point made by the Christians stressed Jewish rebelliousness and the Christians' dissociation from it. As is well known, the Christian community of Jerusalem left for Pella in Transjordan on the eve of the Great Revolt (66-70 C.E.), while the Christians refused to join the rebellion of Bar-Kokhba and were probably punished for their refusal.¹⁹ This wish to enlighten the Romans as to the

15. In his *Embassy to Gaius*, par. 301.

16. "Pilatus, et ipse iam pro sua conscientia Christianus." *Apologeticum*, 21:24.

17. See: *On the Passion* lines 571-574; 676-678; cf. 695-710 and also 690 — 694 (re. the juxtaposition of the Gentiles and the Jews). Cf. Matthew 27:26, 29, 30, 34. See also for the above, K.W. Noakes, "Melito of Sardis and the Jews," *Studia Patristica* 13 (1975) [Texte und Untersuchungen, vol. 116], pp. 247-248.

18. For the above, see Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV, 26:7-9.

19. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 5. Justin Martyr (*The First Apology*, 31) says: "For in the Jewish war which lately raged, Barchochebas, the leader of the revolt of the Jews, gave orders that Christians alone should be led to cruel punishments, unless they would deny Jesus and utter blasphemy..." (trans. M. Dods, Ante-Nicene Christian Library). In contrast to the religious motive ascribed by Justin to the persecution of the Christians by Bar-Kokhba, Jerome speaks of a national-military motive. This motive seems more reasonable although, because of their belief in Jesus as Messiah, the Christians were unable to join the army of Bar-Kokhba, of whom Rabbi Akiba said: "this is the King Messiah." The words of Jerome (in the entry of Eusebius for the year 133 C.E.) are as follows: "Cochba, the leader of the Jewish rebellion, inflicted various punishments on many people among the Christians because they refused to join him in the battle against the Romans."

difference between the seditious Jews and the peace-loving Christians explains the appearance of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in the apologetic works written by Justin, Origen and others for pagan audiences.²⁰

Mentioning the destruction of the Temple served additional propaganda aims for the Christians. First, the Christians argued, it proved the fulfilment of Jesus's prophecy. Second, the destruction was connected by them with the rejection of Jesus by the Jews as well as with his execution and with the persecution of the Apostles and their deaths in the period before the Temple was destroyed (e.g. Stephen, James son of Zebedee, James brother of Jesus, Paul). The Christians argued that not even one generation passed between the killing of Jesus and the punishment suffered by the Jews. Similarly, the manner in which Pilate and the crucifixion were presented served a double propaganda purpose. In one of its aspects, this presentation was designed to win the hearts of the Romans; in its other, it served to limit the influence of Judaism on Christians and, especially, on pagans who wished to join the Church. Such an accusation would put a distance between them and Judaism.

III

This brings us to the question of the relations between Jews and Christians in those centuries: had those relations included causes of friction that generated anti-Semitic reactions among Church writers? Three other questions are associated with this one: Had there been a continuing and real conflict between the Jews and the Christians, or was there only empty bickering between them while the real conflict was taking place between the pagans and the Christians? Did the Jews collaborate with the pagans in their conflict with the Christians? And did the Jews fight for the conversion of the pagans and thereby clash with Christian missionary activity? All of these questions are controversial. I am unable to enlarge on the first one now, but will refer to my recent statement that "Careful reading of the pagan, Christian and Jewish sources relating to the polemic led me to the conclusion that *the Jews were no party to it*. However, without the Jews' existence and independent attitude towards Christians and pagans alike, and without their holy scriptures and the writings of Hellenistic Jewry, the pagan-Christian polemic could not have taken the course and shape it did."²¹ Whether the Jews in this period revealed a proselytizing zeal is, in my opinion, a question also to be answered in the negative, the determined stance to the contrary of such scholars as Marcel Simon and James Parkes notwithstanding.²²

20. See Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 47,33; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 4:73. Cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 33:2-5; Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 20:3.

21. Rokéah, *Jews, Pagans, etc.*, pp. 9-10.

22. Marcel Simon, *Verus Israël, Études sur les relations entre Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'empire Romain, 135-425* (Paris, 1948); James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue. A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (London, 1934).

I would like to deal at length with the third question, that of Jewish-pagan collaboration, because of its importance for our subject. W.H.C. Frend claims that the Jews were active partners of the pagans in the persecution of the Christians during the second century and for at least the first half of the third.²³ Let us illustrate his approach by quoting from his work:

In Asia [Minor], the pagans and Jews were threatened by the same enemy, and for the first time for many generations united against him.

This strange alliance dates from after the defeat of 135. It was one of the means by which Israel saved itself from destruction, but at the cost of forfeiting forever its claim to the universal allegiance of mankind. From now on, the domestic struggle between the Old Israel and the New becomes merged in the general conflict between Church and Empire. In the persecutions which were to wrack Asia in the reign of Marcus Aurelius the Jew was often in the background. For nearly another century he continued to stir up trouble wherever he could.²⁴

In his note 148 *ad locum*, Frend refers, for confirmation of his words, to the charges made by Tertullian in the *Scorpiace* and by Origen in *Contra Celsum* as well as to the *Acta* of the martyr Pionius.²⁵

In 1966 Fergus Millar published a review of Frend's book,²⁶ half of which was dedicated to the refutation of Frend's thesis (as quoted above). Millar mentions, apparently with approval, the words of Prof. Boer about the confrontation of the Jews and Christians with their idolatrous environment.²⁷ He goes on to ask on what evidence Frend relies, other than general statements in Christian sources about the hostility of the Jews. Examining the evidence adduced by Frend, he indicates its weaknesses before adding: "It is necessary to conclude, with M[arcus] Simon, that the evidence for Jewish responsibility for the persecutions is very scanty. This is not to say that there was not polemic (though we know far more of Christian anti-Jewish polemic), hostility and on occasion violence. It is simply to say that, after the first half-century at least, the Jewish communities of the Diaspora were, given that we know very little about them, largely irrelevant to the principal conflict, that between Christianity and its pagan environment."²⁸

Let us now examine in more detail the two central and clearest statements concerning the participation of the Jews in the persecution of the Christians. After at-

23. W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 168, 288, 334.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 258–259.

25. These charges are also used by other scholars as evidence that the Jews were involved in the persecutions of the Christians.

26. In *JRS*, vol. 56 (1966), pp. 231–236.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

tacking the Gnostics and the Catholic Christians, who recoil from martyrdom, Tertullian turns to those outside the Church who take part in terrorizing the Christians and says: “Will you count here both the synagogues of the Jews — the sources of the persecutions, in which the Apostles were whipped — and the assemblies of the Gentiles with their circus, in which they shout and call enthusiastically ‘death to the third race?’ [that is, to the Christians]”.²⁹ Frend omits a few words from this sentence in his book and states: “Tertullian’s outburst ‘*synagogae Judaeorum fontes persecutionum*’... cannot be dismissed as mere rhetorical flourish.”³⁰ On this Millar remarks tersely and aptly: “It would be better to quote it more fully ‘...*fontes persecutionum, apud quas apostoli flagella perpassi sunt*’.”³¹ Millar meant that the ending ties Tertullian’s words to the “briefing” given by Jesus to his Apostles; this weakens the force of the conclusion that Frend wishes to draw from the beginning of the sentence as to the behaviour of the Jews *at the time of Tertullian*. The words of Jesus are as follows:

But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and *they will scourge you in their synagogues*. And ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. *But when they deliver you up*, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak (Matthew 10:17–19).

Millar’s criticism seems to have pressed heavily on Frend for, after four years, he published a short article in which he attempted to answer Millar and to strengthen his own statements on the accusations of Tertullian against the Jews.³² In this article, Frend presented every saying of Tertullian that points a condemning finger at the Jews, and argued that these statements had a realistic background. As for our sentence, Frend argues that “If one takes the sentence as a whole, however, together with its mention of shouts of ‘Death to the third race,’ it must be obvious that Tertullian was thinking of what was happening in Carthage there and then. He was a journalist, not an antiquary, and the reference to the apostles is there for emphasis.”³³ Further on, Frend asserts: “Carthage at the turn of the third century held the same peril for the Christians as Smyrna in the time of Polycarp. It is not unreasonable to suggest following Tertullian that in both cities ‘Jews and pagans were united in common action,’³⁴ for very different motives certainly, but for the Christians it meant a simmering hatred liable to break out on any trivial pretext in savage acts of persecution... Curiously enough Smyrna again provides

29. *Scorpiace*, 10.

30. Frend, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

31. Millar, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

32. W.H.C. Frend, “A Note on Tertullian and the Jews” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 10 (1970) [Texte und Untersuchungen. 107], pp. 291–296.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

34. The last words are a literal quotation from Frend’s book, p. 323; there, Frend made this assertion in regard to the cities of Rome and Smyrna.

a parallel situation with Jews and pagans making common cause against the confessor Pionius.³⁵ Frend finishes by saying: “The pages of Tertullian enlighten both the positive and negative sides of the Jewish Christian relationship. The Latter was hardly, as has been claimed [that is, by Millar], ‘largely irrelevant to the principal conflict between Christianity and its pagan environment.’ On the contrary, *synagogaë Judaeorum fontes persecutionum* was a fact.”

Frend’s having repeated his assertions in forceful and uncompromising language does not make them any more convincing. Even if we accept the words of the *Acta Martyrum* literally,³⁶ we cannot compare a tradition about deeds that occurred (be the degree of exactness that we ascribe to it as it may!) with the abstract and sweeping assertions of Tertullian, who found himself obliged to look for support to the authority of the Gospels. Furthermore, because of the propagandist character of the *Acta Martyrum*, we are perhaps entitled to assign a greater weight to the silence of the sources (*argumentum e silentio*). The fact is that not even once can we find in the *Acta* of the second century or thereafter an explicit accusation that the Jews collaborated with the Roman authorities in hunting down the martyrs, nor even that they informed them of their whereabouts — a fact that is very decisive.

As for the second “proof” brought by Frend from Origen, it is easy to show that it is based on an error.³⁷ In *Contra Celsum*, Origen says:

...He [Celsus] seems to have behaved in much the same way as the Jews who, *when the teaching of Christianity began* to be proclaimed, spread aboard a malicious rumour about the gospel, to the effect that Christians sacrifice a child and partake of its flesh, and again that when the followers of the gospel want to do the works of darkness they turn out the light and each man has sexual intercourse with the first woman he meets. This malicious rumour *some time ago* unreasonably influenced a very large number and persuaded people knowing nothing of the gospel that this was really the character of Christians. And even now it still deceives some who by such stories are repelled from approaching Christians even if only for a simple conversation.³⁸

Curiously enough, Origen does not mention the things that were raised by the Sages against Jesus, his birth and actions, but only the false charges brought against the Christians concerning ritual murder and fornication.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

36. It is reasonable to assume that their formulation was intended to serve propagandist aims. Thus, for example, the words put into the mouth of Pionius about the land of Judaea and its destruction are no more than Biblical descriptions. The presentation of the Jews as opposing the burial of Polycarp’s body and the reason offered for this seem tendentious, being presented in order to draw a comparison between the behaviour of the Jews in Smyrna and their behaviour at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus.

37. Frend does not even mention it again in his article, although Tertullian accused the Jews of slandering the Christians.

38. *Contra Celsum*, trans. H. Chadwick, (Cambridge, Eng., 1965) 6:27.

There is no doubt that Origen's accusations are baseless, for otherwise apologists of the second century such as Aristides (*Apology*, 17), Athenagoras (*Embassy for the Christians*, 3), Justin Martyr (*First Apology*, 26; *Second Apology*, 12), Tertullian (*Apologeticum*, 4:11), and others, who put up a defence against such accusations widely accepted among the pagan multitudes, would not have refrained from noting their Jewish origin. Such immoral deeds were ascribed to the Christians by the people and the authorities because they were an illegal religious sect; it was only natural, in their eyes, that criminal acts should be committed in the secret gatherings of the Christians. This may be inferred from Pliny the Younger's letter (Book 10, Epistle 96), and is also conspicuous in the report on the martyrs of Lugdunum (Lyon) in Gaul (Chap. 14). The Jews are not mentioned there at all with respect to the whole affair; the accusations of "dinners in the manner of Thyestes and sexual intercourses in the manner of Oedipus" were extorted by torture from the pagan household servants of the Christians. The full charge was that, in their ritual ceremonies, the Christians would envelop an infant in dough and then eat it, and that after feasting, they would extinguish the lights and commit adultery and incest.³⁹

In his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Justin asks Trypho:

Have you also believed concerning us that we eat men; and that after the feast, having extinguished the lights, we engage in promiscuous concubinage?

Trypho's answer is that

... those things about which the multitude speak are not worthy of belief; for they are most repugnant to human nature.⁴⁰

It is, then, clear that Origen's claim which ascribes such false charges against the Christians to the Jews is totally unfounded.

IV

In the year 386, John Chrysostom was appointed preacher in the principal church of Antioch, a position he held for the next twelve years. At the beginning of his ministry, in 386 and in 387, he delivered his eight sermons *Adversus Iudaeos*.⁴¹ All scholars agree that these sermons were intended almost wholly for his Christian audience. It emerges from Chrysostom's sermons that the influence of the Jews of Antioch on social matters and even in the religious sphere was considerable. Chrysostom was shocked by the fact that the Christians of his con-

39. Cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, ch. 9.

40. *Dialogue...*, chap. 10, trans. Reith, Ante-Nicene Christian Library (Edinburgh, 1867).

41. See Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'empire Romain...* (New York, n.d. [1914]), I, p. 62; A. Lukyn Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos* (Cambridge, Eng., 1935), pp. 132-133; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. III: *The Golden Age of Patristic Literature...* (Utrecht-Antwerp, Westminster, Maryland, 1963 [1960], pp. 424ff.

gregation visited synagogues freely, participated in Jewish holiday celebrations, and were attracted to everything connected with Judaism. This concern appears in all of these sermons, whose leitmotif is the effort to dissuade his hearers from having any dealings with Jews, whether in the religious or the economic-legal sphere.

It is interesting to note that the situation had changed considerably. In the second century, Justin had Trypho state that the Sages prohibited the Jews to have anything to do with Christians: "And Trypho said: Sir, it were good for us if we obeyed our teachers, who laid down a law that we should have no intercourse with any of you, and that we should not have even any communication with you on these questions."⁴² This is confirmed by a Talmudic source, by a Sage who was a contemporary of Justin:

Another explanation: "Remove," etc. (Proverbs, 5:8). Rabbi Korḥa says: this is naught but the way of heresy (*minuth*). You tell a person not to go to the heretics (*minim*) and not to hearken to their words, so that he will not stumble by (because of) their deeds. He says to them: "Although I do go, I do not listen to their words and I will not stumble by (because of) their deeds." They say unto him: "Although you have confidence, do not go, for of this it was said, 'Remove thy way far from her,' (*Ibid.*) and it says, "For she hath cast down many wounded. (Prov, 7:26)"⁴³

Now, however, at the end of the fourth century, John Chrysostom makes desperate efforts in the opposite direction. The difference between the two situations is that, while in the first half of the second century the Christians still strove to convert the Jews, by the time of Chrysostom there was no Jewish initiative to convert the Christians or the pagans; it was only the Jews' very existence and their behaviour as an established and unified religious group that were seen then as a danger. The hatred towards the Jews that permeated Chrysostom's work is in inverse proportion to Chrysostom's knowledge of Judaism.

In his book dealing with the treatises *Adversus Iudaeos*, Lukyn Williams remarks several times that the Christians argued "rightly," that is, he sets himself up as a judge between the Jews and pagans and their Christian adversaries, and passes sentence in favour of the Christians. In view of this, Williams' critical view of Chrysostom is very instructive.

In his opinion, the absence of an "evangelical spirit" from Chrysostom's attitude towards the Jews is even more serious than his ignorance of Jewish matters (including his ignorance of the Hebrew language). Williams therefore thinks that Chrysostom's sermons do not deserve to be summarized as he summarizes other

42. *Dialogue...*, *op cit.*, 38.

43. *Abot de-Rabbi Nathan*, version B, Ch. 3, Schechter ed., p. vii (13),

treatises of this kind; instead, he only quotes some of Chrysostom's utterances. A typical paragraph from one of Chrysostom's sermons will serve to illustrate their character for us:

Because of this I myself hate the Jews for, though holding the Law (*nomos*), they commit an outrage against the Law; in this way they attempt to ensnare the simple folk. This charge would not have been so grave had they not disobeyed Christ while believing in the Prophets. But now they have forfeited all forgiveness for, on the one hand, they assert that they accept the words of the latter (the Prophets) and, on the other hand, they commit an outrage against the one (Christ) about whom they prophesied.⁴⁴

Incidentally, the same attitude — but from a Jewish point of view — arguing that the Christians were worse than the pagans because of their belief in the Torah and the Prophets, is expressed by a Yavneh (Jamnia) sage, Rabbi Tarphon.⁴⁵

V

Let us now attempt to summarize our discussion. In the period before the Destruction of the Second Temple, as well as in the Yavneh period (that is, from the Destruction to the Bar-Kokhba Revolt), the Christian sect was seen as a thorn in the eyes of the Jewish national leadership. Attempts were made to eliminate the irritant (before the year 70), or at least to expel its adherents from Jewish society and to combat their influence and propaganda. As part of this campaign, the *Birkath ha-Minim* (that is, the curse [literally, the blessing] of the heretics) was instituted, and polemical javelins were flung at the Christians' theology (as, for example, calling Jesus "ben Stara" or "ben Pantera").⁴⁶ After the Bar-Kokhba revolt, the Jewish-Christian conflict faded away in an era of increasing estrangement from Judaism. This withdrawal from Judaism became more powerful in the Church with the increased power and numbers of Christians of pagan origin. It also appears that the eagerness of the Jews to convert their neighbours, a missionary eagerness that could have caused friction, decreased. As a matter of fact, the Christians now had a free hand among the pagans (apart, of course, from persecutions by the Roman authorities, which must have deterred many and caused others to desert).

It is clear that in no instance did the Jews initiate the persecutions by the authorities; they did not inform on the Christians, nor did they hand them over. The *argumentum e silentio*, especially the silence of the compilers of the *Acta Martyrum*, is very strong in this case. Jesus' warning on this subject (see Matthew 10:17–18) might have served as a stimulus for raising such charges against the Jews had there been any basis whatsoever for it in reality.

44. Sixth Sermon, 6.

45. BT, Shabbat 116a.

46. See my article, "Ben Stara is Ben Pantera — Towards the Clarification of a Philological-Historical Problem" (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 39 (1970), pp. 9 — 18.

But even after the strong rivalry passed, there remained negative sentiments against Judaism which were formed in and sanctified by the New Testament; this sanctification determined the attitude of the Church Fathers in subsequent generations.

The position of the New Testament was also influenced by the Christians' relations with the Roman authorities, which the Church sought to improve. One of the ways to achieve this improvement was to rehabilitate the image of Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman authorities, and to limit or deny entirely his responsibility for the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The other aspect of Pilate's rehabilitation was, of course, the complementary condemnation of the Jews. As the illegal status of Christianity in the Empire did not change until the edict of the year 311, it was only natural that the Church Fathers of the second and third centuries should continue to work for this desired change, doing so perforce at the expense of the Jews by, for example, throwing all the blame for the death of Jesus onto their shoulders.

But it was not this alone that led the Church Fathers to an anti-Jewish position. They were forced into such a stance by the very existence of the Jews, and by the Jews' attachment to their Law, their customs, and their traditions. Christianity was absolutely dependent on the Jewish Bible and on the connections between it and the New Testament for its theology and ethics. Christianity also needed this connection in order to prove the antiquity of its beliefs. It had to contend with the influence exerted by the Law and the Prophets on pagans who were attracted to the Church and wished to become Christians. This influence raised many embarrassing questions for the Christians, and so it happened that the very existence of the Jews, even without any action on their part, constituted a problem for the Church: the origins of Christianity and the path to Christianity were intertwined with the Jews' Holy Scriptures. This situation forced the Church Fathers to come forth to defend Christianity and to explain its stand. As I see it, this was the fundamental cause of the attacks on the Jews made by the Church Fathers: they had to make Judaism unattractive, even repulsive, to Christians and to pagans. At the same time, we encounter words of praise for the Jews and Judaism referring to the period *before* the time of Jesus in various apologetic treatises intended for pagans or Gnostics and heretics, with a clear purpose (I discuss this phenomenon at length in my recent book).

VI

The question which we must now confront is this: Are we dealing here with legitimate attacks within the framework of mutual rivalry and polemic — bitter though it might be — or did these attacks perhaps exceed these limits and ought they accordingly to be defined as anti-Semitic? In his discussion of the Epistle of

Barnabas⁴⁷ which, in his view, was “probably written after the uprising of Simon Bar-Cochba,” J. Alvarez argues that this work was in fact the first treatise of the *Adversus Judaeos* series, and it served as an apologetic model for the second and the subsequent centuries. Its author, says Alvarez, “desires at any cost that Christians separate themselves from the Synagogue, and suggests the keeping of the eighth day of the week in place of the Jewish sabbath (XV, 8),” for he “saw how some Christian communities wavered between both religions and so kept up Jewish practices, and this he wished to eliminate” (p. 73). Alvarez adds that “With the Pseudo-Barnabas is born the scorn for the Jewish People, and their [title of] pride as the chosen people passes over to the Christians” (p. 74). Let us quote a few more sentences from Alvarez to illustrate his somewhat surprising conclusions.

The Pseudo-Barnabas attributes Jesus’ death to the Jews, even crucifixion, lance, insults, spits which the Gospels attribute to the Romans. Yet, apart from this historic inexactitude, he seems not offended. He simply exaggerates (VII, 9), as when he describes the Hebrew Kippour [Day of Atonement] and other points (VII, 1–8). One might say there is an anti-Jewish tendency but not anti-semitism.⁴⁸

Again: “In brief, the Apostolic Fathers propose a separation between Synagogue and Church; they are anti-Jewish but not anti-semitic in the sense that history has given to this word.” Alvarez adds an excuse: “Christian opposition was no little nourished by the rebound and hatred of the Synagogue in the first days of Christianity, nor any the less by the cooperation of the Jews with Roman persecutors, according to St. Polycarp’s Martyrium.” And his final words are these: “Judaism and Christianity could live together culminating only in total integrity. Because they were not integrated, the Apostolic Fathers saw Judaism against Christianity, and Christianity against Judaism. But this is not anti-semitism yet.”

Alvarez focused his discussion on the early Church Fathers (second century); of this group, the author of the Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas is exceptional because of his hostile language, perhaps because of the goal he set, the removal of the Christians from the influence of Judaism. But there is no doubt that *in general* the tone of the attacks on the Jews, paradoxically, becomes ever more acute as the distance in time increases from the period of actual and sharp conflict between Jews and Christians. The more the contact between the two religions diminishes, the more hatred towards the Jews is expressed. The explanation of this phenomenon is, I suggest, that the Christians now despaired of ever converting the Jews, and therefore saw no need for self-restraint. Because of this, the Jew lost his flesh-and-blood image, and became an abstract, one-dimensional, negative and Satanic

47. J. Alvarez, “Apostolic Writings and the Roots of Anti-Semitism.” *Studia Patristica*, vol. 13 (1975) [TU. vol. 116], pp. 69–76.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

figure, delineated in a mosaic of derogatory verses and statements from the Jewish Bible and the New Testament. At the root of the matter lies, then, not the actual condition or behaviour of the Jews, but rather the image of the Jews required for the purposes of Christian theology. The theologians created this image according to the New Testament, on the one hand, and their allegorical interpretation of Biblical heroes personifying the wicked and sinful Israel who persecutes the true and good Israel, that is, Christianity, on the other. In this way, expositional exercises and unbridled, hate-filled denunciations, written and expressed in response to temporary factors, established a long-enduring attitude towards the Jews — and this because of the authority of their authors and the prestige they enjoyed in subsequent generations. This attitude, together with the New Testament, formed the approach of Christianity to the Jewish people in the Middle Ages and in modern times, when Judaism was at the mercy of Christianity, and when the causes that engendered anti-Semitism in the early Church had long passed from the world.

I would like to end this survey with a few lines written by Norman Ravitch that seem to me to contain a note of optimism, at least for the future.

Ravitch says:

Modern anti-Semitism owes at least as much to secularism and the destruction of reverence for the biblical tradition as it does to orthodox belief. And religious liberals may come to view the Jews as just as stiff-necked and just as incorrigible as did orthodox Christians. Certainly the Jewish attachment to the land of Israel is difficult for many religious liberals to accept...

The decline of Christian orthodoxy has made the modern Jew vulnerable to a hatred that knows neither religious fanaticism nor theological denigration. But he is still hated — and more murderously so.

The current theological revolution in the Christian interpretation of the Jewish people is a work of charity and atonement. One can only wish it well. One must, however, hope that it will continue to seek to tie Christians and Jews, Christianity and Judaism, ever more closely together — that it will enmesh them together more umbilically into the Christian-Jewish nexus. Despite its tragic consequences and historical ambiguities, the Christian-Jewish nexus probably protects Christians and Jews from mutual hatred and self-hatred better than any secular, ideology currently available.⁴⁹

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49. Ravitch. *op cit.*, p. 52.