

## Leonard Rutgers

# Early Christian Anti-Judaism

I would like to start my reflections with a quote from Isaac Asimov. In the first of his *Foundation* novels, this Russian-born American biochemist and science fiction writer has one of his characters remark that “violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.”<sup>1</sup> It is a keen observation—one that, I believe, can be of use when studying the anti-Jewish sentiments that surface frequently in early Christian literature of first few centuries of the Common Era.<sup>2</sup>

Now, of course, it goes without saying that it would be wrong generically to qualify the emergence of the advanced literary culture that accompanies the rise of Christianity and that, in fact, is one of its defining characteristics, as a sign of incompetence. Even so, there is no denying that there is something deeply unsettling about this literature all the same, specifically in the way it deals with others in general, and with Jews and Judaism in particular. Early Christian discussions in this area raise fundamental questions. Such questions do not just concern the rationale for the invectives that emerge over the course of early Christian discussions that deal with Jews and Judaism. They also prompt us to reflect on the larger mechanisms that underlie these debates, as well as on the social ramifications of the rhetoric strategies that characterize early Christian thinking on the Jews.

Before trying to highlight what I believe to be the crucial features in all of this, let me begin by stating that in this paper my thinking on these matters

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1 I. Asimov, *Foundation* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1951), 71, 90, 117.

2 See further e.g. R. R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1979); J. G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); R. L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century*, vol. 6 of *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, ed. P. Brown (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); G. I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); C. A. Evans and D. A. Hagner, *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); K. R. Stow, *Alienated Minority: The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); W. Nicholls, *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate* (Lanham: J. Aronson, 1993); I. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. B. Harshav and J. Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); L. V. Rutgers, *Making Myths: Jews in Early Christian Identity Formation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009); D. Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); R. Chazan, *From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism: Ancient and Medieval Christian Constructions of Jewish History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); R. S. Kraemer, *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

has been fueled by a very simple realization: namely that aggression, in either its verbal or physical manifestations, is almost never an expression of strength. Rather, as psychiatrists have pointed out time and again, anger, as well as the acts of aggression that result from it, are typically brought about by two factors that at first blush may seem to be quite alien to it but that, in reality, are at the very core of such emotions, namely, pain and fear.<sup>3</sup>

It is this understanding of human behavior that brings me to the question I would like to address: if anti-Jewish ideas and verbal abuse of the Jews are such a recurrent feature in early Christian literature, what was it that Christian writers were so afraid of and why? What sort of pain did they experience and why did they feel the need to take it out on the Jews? And, last but certainly not least, how did the emotional turmoil in which early Christian writers transparently found themselves, affect Jewish-Christian relations in late antiquity more generally? What were the more structural and long-term effects of their incompetence to move beyond feelings of pain and fear in this particular area?

Before trying to find an answer to these questions, let us not get ahead of ourselves, however, and start at the beginning. If we want to gain a deeper understanding of anti-Jewish sentiments within early Christianity at large, literary sources are our most important guide. When we look at this literature and at the ways in which it deals with Jews and Judaism, one can discern at least the following four salient characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

First of all, ideas that were not all congenial to Jews emerge from the very start, that is, they may already be found in the earliest layers of the New Testament, at which point they become a standard feature in early Christian literature to the extent that they rear their ugly head again and again, all the way down the end of antiquity and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Even when there are large tracts in early Christian literature that do not talk about Jews and Judaism at all, one encounters anti-Jewish sentiments in the writings of many fathers of the early church, that is,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. L. Berkowitz, "Pain and Aggression: Some Findings and Implications," *Motivation and Emotion* 17, no. 3 (1993): 277–93.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g. S. G. Wilson, ed., *Separation and Polemic*, vol. 2 of *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, ed. P. Richardson and S. G. Wilson (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986); A. L. Williams, *Adversus Judaeos: A Bird's-Eye View of Christian Apologiae Until the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. A. R. Eckhardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers: The Encounter of Jews and Christians* (New York: Scribner, 1967); S. G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70–170 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); J. D. Dunn, "The Question of Anti-Semitism in the New Testament Writings of the Period," in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135*, ed. J. D. Dunn (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 177–212; T. L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).

in the works produced by major as well as by minor figures.<sup>6</sup> Besides and no less importantly, such ideas can surface any time, even when we, as modern readers, feel that the larger context in which such remarks suddenly pop up, does not warrant it all at. In short, in early Christian literature anti-Jewish sentiments are like white noise, that is, a sound that, even when it is scarcely audible, is always there, humming in the background constantly.

Second, from a literary perspective, anti-Jewish ideas come in all shapes and sizes. They appear in virtually all literary genres, from exegetical commentaries and sermons to historiographical works and treatises designed specifically to engage and combat the Jews. Given their pervasiveness it hardly comes as a surprise to note that the phraseologies that were used in these variegated literary contexts run the full gamut too, from occasional and off-hand observations that occur when one least expects them, to systematic reflections and elaborations, as in such cases where early Christian thinkers went through their thinking process in a step-by-step fashion, producing fully-fledged monographic treatments about the Jews and Judaism in the process.

Third, and along similar lines, early Christian anti-Jewish thinking seems to have been spread fairly evenly through the Greco-Roman world in geographical and cultural terms, with such ideas surfacing in Syria, Egypt, or Asia Minor as well as in France or Spain and in virtually all the lands in between, and with the respective sources being composed in a variety of languages including Latin, Greek, and Syriac. Clearly, the ventilation of anti-Jewish ideas on the part of early Christians was far from being reserved to a single cultural group, set of theologians, or one or more specific, clearly delineated geographical areas. Yet, perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of all is the fourth one. As scholars have consistently argued over the last twenty to thirty years, the Jews that appear in the writings of the fathers of the early church are frequently not flesh and blood people at all.

Instead, the Jews we encounter in patristic literature are the direct outcome of the fathers' engagement with the texts of the Bible, meaning the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament. As a result of this, the Jews that emerge over the course of this process are not historical personalities but figments of scriptural imagination, which is why they are often appropriately called "hermeneutical

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. O. Limor and G. G. Stroumsa, eds., *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996); H. Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld (1.–11.Jh.)* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1990).

Jews.”<sup>7</sup> It is exactly in contexts where such literary inventions and artificial constructs surface that early Christian thinking on “the Jews” expands most dramatically in terms of the verbal aggression and abuse that gets formulated then and there.

If it is true, then, that much of the evidence at our disposal is textual in nature to the point that crucial passages are primarily the result of exegetical meditations and an extended internal monologue, how do we move beyond the purely textual and hermeneutical toward a deeper understanding of the larger historical mechanisms that were at work here?

Interestingly enough, it is exactly the self-centeredness of our texts that helps us see what is going on, that is, as soon as we attempt historically to contextualize the evidence a bit further. On the most basic of levels, early Christian texts dealing with the Jews are often not about the Jews at all but about Christians in search of their own distinct identity. Having begun its life as an offspring of Judaism and as a Jewish sect that accepted the same writings as sacred, early Christianity was facing a set of major, almost unsurmountable challenges when it came to delineate its self-identity. Clearly etched boundaries became crucially important because it was through them that Christian theologians needed to succeed in highlighting the fact that Christianity was something altogether different and new, rather than just the incarnation of Judaism’s younger, yet still identical twin. As they tried to sever all ties from the Jewish past that had produced them, early Christianity’s theological champions could do little but engage in a considerable amount of negative identity-formation. This meant, rather inevitably, that Judaism ended up at the receiving end of the hostile rhetoric that this process of dissociation, separation, and identity formation entailed and engendered.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that the ideas that surfaced in this process appear to have developed without much reference to actual Jews and Jewish communities is not really surprising either. Religious sects that start out on their own, in the way that early Christianity did, are almost always high-tension religious movements. As such, these movements have a tendency to cut themselves off from society at large. Instead they prefer to focus exclusively on the internal dynamics of the group. In addition to thinking about which social norms to embrace and enforce, this naturally also includes self-centered efforts to arrive at a formulation of the group’s ideology including one’s own identity.<sup>9</sup> In our case, this explains why

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7 J. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Cf. also A. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Rutgers, *Making Myths*.

8 Cf. Rutgers, *Making Myths*.

9 Cf. W. S. Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Christianity was so self-referential when it talked about Jewish traditions from which it sought to dissociate itself.

If we are correct in concluding that a significant portion of early Christian thought concerning Jews and Judaism had been produced in response to internal needs and for the purposes of internal consumption only, we still must pose the crucial question of whether these writings had an effect that went beyond the narrow audience for whom they were intended. Did they affect Jewish-Christian intragroup relations at large? And did these early Christian efforts to define their own, distinctive selves vis-à-vis the Jews provide them with the necessary tools to interact competently with their significant Jewish “Other” in real life?

To answer those questions, it is instructive to glance briefly at the infamous sermons known as *Against the Jews* that John Chrysostom delivered in the cathedral of the provincial capital of Syrian Antioch in 386 and 387 C.E.<sup>10</sup> When we look at these eight lengthy sermons using the notion of “violence as a measure of incompetence” with which I began my reflections, we see violence and incompetence manifest themselves at three different yet interrelated levels that are very informative from the larger historical perspective that we are interested in here. First there is incompetence in the aggression and verbal abuse that occurs throughout these discourses—clearly evidence for someone who is utterly and disconcertingly incapable of reigning himself in, an uncompromising bully. There is also incompetence that is practical in nature and that relates to Chrysostom’s inability to fully control Antioch’s early Christian community, that is, a group where some people were not bothered in the least by the cordial and organic relationship they cultivated with the local Jewish community.

Yet, the most disturbing form of incompetence is conceptual or theological in character. It arises out of the discrepancy between John Chrysostom’s core message on the one hand and the reality on the ground on the other. Chrysostom’s core message is that Christianity had replaced Judaism entirely. Yet it was precisely on that score that reality was very different from what Chrysostom was saying: even in the late fourth century C.E., Antioch’s Jewish community was so alive and kicking that many Christians were attracted to it to the extent that they participated in its rituals freely and joyfully. It was precisely this situation that helps explain John Chrysostom’s repetitive insistence on selected passages from the Hebrew Bible. These he adduced in an attempt to show that the Jews had ceased to be the people of the covenant a very long

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Chrysostom, *Eight Homilies Against the Jews / Adversus Judaeos*, vol. 68 of *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1862); P. W. Harkins, *Saint John Chrysostom: Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, vol. 48 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1979). Cf. also Rutgers, *Making Myths*, 19–48.

time ago already, that is, even before the historical emergence of Christianity itself. It was a scenario that was the exact opposite of what most contemporaries of John Chrysostom knew to be the case in Antioch. Even when Chrysostom employs an exegetical strategy that others had used before him, its reiterative nature indicates, therefore, that there is quite a bit of special pleading going on here, almost as if Chrysostom is not merely trying to convince his audience but himself as well.

Whatever the real reasons for John Chrysostom's exegetical exuberance and the violently anti-Jewish conclusions he drew from it all too consistently, it is clear, in any case, that in these sermons we encounter an interesting amalgam of what we have already talked about before, namely (a) the fear of not being able to fully control one's own community in the way that the author of these sermons saw fit; (b) the pain of having to do so on the basis of a theology that preached a reality that did not exist and therefore did not and could not convince the Christian masses; which (c) then leads to all of this getting translated into massive amounts of verbal aggression that one cannot but see as a sign of weakness rather than of strength. Here there is verbal violence of a kind that one can easily qualify as "a final refuge of incompetence."

And yet, it is precisely this that makes John Chrysostom's sermons so very interesting from a historical point of view. What we are witnessing here is what I have already highlighted, namely that as soon as Christianity became a societal force to be reckoned with, over the course of the fourth century C.E., it had to negotiate the shockwaves caused by a reality check that resulted from a thorough discrepancy. This discrepancy consisted of, on the one hand, Christianity's self-centered self-image, which had been developed in almost exclusive reference to the in-group and which posited that Judaism was now a thing of the past. And, on the other hand, the reality of a Jewish outgroup that was doing really well for itself during precisely this period—with Jews building monumental synagogues all over town, fulfilling their civic duties high up the social ladder as they were serving on the city's councils, and participating in the cultural life of their times through attending theaters and hippodromes. From a Christian point of view, such a discrepancy was insufferable in that it called into question core notions within early Christian theology concerning the Jews and Judaism, namely ideas about early Christian supersessionism, in the most serious of fashions.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Cf. T. L. Donaldson, "Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Definition," *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting* 3 (2016): 1–32.

When such a view of things helps us to explain why there is so much anger, that is, powerlessness in John Chrysostom's words, it is important to stress all the same that his hot-tempered perorations cannot therefore be taken to have been ineffective or without consequence. Rather, they were volatile and dangerous enough, particularly when we consider that there is strong empirical evidence to suggest that hate speech of the kind that we encounter here can easily transform into a hate spin, that is, into forms of manufactured indignation geared toward the emotional exploitation and manipulation of the masses, for the purpose of propelling them into action.<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly and perhaps inevitably, this is exactly what then happened in those very same years, meaning in the late fourth and early fifth century C.E. Both literary and archaeological evidence indicates that during this period, synagogues, that is, actual buildings, came under attack by Christian mobs, often for the purposes of transforming them into churches. While several factors contributed to this process, there can be little doubt that centuries of anti-Jewish sentiments on the part of early Christian theologians created the necessary conditions for such events to take place. Once early Christian thinkers began to identify the synagogue as the very site where Judaism manifested itself in this world, as John Chrysostom did amongst others, it became possible for the verbal anger they had vented for so long to attach itself to concrete and identifiable sites and buildings. Late Roman lawgivers did not like that much, but insofar as the Jewish community that gathered in such places was concerned all bets were now off. They had to suffer the ultimate and violent consequence of the utter incompetence we see reflected in early Christian writings including the sermons of John Chrysostom.

Much more than is possible here could be said about the interrelationship between early Christian theology and the history of Jewish-Christian relations in late antiquity. However, it is time to stop here and pose ourselves the question: Can we really maintain that there exists a direct and causal relationship between the anti-Jewish verbal rhetoric we encounter in much of early Christian literature on the one hand and the deeds of aggression against actual Jewish communities on the other?

I think we can and we must. By concluding that I certainly do not mean to imply that violence was the only way in which Christians related to Jews from the late antique period onwards: our sources indicate that there was considerably more nuance to that relationship than just that. What I want to stress, however,

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. B. J. Bushman, R. D. Ridge, and E. Das, "When God Sanctions Killing: Effect of Scriptural Violence on Aggression," *Psychological Science* 18, no. 3 (2007): 204–7.

is that with the rise of Christianity there occurred a systemic change in how Jews were to be viewed within society at large. With orthodox Christianity becoming the single most important identifier in the identity politics of the period and with the Jews becoming Christianity's primary significant "Other," a set of new conditions were created that, once combined with the anti-Jewish rhetoric that permeates much of early Christian literature, led to a new default position vis-à-vis the Jews. That position was fundamentally different from what had been customary before, during the times of the pagan Roman Empire. This new state of affairs can be summed up by saying that within Christian theological circles, anti-Jewish sentiments now became the new normal. To this should be added that the real problem with such an attitude was not that it was necessarily shared by all theologians equally and all of the time, let alone by the population at large. The problem was that these ideas, and the rhetoric that went with it, could be called upon and put into action at any time in such a fashion that actual acts of intimidation and violence against the Jews seemed nothing but a logical, even an inevitable, step in the unfolding of one's own Christian identity.

All of this is also precisely why I think there is little that is innocuous about anti-Jewish sentiments in early Christian literature. When seen against the larger systemic changes I just mentioned, the fathers of the early church were doing little else than lay the groundwork for letting anti-Jewish notions enter into the capillaries of Christian theology in ways that would profoundly influence and, in fact, spoil Jewish-Christian relations for much of the remainder of European history.

While it is already sad enough that Jewish-Christian relations should have evolved in this way and along these lines, insofar as the Christian side of this relationship was concerned, it is, finally, quite ironic that the main drivers in this process were not strength or newly found self-confidence but fear, pain, and, in fact, and a significant dose of incompetence. In light of the above, I probably do not need to stress that in my view, incompetence does not set either a person, a group, or a literature free.

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