



The Origins of Anti-Jewish Rhetoric in the Hymns of Good Friday

01.04.2023 | George Demacopoulos

The oldest-surviving Christian hymns designed exclusively for Holy Week are a set known as the *Idiomele*. In the modern Orthodox Church, they are sung during the Royal Hours service of Good Friday morning (the final hymn is sung during two additional services). Apart from their antiquity, the most noteworthy feature of these hymns is that they were the first to blame “the Jews” for the death of Christ.

Not only is this accusation historically misleading, it constituted a dramatic break from earlier hymns that reflected on the crucifixion. Based on recent historical research, we are now able to link the introduction of anti-Jewish rhetoric in the *Idiomele* to precise events in Palestine at the time of their composition. This historical evidence further accentuates our need to address the theological incoherence of the anti-Jewish rhetoric of these hymns and others composed in later centuries.

The *Idiomele* may be the oldest Holy Week hymns but they were not the first to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Approximately one thousand hymns emphasizing those very themes predate the *Idiomele*. Those earlier hymns were composed for an eight-week cycle of Sunday services, known as the *Octoechos*, and survive in a text known as the [Jerusalem Georgian Chantbook](#). While a few of those hymns do contain negative statements about the Jews, on balance they consistently position the whole of humanity as responsible for the death of Christ, precisely because Christ’s death and resurrection save the whole of humanity from death. In other words, our earliest evidence of Christian Liturgy instructs us that, week after week, Christians sang of themselves as the ones most responsible for the death of Christ. It is both historically and theologically significant that the earliest Christians in Jerusalem did not assign blame for the death of Jesus outside of their own community.

But that is precisely what began to happen with the composition of the *Idiomele*. Four of the twelve explicitly name “the Jews” (?? ????????) as the lone group responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion (the fourth, sixth, seventh, and eighth hymns respectively). A fifth speaks indirectly of the Jews by juxtaposing the “transgressors” (???????????) to the Gentiles, who are elided with the singers of the hymn because they are the ones who “glorify [Christ] with the Father and Spirit” (eleventh hymn).

None of the *Idiomele* mention the role of the Romans in Jesus’ crucifixion, even though figures like Pontius Pilate feature prominently in the Gospel accounts of Christ’s passion and even though crucifixion was a uniquely Roman punishment. Simply put, the Jews never performed crucifixion.

Perhaps more significantly, even though Jesus, his disciples, and the vast majority of his early followers were Jews, the *Idiomele* place “the Jews” outside of “our” community.

Why, we might ask, did the authors of the *Idiomele* abandon centuries of hymnographic tradition to assign blame for Christ’s death outside of the community?

Historical Answers

Since antiquity, the Romans had harassed Jewish communities, but they had never required Jews

to adopt Roman religious practices. It was only after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century that the government attempted to force Jews to adopt the religion of the state. The emperor Justinian (527-565) was responsible for the most vigorous anti-Jewish legislation. In addition to fines and the confiscation of property, Justinian prohibited Jews from serving as members of town councils and he forbid the construction of new synagogues. In Palestine, where Jews had sizeable populations, Justinian dismantled existing synagogues and likely used his army to force conversion.

Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that Justinian's reign witnessed the largest outbreak of anti-Christian violence by Palestinian Jews of the late-ancient period. The most dramatic of these uprisings occurred during the 550s when a mob of Jews and Samaritans joined forces to assault the Christians of Caesarea, the capital of the Roman province. In addition to killing a number of Christians, including the governor, the mob plundered and burned several churches.

In a recent doctoral dissertation, Christopher Sweeney was able to prove that the *Idiomele* were composed in Palestine during Justinian's reign. While it is uncertain who authored the *Idiomele*, we know that the monks of famous monastery of Mar Saba adopted them into their Good Friday services in the narrow timeframe between 553 and 560. Shortly thereafter, these hymns were appropriated by the Church of the Anastasi in Jerusalem. In other words, these hymns were first used by Chalcedonian Christians at the precise point in history when Jewish and Christian communities in Palestine were undergoing unprecedented levels of violence. It is not too difficult to see the anti-Jewish features of the *Idiomele* as a hymnographic response to the on-the-ground reality of escalating Jewish/Christian conflict.

Theological Problems

While this historical context may help us to explain the origins of anti-Jewish rhetoric in the *Idiomele*, it does not address the theological implications of this shift. More than anything else, the introduction of anti-Jewish rhetoric in these five *Idiomele* shifts the focus from a theological reflection on the crucifixion as an ontological event that alters the relationship between God and humanity to seeing the crucifixion as a specific historical event in which Christ is murdered by a specific, alien group of people whose descendants remain culpable for his death. Not only does this change detract from the central theological tenet of the death and resurrection of Christ—that it allows for the restoration of humanity—it removes the consideration of personal accountability from the singer. Culpability is shifted from “me” to “them.”

To understand the theological significance of recalibrating who is responsible for the violence that Christ suffers, we can look to a comparison between those *Idiomele* that do and those that do not isolate the Jews for censure. The second *idiomele* affirms that Christ was “nailed to the cross by wicked men for our sins.” The third *idiomele* notes that Christ “suffered the transgressors to lay hold” of him. Hymns that use phrases like “wicked men” or “transgressors” to identify the culprits of Christ's crucifixion (without any other indication of their identity) are both more historically accurate and more amenable to a constructive exegesis of the crucifixion than those that transfer all of the guilt to an external body, such as “the Jews.” This is because a singer can see themselves in the more generic descriptions of sinners. As the ancient Sunday hymns affirm, Christ suffered on behalf of all because all humans have sinned and need the saving act of Christ's death and resurrection.

By shifting the focus of culpability for Christ's death from a collective group of singing sinners to a non-singing external community (i.e. the Jews), these five *idiomele* forsake one of the most important theological dimensions of the Christian theology of the Cross—that Christ died because “we” needed him to do so.

To be clear, not all of the *Idiomele* make this theological mistake. And, poetically, many of the

Idiomele are beautiful. The final one—*Today is hung upon the cross He who suspended the earth and the waters*—is, to my mind, the most powerful hymn of Holy Week.

But, is it not time for us revisit the usefulness of hymns, like the five anti-Jewish *Idiomele*, that not only broke from the theological tradition of the early church, but which can so easily be shown to be an ahistorical, rhetorical reaction to temporary conditions that no longer exist?

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Source: [Public Orthodoxy](#), April 2022. *Public Orthodoxy* is a publication of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham University.