



When the Church Left Israel

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It is a sad and tragic case that today we speak of Israel and the Church as two separate entities. In the aftermath of Jesus' resurrection, the first generation of believers did not see themselves apart from Israel. In both beliefs and daily practice the apostles showed thorough Jewishness. In his letter to the Romans, Paul argues that he and the believers of both Jewish and non-Jewish background are the Israel, and he warns believers of non-Jewish background not to assume that they are somehow more privileged than the Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. He also noticed that some were dividing the community of believers precisely along those lines. Newly converted and still deeply influenced by the habits and customs of their own respective cultures, the believers of non-Jewish background were turning Paul's teachings upside down, introducing antagonism toward Judaism and everything Jewish, and deliberately distancing away from the Law of God, which they rather saw as the Law of Moses.

Persecutions also contributed to the growing separation. The Temple religious establishment pushed the Christian believers out of Judaism, while the Roman imperial authorities at both local and imperial levels showed little patience with movements which were refusing to

worship the imperial cult. The two Jewish rebellions of 66-70 and 132-135 made the things even worse, for when the Romans turned against the Jews, many Christians found it more expedient to distance themselves from their fellow believers of Jewish origins.

Worse than persecutions was the gnostic influence which gradually but surely transformed the thinking, the attitudes, the teachings and the practices of the believers. We see the effect and potency of Gnosticism in the works of Marcion (d. c. 160) who denounced the sacredness of the Hebrew Scriptures, attributed the origins of evil to Jewish Jehovah (whom he contrasted to the Christian God of Love), and stressed radical discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity. His "abridged" Scriptures forced the Church Fathers to undertake the "rescue" of the Hebrew God and Scriptures, only to find themselves in an awkward position of siding with the Jews for whom they have already developed repugnance. This development entailed a formation and definition of Christian Holy Scriptures, and necessitated a doctrine that God had rejected the Jews and had instead made the Church the guardian of the Truth. The Hebrew Scriptures were "saved," but renamed as the Old Testament, and the Apostolic Writings were elevated as the New Testament, implying

that the New supersedes the Old. With this anti-Jewish attitude, the Christians launched on a religious journey of their own without the Jews, determined to get as far as possible from everything Jewish. Challenged by both Jewish and gnostic leaders and intellectuals, the Church Fathers in defense of their beliefs and practices heavily borrowed from nonbiblical sources. They came to believe that the works of Greek and Hellenistic writers offered answers to some of their perplexing questions concerning the origins of evil, the nature of man, the way of salvation, and so forth. In spite of their spirited defense of Christianity, the Church leadership, unaware of the consequences of their actions brought about the Church to the point where they perceived themselves as a new entity that replaced Israel. By the fourth century, the Christian writers established a strong tradition of *Adversus Judaeos* (Against the Jews).

This hostile attitude toward the Jews started as early as the first century. The most vicious was the widely circulated *Epistle of Barnabas*. Hostility continued in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and others as well. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) took the hatred against Jewishness to new heights. He viciously turned against not only the Jews but even the fellow Christians

who still lived according to the norms and values found in the Holy Scriptures: the Jewish festivals, the Sabbath, the kosher diet, and so on. In his well-attended sermons, John Chrysostom vowed to fight to the end and eliminate all those who claimed to be Christians yet still lived like Jews. The impact John Chrysostom and the likes of him left on their and future generations was enormous and manifold. For one, the persecution of the Jews and the heretics (regardless of the fact that some “heretical” groups were much closer to the biblical teachings than John Chrysostom and his contemporaries) was theologically justified. On a moral level, it provided a license to greedy neighbors to destroy and seize the property of the Jews and the “heretics.” More important, however, John Chrysostom’s sermons finally defined and canonized the notion that Christians are completely different from Jews, that the more one is purged from Jewishness, the more Christian one is.

The widely acclaimed Edict of Milan (313), by which Emperor Constantine ended the vicious persecution of the Christians, was yet another step in taking the Church further away from Israel. The promulgation of the Edict was taken by Christians as the act of God, and from that point on Constantine was hailed as the champion of Christianity. Few were, and still are, aware of the consequences of Constantine’s imperial policy concerning the Church. Talk about Constantine’s conversion is more wishful thinking on the part of Christians than a reality. Constantine’s behavior was deceptive. His objective was not to become one of the Christian believers, but to bring political and social cohesiveness to the empire which previous Emperors Diocletian and Galerius attempted through systematic persecution of Christianity but failed to achieve. Instead of searching for the Christians and destroying them, Constantine gave them freedom but then began to fuse them with the rest of population. Although his decrees seemingly favored Christianity, they were for all practical purposes enforcing a propagandist way of life. In both the Donatist affair (a

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dispute among the Christian factions over the legitimacy of the appointment of Bishop Caecilian) and, especially, at the Council of Nicea (a theological dispute among the Christians over the nature of Jesus Christ), Constantine showed his main concern, the unity among the Christian leaders whom the Christian masses followed. The dispute over the nature of Jesus was more of a philosophical and theological character concocted by the Christians themselves as they entangled in gnostic-like attempts to explain and define the character of Jesus Christ, and Constantine had no expertise in theology nor interest to seek the “truth” about the Christian God. He pursued a united religious front. Those who opposed him he exiled, but he was always ready to recall them if they have showed will to compromise. Constantine issued several decrees to enforce his imperial policies, and what is of significance to notice is that the Christian leaders were indifferent to Constantine’s decrees which directly contradicted the Law of God—for example, his legislation of March 7, 321 to worship on the day of the sun, the first day of the week as opposed to the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. Also, no one opposed him for introducing the cross as a new symbol of Christianity. Previously a hated instrument for punishment of criminals, the cross was now being made into the instrument of salvation and the object of veneration and worship. When Theodosius I in 381 declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire, the church was even more emboldened against its enemies, the Jews in particular. The Church now began to turn against the Jews with greater determination, and physical destruction of Jewish properties and persons ensued. Decrees and laws against the Jews and Judaism followed, most of them found in the Codes of Theodosian (438) and Justinian (533). It did not take long for the Church leaders to inspire, and

even initiate, laws against Judaism. Long before the infamous Inquisition of the fifteenth century, the clergy also inspired the Visigothic Code (649-654), a code which legitimized one of the worst persecutions on the Iberian peninsula, with an objective to completely wipe out Judaism in the Visigothic Kingdom. The code also provided “spiritual” guidance to the clergy as they were advising the medieval kings in drafting laws for their respective kingdoms.

By the thirteenth century the Church scarcely resembled the Kingdom of God spoken of in the Gospels. By then, it acquired such enormous political powers as to be able to dictate European politics and transformed itself into an imperial Church. The Church claimed she alone has authority in matters of doctrine, salvation, politics, and life in general, in direct opposition to the gospel teachings. The Reformers took upon themselves a task to reform the Church and bring her around to the original teachings. Whatever changes the Reformation brought about, however, it could not undo the centuries-long attitude against Jewishness and the Law of God. The impact of the choices made earlier by the early Church Fathers necessitated new choices to justify the earlier ones. The old attitudes and deeply held habits were difficult to overcome.

Starting in the fourth century, the Church was defining and shaping society, and greatly contributed to the making of Western Civilization. It, however, failed in its own purpose, and is greatly responsible for the horrors since the Middle Ages. The modern world which decided to go forward without Christianity failed to achieve better results. The current spiritual confusion only reflects the failures of the past. A growing number among Christians, however, is becoming more aware that the Church ought to return to its original roots.