

# **THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES: THE CHURCH FATHERS SPEAK TO THE RELATIONSHIP OF ISRAEL TO THE CHURCH**

*by Jamie Cowen*

**C**rusades, Inquisition, Pogroms and the Holocaust are emotionally laden terms for the Jewish Community. They convey to most Jews that Christianity is blatantly anti-Semitic, and these terms are often used as proof-texts to support the allegation that Yeshua (Jesus) is not the long awaited Jewish Messiah. All of the aforementioned events were in some part motivated by religious factors. But how do the following Scriptures comport with reality?

*This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.' " (Zech. 8:23)*

*I am talking to you Gentiles . . . If some of the branches have been broken off [Jews], and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches... . Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. (Rom. 11:12, 17, 18, 22)*

How is a Jewish originated faith transformed into the primary means of destroying the Jewish people? Tragically, the baggage lies at the door of those who successfully built Christianity into an enduring and world-wide institution, i.e., the Church Fathers. This article first identifies the Church Fathers and their utterings about Jews and Israel. Next, the arti-

cle attempts to offer an explanation why the Fathers said what they did. Finally, the article concludes with some lessons for the Messianic Movement.

## THE CHURCH FATHERS

Historically, most non-Christian scholars see the roots of Christian anti-Semitism embedded within the texts of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, there are texts which are inflammatory, and those which have been used as the justification for persecuting Jews. But to flatly argue that the New Testament is anti-Semitic on its face, to be consistent, one would also have to argue that the Talmud and other early Jewish writings are similarly anti-Semitic.<sup>2</sup> What makes the New Testament unique in this regard, however, is that it was used by the Church Fathers and others to reinterpret the role of Israel and the Jews vis the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Church Fathers are those who followed after the Apostles of Yeshua and who, through letters, treatises and sermons, established the theological basis of institutional Christianity. They wrote from the late 1<sup>ST</sup> century CE to the mid 5<sup>TH</sup> century. They were often bishops of large metropolises who were combating either non-Christian or anti-Christian beliefs,

1 “[T]he New Testament itself cannot be ignored and the anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic statements found there have to be taken into account. It is here, in the fundamental source of Christianity, that the charge of deicide and collective transcendent Jewish responsibility is found. The New Testament began the characterization of the Jews as Satan or in league with the devil.” Paul Grosser and Edwin Halperin, *Anti-Semitism: Causes and Effects* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), 59.

2 Here are two examples, one from the New Testament, the other from the Talmud: “Jesus therefore said to them [Jewish leaders], “...Why do you not understand my speech? Because you cannot listen to my word. The father, from whom you are, is the devil, and the desires of your father, it is your will to do.” John 8:42-44.

“In accordance with whose ruling is the halachah? The halachah, he replied, is in accordance with the ruling of Beth Hillel. But, indeed, they said to him, it was stated in your name that the halachah is in accordance with the ruling of Beth Shammai!... I have, he said to them, a younger brother who is the firstborn of Satan and his name is Jonathan and he is one of the disciples of Shammai.” Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas of the House of Hillel, Talmud, Yevamot 16a.

practices and, in some cases, attacks. Some of their perceived enemies were pagans, Montanists (an apocalyptic sect), Arians (a group which rejected the deity of the Messiah), Ebionites (those who practiced Jewish law but rejected Paul's writings and the divinity of the Messiah) and Jews. Their goal, similar to the Rabbis of the Mishnaic and Talmudic eras (70 CE-500 CE), was to make religious belief and practice uniform throughout the Church. The Fathers can be divided into different groups. There are the Apostolic Fathers, who were often disciples of some of the Apostles, and who wrote from 80-150 CE. Then there are the theological fathers (150-450 CE), who composed lengthy treatises on Christian doctrine and who also could be sub-divided between the Eastern and Western churches.<sup>3</sup>

### **THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS**

The form of the Apostolic Fathers' writings were similar to the writings of the New Testament. They were often letters prescribing appropriate behavior among the believers. Some have oblique references to Jews or Israel, but typically these issues are ignored. However, there are some very clear suggestions that even these early men perceived the Church as a "new" Israel. Possibly, the earliest of the writings is the church manual known as the *Didache* (80-100 CE). While the author is unknown, it is probable that some of the Apostles were familiar with it. Again, it is largely a manual of prescribed behavior but also includes some material to be utilized in services such as prayers and readings. It is comparable in a limited way to the Jewish prayer-book (Siddur) formalized at Yavneh in the late 1<sup>ST</sup> century. While the *Didache* refers to the Kingdom of David, it has no other reference to anything Jewish. However, it mandates that the believers gather together and break bread on the

---

3 Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 1.

Lord's day,<sup>4</sup> presumably Sunday, showing an immediate distinction with the Jewish Sabbath practice. It is possible, but not likely, that these believers met both days.

The first of the notable Apostolic Fathers was Clement, bishop of Rome, and a likely disciple of Peter and Paul.<sup>5</sup> He wrote a letter around 97 CE described as the *1<sup>st</sup> Epistle of Clement*. Again, there is no direct reference to Jews or to Israel and its place or lack thereof in God's economy. Rather, most of the material involves behavior and leadership issues within the community of believers. But Clement does state that Jesus comes from Jacob (Israel) and that within Jacob are priests and Levites who minister unto God.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Clement notes that God promised that the seed of Jacob shall be as the stars in heaven. While these comments reveal nothing about the relationship of the Jewish community to the early Church, it does suggest that Clement views the Church as originating with literal Israel, and that Israel clearly had, and may still have, a part in God's plan for the earth.

*Second Clement* is written around 150 CE, though Clement is not likely the author. It fails to mention Israel or the Jews, but does note that the Church is spiritual and has always existed.<sup>7</sup> This is potentially interesting for two reasons. Christianity increasingly leaned toward a spiritual versus a natural identity. Hence, the spiritual is good; the natural, bad. This is in contradistinction with the land of Israel and the Jews, which provided a more literal and concrete evidence of God's kingdom. Second, the concept that the Church always existed shows a

4 "Didache: Chapter 14, *Apostolic Fathers*, Lightfoot, J.B., ed. and trans., on-line. Internet. 10 Nov. 1999. Available on the web: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/ante-ninc/didache.htm> .

5 Schaff, Volume II, 287.

6 Clement of Rome, "1<sup>st</sup> Epistle of Clement, 32:2, Lightfoot, On-line. Internet. 10 Nov. 1999. Available at: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/ante-nic/clement/1clement.htm> .

7 "II Epistle of Clement," Lightfoot, On-line. Internet. 10 Nov. 1999. Available at: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/ante-nic/polycarp/polmart.htm> .

break in connection with God's covenant with the Jews. If the Church always existed, then either the Jews were never partakers of the Covenant, or they were temporary stewards who have forfeited the Covenant to the true people of God.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and an apparent disciple of John. In a letter by Polycarp to the believers at Philippi, once again there is no reference to Jews or Israel. But he does refer to a well known co-laborer in the faith, Ignatius, whom he clearly considers to be a great man of God. Ignatius' obvious anti-semitic sentiments are addressed below. A second work relating to Polycarp is known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The author is unknown. In this material it is mentioned that Gentiles and Jews from Smyrna supported the plan to have animals attack Polycarp. It is noted that Jews assisted in burning Polycarp alive, and they encouraged his body to be removed and disposed of to ensure no idolatry.<sup>8</sup> While possibly historically accurate, this material could only fuel increasing anti-Semitism in the early Church.

Far worse, however, are the writings of Ignatius. Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch, martyred in 107 CE under Emperor Trajan. Antioch was in present day Syria, which had a very large Jewish population.<sup>9</sup> He wrote a number of letters, many of which mentioned Jews. In his letter to the Philadelphia church, he implored his readers to not listen to anyone expound on Judaism. He continued that it was "preferable to listen to a circumcised man preach Christianity than an uncircumcised man preach Judaism." But if neither preaches Christ, "they are to me tombstones and graves of the dead."<sup>10</sup> Another letter to

---

8 "Martyrdom of Polycarp" Lightfoot, On-line. Internet. 10 Nov. 1999. Available: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/ante-nic/polycarp/polmart.htm>.

9 Paul Johnson, *History of the Jews*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 135.

10 Ignatius, "Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians," Lightfoot. On-line. Internet. 10 Nov. 1999. Available: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/ante-nic/ignatius/igphil.htm>.

the Magnesians, however, is his *coup d' grace* on the Jewish faith: "If we conform to Judaism, then we... have not received grace." He encourages his followers to not observe the Sabbath, but rather regulate the calendar by the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection. Finally, "it is absurd to have Jesus Christ on the lips, and at the same time live like a Jew. No. Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism believed in Christianity, and in its bosom was assembled everyone professing faith in God."<sup>11</sup> Ignatius' remarks are the first and clearest statements made regarding a complete separation of Christianity from Judaism and the Jewish people. And it is remarkably early. It is also obvious from the letters that his churches encountered and wrestled with Jewish issues. Syria and Palestine were known regions of Nazarene (Jewish-Christian) worship.<sup>12</sup> Yet his statement to the Magnesians that it is absurd to try and be both indicates his apparent disdain of those groups. It is unclear how much Ignatius influenced later Christian writers, but he certainly laid the foundation for the rejection of the Jewish people and their connection to the Church.

The most heinous of the early writings was the *Epistle of Barnabas*, universally rejected as being authored by the Apostle, and generally not accepted as an authoritative Apostolic Father writing. This Epistle was aimed at the Jewish-Christians and was written early, 96-98 CE.<sup>13</sup> In it, he vilifies the Jews, even the ones of the Bible, and rejects their covenant with God. He says the Jews lost their covenant forever when Moses destroyed the tablets on Mt. Sinai. He states that Jesus is for the Gentiles, who are the true recipients of God's covenant, not the Jews. He shows that the keeping of the new moons and

<sup>11</sup> Ignatius, "Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians," Lightfoot. On-line. Internet. 10 Nov. 1999. Available: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/antenic/ignatius/igmagnsa.htm> .

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Schonfield, *History of Jewish Christianity*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Schaff, Volume II, 303.

the Sabbaths are abolished as well as other Jewish law. There is only one law—the law of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> The tragedy is not that this work existed nor that it had much apparent influence on others, but that there was little or no rebuttals. The historic Church never gave the *Epistle of Barnabas* much credibility but then again, it failed to adopt writings that counter-balance the Epistle. The Nazarene community existed for centuries,<sup>15</sup> whereby it attempted to continue God’s covenant with the Jews from a New Covenant perspective, but the Church provides little or no assistance to such a group. In fact, it essentially rejects this approach.

The final Apostolic Father work is the *Epistle of Mathetes* to Diognetus, written somewhere between 150-200 CE. In this letter Mathetes makes clear that Judaism and Christianity are totally separate. He states that Christians do not hold to the superstition nor the forms of worship of the Jews. He claims that Jewish acts are folly, and God does not need blood, smoke and burnt offerings. He calls Jewish practices ridiculous and unworthy of notice. He considers Jews busy-bodies and boastful.<sup>16</sup> Mathetes’ anti-Semitism raises up a notch. Rather than simply criticizing Jewish practices, he now condemns them personally. Unfortunately, this is consistent with many of the later theological fathers.

## **THEOLOGICAL FATHERS**

As Christianity spread beyond the Jewish communities of the Roman Empire, it encountered opposition from without and within. It wrestled with paganism, Judaism and Greek humanism. A group of men, again largely bishops of metropolises,

---

14 “Epistle of Barnabas,” Lightfoot. On-line. Internet. 10 Nov. 1999. Available: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/ante-nic/barnabus.htm> .

15 Schonfield, 90.

16 Mathetes, “Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” Lightfoot. On-line. Internet. Available: <http://wesley.nnc.edu/noncanon/fathers/ante-nic/diognetu.htm> .

wrote treatises and letters attempting to prove the supremacy of Christianity over these other faiths. Issues in their writings ranged from theology to philosophy to practical living. These works helped define historic Christianity. Many of these men, beginning with Justin Martyr in the mid-2nd century and continuing through Augustine and Jerome of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, had much to say about the Jews and Israel. Unfortunately, none of them saw a continuation of God's covenant with the Jewish people, whether believers in the Messiah or not.

Possibly the most interesting and illuminating writing is Justin Martyr's *Conversation with Trypho the Jew*.<sup>17</sup> Written in the 140s, this dialogue covers every imaginable issue between Jews and Christians, including lengthy discussions of prophecy and philosophy. Justin Martyr was the first of the great Christian theologians. Trypho was a Jew, who by accident became acquainted with Justin Martyr in Ephesus as Justin was preparing for a voyage. After lengthy introductory remarks, Justin describes himself as believing in Jesus. Trypho, accompanied by other Jewish men, criticizes Justin and suggests he become circumcised and follow the law. Trypho claims that the Christians invented the notion that Jesus is the Messiah. After some debate Trypho asks why the Christians do not keep the law, and thus be different from the other nations. Justin claims that Christians serve the same God who led Israel out of Egypt, but they do not trust in Moses or the law. Rather Christ is the final law; he abrogates the old. Christians are now the true spiritual Israel and descendants of the patriarchs. He continues by stating that circumcision is a sign of separation that Jews must suffer, separation from God and the land of Israel, as recently experienced in the failed Bar Kochba revolt. Circumcision, the Sabbath and the Feasts, were enjoined on the Jews due to the

<sup>17</sup> Justin Martyr, "Conversation with Trypho the Jew" *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I*, ed. Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, American Edition, 1885. On line. Internet. Available: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0128.htm> .

hardness and transgressions of their hearts. Justin concedes in a response to Trypho that Jews who believe in Jesus but keep the observances will be saved. However, he considers them weak-minded because God gave the law due to their hardness of heart. Jews who reject Jesus are condemned, however.

Dr. Kendall Soulen in a recent book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, discusses the impact of Justin's writings on the development of replacement theology—the idea that the Church replaces Israel in God's covenant economy. Soulen argues that during his debates with Trypho and through other works challenging pagan philosophers, Justin developed a theology that essentially displaces Israel from any prominence in the Scriptures, despite the fact that Israel comprises almost the totality of space and interest in the Old Testament. Justin views God's plans in four parts: Creation, the Fall of Man, Redemption in Christ, Final Judgment and Consummation. He contends that the purposes of God's relationship with Israel was solely to birth the coming Messiah, who would establish His kingdom, which is now the Church. Consequently, the true Israel is the Church.<sup>18</sup> While earlier writings alluded to the view that the Church was now the sole covenant partner with God, nothing approaches the clear statements of Justin's. Worse, he provides the theological justification for God's permanent rejection of the Jews and Israel. If God rejects them, should not God's new covenant people, the Christians do the same?

By the end of the 2<sup>ND</sup> century and beginning of the 3<sup>RD</sup>, a wholly new issue arose in the Church that captivated the writings of most of the Fathers, i.e., Gnosticism.<sup>19</sup> Gnosticism's origins are ancient and are rooted in Hellenism, the concept of two separate worlds, the material and the spiritual. The material is evil; the spiritual, good. But like many other contemporary

---

<sup>18</sup> Kendall R. Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 34-40.

<sup>19</sup> Schaff, Volume II, 320.

philosophies, Gnosticism influenced Christian thinkers and challenged the prevailing theology of many Orthodox Christian leaders. There arose two particularly important bishop/theologians, Iraeneus and Tertullian, who, while primarily responding to gnostic ideals, further cemented the concepts of replacement theology within the Church. Gnosticism as taught by the leading Gnostic Christian, Marcion, contended there were two gods: The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. The God of the New Testament was superior to the God of the Old. The God of the Old pertained to the material world as represented by the Jews. The God of the New pertained to the spiritual, and Jesus Christ rescues humanity from the material and the Jews.

Iraeneus first responds in his work, *Against Heresies*, where he shows that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the same God of Jesus Christ. He proves there is a continuity of God's purposes from Creation through redemption in Christ to the consummation of God's kingdom on earth. Hence, there is only God, who has one purpose, the consummation of mankind in Christ. God had a plan for the Jews, who were to prepare themselves and the world for the coming of Christ. However, they rejected and murdered him. Because the Jews rejected God's provision, God granted their inheritance to the Gentiles alone. Jews who boast of being Israel are disinherited from the grace of God.<sup>20</sup> They are no longer useful. While Iraeneus's arguments effectively combated the gnostic notion of the two gods, it once again was at the expense of God's relationship and plan for the Jewish people.

Tertullian similarly argued there is only one God, and that the God of Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But then how does one explain the unity of Old and New Testaments? Tertullian suggested that the commandments of

---

<sup>20</sup> Soulen, 40-48.

the Torah are degrading and unworthy of an enlightened people. It was given to the Jews to curb idolatry and greed, which were unique Jewish characteristics not shared by the rest of the human race. Their “trail of crimes” culminated in the killing of Christ. Jews were always unworthy of election; now they have lost it. God’s choice was transferred to the Gentiles, who are capable of living at a higher level than the Jews.<sup>21</sup> As can be seen, these views not only contravene clear statements within the New Testament, but they ignore both the substance of the Tenach and the historical experience of the Jews. To suggest, as in Tertullian’s case, that the Jews were inferior in ethical quality to the Gentiles around them is astonishing in light of statements made in both Testaments about Gentiles and their typical pagan lifestyles within the Roman Empire.

Following Tertullian and much influenced by his writing is Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. He is considered by many to be the greatest bishop of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. He wrote numerous treatises on various schisms including a lengthy one called *Treatises Against the Jews*. While not particularly original in his condemnations of the Jews, he makes it clear that Christians succeeded the Jews in receiving God’s favor and they, the Gentiles, have attained the kingdom of heaven instead of the Jews. What makes Cyprian unique is his demand that Jews be expelled from his diocese at the point of the sword, though it is unclear whether that ever happened.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that this is the first such public call to expel Jews from an area by a notable Christian leader.

Probably, the next significant writer to discuss Jewish/Christian relations is the historian, Eusebius, whose *Ecclesiastical History* is still one of the mainstays of early Church history. He explores the crucial periods of Church

---

21 Tertullian, “Five Books Against Marcion,” trans. Dr. Holmes. On-line. Internet. Available: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0312.htm> .

22 Grosser, 58.

development in the late 1<sup>ST</sup> and early 2<sup>ND</sup> centuries. And, of course, he speaks of Jewish-Christians (Nazarenes or Ebionites), and of the church's relations to the larger Jewish world. He is somewhat favorably disposed to the early Nazarenes and their desire to keep the Mosaic law, but only as a witness to the other Jews to show them that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. But like all of his contemporaries, the Church has replaced Israel in God's economy, so once the first century has passed he disparages the law-keeping Nazarene community. He does mention, however, the breadth of the movement even well into the 3<sup>RD</sup> century, which includes Palestine, Syria, Cyprus and Mesopotamia.<sup>23</sup> Judaism, however, has no merit and is a threat to the Church. Tragically, he amplifies on Greek and pagan anti-Semitic diatribes by accusing Jews in every community of crucifying Christians during Purim to show their rejection of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> This later leads to the ritual murder charges trumped up by priests during the Middle Ages, resulting in potentially hundreds of thousands of Jewish deaths.

Following Eusebius's history, two groups of events dramatically changed Jewish/Christian relations: first, a series of church councils were convened to resolve doctrinal disputes whereby decisions were made that sealed the separation of Christianity from any Jewish connection. Second, through a decree by the Roman Emperor Constantine, Christianity was made the state religion, authorizing state action against anything perceived anti-Christian.<sup>25</sup> Now anti-Semitic statements made by Church Fathers often resulted in state action against the Jewish people. Unfortunately, the best example of such a case is a series of homilies against the Jews made by John Chrysostom in the late 4<sup>TH</sup> century. After a storied career in Christendom, he became the Bishop of Constantinople (the most powerful bish-

---

<sup>23</sup> Schonfield, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Grosser, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Grosser 74-75.

opric in the Eastern Empire) in 397 CE. This is Phillip Schaff's comments about Chrysostom in his classical and exhaustive 19<sup>th</sup> century work, *History of the Christian Church*:

*John, to whom an admiring posterity since the seventh century has given the name Chrysostomus, the Golden-Mouthed, is the greatest expositor and preacher of the Greek church, and still enjoys the highest honor in the whole Christian world. No one of the Oriental Fathers has left a more spotless reputation; no one is so much read and so often quoted by modern commentators.*<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of his reputation, Chrysostom issued a series of homilies specifically directed against Judaizing tendencies in his home region of Antioch. Antioch remained a stronghold of the Nazarene communities even to this late date. The following is from one of his treatises:

*The Jews are the most worthless of all men. They are lecherous, greedy, rapacious. They are perfidious murderers of Christ. They worship the devil, their religion is a sickness. The Jews are the odious assassins of Christ and for killing God there is no expiation possible, no indulgence or pardon. Christians may never cease vengeance, and the Jew must live in servitude forever. God always hated the Jews. It is incumbent upon all Christians to hate the Jews.*<sup>27</sup>

Without a doubt, these comments were of the worst, to date, made by the Church Fathers. What made them particularly dangerous was now they could be acted upon with either State sanction or, at a minimum, State acquiescence. Sure enough within a few years synagogues were ransacked, Jewish property was destroyed and Jewish rights within the Empire were limited. In an absolutely horrible admission, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, wrote to Emperor Theodosius following the destruction of a local synagogue, "I hereby declare, that it was I who set fire to the synagogue; indeed, I gave the orders for it

---

<sup>26</sup> Schaff, Volume III, 377.

<sup>27</sup> John Chrysostom, "Homilies Against the Jews," quoted in Grosser 78.

to be done so that there should no longer be any place where Christ is denied.”<sup>28</sup>

Contemporaneous with Chrysostom were two other Fathers from the West: Augustine, probably the most influential of all the Fathers, and Jerome, the translator and compiler of the Bible into the Latin Vulgate. The two often corresponded by letter. It appears from some of Jerome’s letters that he was envious of Augustine. In the late 390’s Jerome apparently had written a treatise on the Book of Galatians, which Augustine criticizes. Their communication elucidates their respective positions on Judaism and the Jewish people. Augustine asserts that the Apostle Paul maintained his Jewish lifestyle after faith in the Messiah. Augustine believed that it was not improper for Jewish believers to maintain Jewish customs. However, these ceremonies did not result in salvation. He argues that in Galatians Paul rebuked Peter for expecting the Gentiles to keep Jewish law. But it was not inappropriate for Peter and the other Jewish brethren to keep them. In Augustine’s view Paul only forsook those customs that were evil, i.e., those that were binding for salvation.<sup>29</sup>

Jerome vehemently opposes Augustine’s view of Galatians. He contends that Paul was free from the law himself, and he was rebuking Peter for slipping back under it. He then comments about the sect of the Minei or the Nazarenes, who still have synagogues in the East. “[T]hey desire to be both Jews and Christians—they are neither one nor the other... . If we must receive Jews into the Church, along with their customs, they will not become Christians but make us Jews.” He concludes by stating that whoever keeps Jewish laws are cast into the pit of perdition.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Grosser, 78-79.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, Letter Number 40 to Jerome. On-line. Internet. Available: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102040.htm> .

<sup>30</sup> Jerome, Letter Number 75 to Augustine. On-line. Internet. Available: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102075.htm> .

Augustine clarifies his position later by agreeing that he does not allow a Jew to maintain Jewish traditions if he becomes a Christian. Augustine suggested that God granted the Jews time in the first century to relinquish their tradition. But now they are no longer valid.<sup>31</sup> Augustine further took a somewhat more moderate position on Jews in general, unlike some of his contemporaries. He counseled that Jews should be left alone, not attacked by Christians, because they were God's example of a forsaken people and attested to the truth of the gospel by their lowly and rejected status. In some respects Augustine's views prevailed especially within the Western Church until the Crusades, 700 years later. Nevertheless, the damage was done. The Church Fathers *en masse* saw the Church as replacing Israel's status in God's covenant economy, ignoring the very premises of the Tenach, Yeshua's teaching and particularly the Apostle Paul's admonitions to his largely Gentile Christian audience. The Fathers' views cemented into the theological foundation of the Church a suspicion, at best, and a hatred, at worst, of all Jewish people, including those who similarly believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Tragically, these men's views provided the justification for unspeakable atrocities committed against the Jewish people, often instigated by the Church leaders in later years. The question that needs examining is how did this happen? How did a fully Jewish movement change into a wildly anti-Semitic institution? How did genuinely godly men, at least from all other appearances, who wrote and spoke of God and his ways in such profound terms, issue such demonically inspired rhetoric? The next section attempts to address these issues.

### **CAUSES OF THE CHURCH FATHERS' ANTI-SEMITISM**

Justin Martyr makes a very interesting comment towards the end of his dialogue with Trypho the Jew: "You curse us in your

---

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, Letter Number 82 to Jerome, On-line. Internet. Available: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102082.htm> .

synagogues; but we pray for you in our assemblies.”<sup>32</sup> From the very beginning of Yeshua’s ministry, there was little restraint showed by any party in attacking the other. The Pharisees called Yeshua the son of Belial (the devil).<sup>33</sup> Yeshua called them the children of the devil.<sup>34</sup> The Pharisees and others condemned Yeshua to death. Yeshua predicts Jerusalem’s destruction and the desolation of His people for failure to accept His Messiahship.<sup>35</sup> The Acts of the Apostles continue this legacy: The Apostle Paul enters a synagogue and preaches the gospel; some receive it but those who do not stir up the masses and throw him out. He then condemns those who rejected his message.<sup>36</sup> The battle continues throughout the first century and into the second. The Rabbis add a new benediction to the 18 benedictions recited on the Sabbath, where the heretic (the Jewish believer in Jesus, among others) is condemned.<sup>37</sup> Until the destruction of the Second Temple, and to a lesser extent the Bar Kochba rebellion in 131, the Jewish community was a force to be reckoned with in the development of the Messianic faith. Most of the apostles were martyred at the instigation of the Jewish community. Clement accused the Jewish community of fueling Emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians. The Martyrdom of Polycarp cites the Jews again in assisting in the death of Polycarp. Are these all fabrications or could they be true? It is likely these events are true, not because the Jewish community was inherently evil but because there was a genuine

<sup>32</sup> Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho the Jew.”

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 12:24.

<sup>34</sup> John 8:42-47.

<sup>35</sup> Luke 19:41-44.

<sup>36</sup> Acts of the Apostles 13:44-46.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, 146. This reference is to a curse that was added to the eighteen benedictions said in daily prayers, known as the Amidah. This curse, which is a reworking of an earlier statement, is known as the *Birkhat Haminim* or curse against the heretics. It was applied in the synagogue specifically to route out those who deviated from the set faith of the Pharisees/Rabbis, particularly the early Nazarenes.

struggle for power. Judaism was undergoing radical change with the development and consolidation of Rabbinic Judaism and hence contrary views were isolated and then persecuted. Similarly, the Church was developing with an increasing number of Gentile believers, and it was being forced to develop in contradistinction to the apparent direction of the normative Jewish faith.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, both groups had to contend with the paganized Roman Empire and an increasing level of persecution by the Empire towards both communities. Each community responded in its own way towards the persecution. The Jewish community rebelled, e.g., the two major revolts. Because the Jews lost both revolts, they became an increasingly targeted and despised community.<sup>39</sup> Jewish believers participated for a time in both revolts, but in both cases became the subject of persecution by their rebelling brethren.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, the formative Church yielded to martyrdom rather than rebellion and ultimately grew in numbers and influence to the point where it was accepted as a recognized institution within the Roman Empire. The Church Fathers lived through and had to respond to these experiences. Because the Fathers believed that Jesus was the true Messiah for all mankind, they sought to convince others, both Jew and Gentile alike. To convince both they distinguished themselves from both. This is particularly true in debates with the Jewish community. By the end of the first century it was abundantly clear that normative Judaism had rejected the Apostles' witness and was consolidating its belief system in a different manner. Since the Jewish community was clear in regards to its views on Jesus and his followers, the Church Fathers tried to persuade Jews that the Scriptures foretold of a new and different way. If God's promises are true and real, and yet the community to which the promises were

---

<sup>38</sup> Schonfield, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, 143.

<sup>40</sup> Schonfield, 61.

made appears to be rejecting them, what about those outside of the community who are accepting them? Who and what are they? And what of the original community to whom the promises were addressed? Somewhat logically, albeit unfortunately, the Fathers saw themselves as the true repositories of God's promises, particularly in opposition to the apparent original group. Consequently, the Scriptures must foretell the rise of a new community that replaces the original. In the end this is exactly how the Fathers rationalized their position and their community. Had the Church remained a marginalized or even a minority community, the distinctions from the Jewish community would not have been overly consequential. However, the Church became the majority community, and similar to the treatment the once larger Jewish community showed the Jewish followers of Jesus, now the Church took aim at the minority community, with far more disastrous consequences.

None of this is written to justify the actions of the Church Fathers. Despite the polemics of some of the New Testament, it is quite clear that Yeshua never saw an entity replacing the Jewish people in God's economy. And the same is true for the Apostle Paul. A joint venture of sorts with Jews and Gentiles expressing their faith somewhat differently? Yes. The fulfillment of the Jewish call for the law to go forth from Zion to the ends of the earth? Absolutely. But history is always written with the advantage of hindsight. Yet history occurs in the responses to the present. The Fathers very much were men who responded to those events in a logical yet short-sighted and skewed manner. What is worse was that each new generation seemed to skew the plumb-line further, precursing an eventual disaster.

### **LESSONS FOR THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT**

How do we respond to the Church Fathers? Their views on the Jews, Israel and the purposes and composition of the Church, we must reject. However, we cannot ignore the beauty and the

ingenuity of much of their material. From Polycarp's and Ignatius' concern for their flocks to Justin Martyr's brilliant analysis of the comprehensiveness of God's plans for humanity through Augustine's incomparable, *City of God*, these men knew God and influenced all of human history to know, ironically the God of Israel, and the God of the Bible. With the exception of the Nazarene community, whose writings have largely disappeared, the Church Fathers are the sole early transmitters and expositors of New Testament truth and teaching.

Whether we like it or not, Messianic Judaism is a product of two communities, the historic Church and historic Jewry. Our faith in the Messiah originates with the New Testament and is influenced by the writings of not only the Church Fathers, but later reformers as well. Our identity, traditions, culture and faith practices are additionally influenced by the Tenach, the Talmud, Rabbinic writings, Jewish history and our personal Jewish experience. Because of the tragic relations between these two communities, it is difficult, if not impossible, to claim heritage from both and to build a viable community where both are evident. In fact, it is very tempting to disparage one or the other to enable this new community to forge a unique identity. But if we do so, we will fall into the same trap as the Church Fathers. As discussed previously, the Church Fathers faced opposition from the Jewish community. When coupled with the increasing political risks of connections with the Jewish community, their natural reaction was to reject the community which birthed them and to claim a separate and special status. That set the stage for mutual disdain and disaster. Consider what may have happened had the Church Fathers stood with Israel and the Jews despite the opposition. Yes, maybe there would have been a healthy competition for a time, but it is possible that when things affecting both communities arose that the two could have combined their efforts, maintained bridges between them and possibly formed an entity that adequately expressed distinctives of both communities.

Today, there exists two separate communities with distinctly different histories, and where the two have overlapped, the results have been disastrous. Messianic Judaism, however, is strangely connected with both, and probably has the greatest potential of bridging the historical chasm. The Church Fathers helped to create the chasm. We can either continue their pattern by distancing ourselves from either community, or we can walk a treacherous path that embraces both while rejecting the positions that caused the breach in the first place. Can Messianic Judaism become an accepted branch of Judaism and simultaneously be accepted by the Church as members of the Body of Messiah? It is not only possible, but it is incumbent upon us to try. “All things are possible to him who believes.”<sup>41</sup>

*Jamie Cowen has been the leader of Tikvat Israel Messianic Congregation in Richmond, Virginia since 1990. He is the President of Russian Immigration Services, a Richmond-based organization which provides legal and social services to Russian Immigrants in the U.S. Mr. Cowen earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Pennsylvania State University, a Juris Doctor degree from Catholic University and a Master of Theology degree with a major in Jewish Studies from Messiah Biblical Institute and Graduate School of Theology. He currently sits on the Executive Committee of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations where he serves as the Vice-President.*



---

41 Mark 9:23.