# Broken Roots. What Happens When We Don't Know Jesus's Jewish Context

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**On the 16th of October, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the highest-ranking Catholic Church clergyman in the Israel region, made an offer that shocked the world. He proposed to exchange himself as a prisoner, in order to secure the release of dozens of Jewish children held by Hamas in the current Israeli-Gaza war, knowing it could cost him his life. Such boldness of a Christian on behalf of Jewish children is much rarer than it should be.**

Throughout the last two millennia, we Christians have had as much to do with propagating antisemitism as preventing it. To this day there are antisemitic Christians who believe that the Bible supports such hatred of Jews. Robert Bowers notoriously used John 8:44 in his 2018 synagogue massacre stating, "Jews are the Children of Satan." During the last century only about 830 Protestant Christians world-wide were recognized as *The Rightoues among the Nations*, who put themselves in harm's way to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. But where did this Christian antisemitism start? It turns out that this phenomenon goes all the way back to the ancient Church Fathers. Their unwillingness to exhort learning about the Jewishness of Jesus has been one of the largest contributors of antisemitism through the ages. As Christians, ignoring such Jewish context is to imperil our witness and often leads to a renaissance of antisemitic problems.

## A Slow Severing

The historic church has had its share of misunderstandings with other cultures, which came laden with a heavy price. But few prices are as steep as this outworking of the church's antisemitism through the centuries. From the 1st century through the 4th century, the relationships between Christ-denying Jews, Messianic Jews, and Greco-Roman Christians were tense and mixed. Greco-Roman Christians had little in common with Non-Messianic Jews, yet had harmony with Messianic Jews, though tensions still existed (Galatians 2). But it was the Jewish revolt against Rome in A.D. 66 that accelerated what scholars have dubbed 'The Parting of the Ways,' during which Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians slowly drifted away from each other. Relations deteriorated even more drastically in A.D. 132, when the Jewish General Bar Kokhba revolted against Rome, declaring himself the Messiah, while also attacking the Messianic Jews who did not support his cause.

Bar Kokhba was crushed a few years later with an overwhelming Roman force that flattened most Jewish towns and killed nearly half a million Jews. After that, The Jewish people weren't allowed to enter Jerusalem, renamed Aelia Capitolina, upon pain of death. Dr. Marvin Wilson notes, "Until this point…those Jews who believed in Jesus sought to remain within the synagogue, or at the very least, under the religious umbrella of Judaism." Lindemann & Levy's book Antisemitism states, "It appears for centuries some Christians would frequent synagogue functions as well as local church liturgies. The boundaries between the two groups remained quite porous for a considerable period." The revolt's aftermath likely stunted the growth of the Jewish arm of Christianity. However, the Gentile Christian population grew steadily, ever more separated from the Jewish roots of the faith by time, destruction, and culture. The long-term consequences of this began to manifest by the 2nd century.

## Poisoned Well

In the early 2nd century, Church leaders such as Ignatius identified the Jews with the designations "Christ-Killers" and "Murderers of the Lord," which were, soon after that, widespread. He also said that anyone who celebrated Passover was a partaker with those who killed the Lord. In the mid-2nd century, Justin Martyr proclaimed that Christians were the true Israel, and that Jews were never the intended seed of promise. He also re-stated the Christ-killer contention, declaring, "For after that you [Jews] had crucified him, the only blameless and righteous Man…" In the 5th century, John Chrysostom earned the moniker "Silver Tongue" due to his eloquent defense of the Christian faith. Yet, his Homily against the Jews is taken to a sinister level:

> "[They are] inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil.…Debauchery and drunkenness have given them the manners of the pig…they have surpassed the ferocity of wild beasts, for they murder their offspring and immolate them to the devil… Their synagogues may be likened to the abode of Satan…"

## Burnt Branches

This loss of the Jewish context in the New Testament gave room for the Theologian Marcion to declare that Jesus was a new God, distinct from the Old Testament vengeful God. In Marcion's case the church dubbed him a heretic, but the antisemitic dominos kept falling. As Professor Marvin Wilson of Gordon College explains, "Their [The Church Fathers] anti-Judaic stance forced them to view the Jewish Scriptures with its many strange laws and customs as offensive at worst and a little more than antiquated at best." Not all the Church Fathers were antisemitic, but those who were not were soon outvoted. The Synod of Eliva, a church council in 306 A.D., was the beginning of the end for Messianic Jews, as it forbade intermarriage, sexual intercourse, and the sharing of meals between Jews and Christians.

The emperor Constantine is often either exorbitantly praised or excessively criticized regarding his treatment of Christianity, but one issue often glossed over by scholars is his poor treatment of Jews at the Council of Nicaea. He wrote:

> "It was declared to be particularly unworthy for [Easter], the holiest of all festivals, to follow the calculations of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded…We ought not therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews…we desire…to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews…[even if their deliberations are not wrong] it would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people."

Given Constantine's changes to the dates of biblical holidays, it is no wonder that modern Christians are often confused by Jewish calendars when it comes to Easter and Passover! The Synod rulings against Jews continued through the years with multiple council rulings (*see Fig 1 below*).

## The Family Tree of Jesus

Had the early 2nd-century church spent more time learning from the Jewish Christians, they likely would have seen or understood the Jewish nature of the Gospels. Jesus observed the Law (Torah) in every way and affirmed Jewish ways of living. Many modern Jewish and Christian scholars assert that Jesus affirmed the Torah and never broke its law. He worshipped at the synagogues and regularly took part in the Torah-centered education. Luke 4:15 notes, "He taught in their

synagogues, and everyone respected him." The modern Rabbi Harvey Falk recently noted, "Yeshua (Jesus) strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically…not one of our sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the Torah."

Jesus's teaching style and methods were also that of a sage from Galilee, where he was often received as a respected Rabbi. This was important because as David Friedman notes, "These positive reactions would not have occurred if Yeshua had been ignorant of Torah. If he had taught or practiced against the Torah, the common people from Judea and Galilee would have dismissed his teachings." This also means he prayed Jewish prayers publicly with his fellow Jews in synagogues, likely including the 1st-century 18-benediction Amidah and the Shema, the variations of which are still prayed in synagogues today. He also dressed in traditional Jewish clothing, including wearing *tzitzit,* the Deuteronomy 22:12-commanded tassels attached to the corners of one's robe which many Jews still wear today. According to David Bivin, the word in Matthew 9:20-21 that is translated into English as 'hem,' is translated into 'tzitzit' from the Septuagint.

Jesus expected his disciples to respect the Jewish Temple worship (Matt 5:23-24). He observed Jewish holidays such as the Feast of Dedication (Hannukah), the Feast of Booths (Sukkot), and Passover. Jesus also observed the Sabbath because the law required it, though he disagreed on debatable mitzvot (good actions) concerning it. He affirmed Jewish life and Jewish Law, which, as the Jewish Messiah and Savior of the world, was necessary to fulfill God's covenantal plan.

## Jew, Judean, Galilean, Sadducee – What's the difference?

The blanket charges of the later church against 'Jews' missed the nuance of 1st-century Judaism. The title 'Jews' in the Gospels was often misunderstood by the early church as applying to all Jews. But the late Dr. David Stern notes, "Throughout all four Gospels and Acts 1-8, '*Ioudaioi,'* in nearly all instances, means Judeans and not Jews. In these books when Jews refer to *Ioudaioi*, they're generally distinguishing Judean Jews from Galilean Jews." This was akin to city-folk versus country-folk antagonism. This seems lost on the Church Fathers.

The 'Christ-killer' charge dumped upon the whole of the Jewish people is also hollow. The Sanhedrin, who condemned Jesus, was controlled by the Sadducees who were put in power by Hellenistic King Herod and the Romans. They were hardly representative of the common Jew who welcomed Jesus in like a royal dignitary on Palm Sunday. Further Archeological evidence has uncovered Pontus Pilates court in Jerusalem which could only hold around 100 people. This is hardly representative of the whole city of Jerusalem yelling for Barnabas' freedom instead of Jesus's at his trial.

## Culturally Relevant Replant

For nearly eighteen hundred years, Jews and Christians alike have suffered because the early church fathers neglected the cultural context of Jesus and his affirmation of his people. While not every sin of misrepresentation may lead to a horror as terrible as the 2018 Pittsburg Massacre or the Holocaust, the fact that such a possibility exists must make us vigilant. Acts like that of Cardinal Pizzaballa of Jerusalem attempting to give himself up for Jewish children ought not to be so uncommon.

In 1960 when a Jewish reporter said to Edith Shaeffer that Christianity sounded like a Jewish religion, she firmly responded, "Yes…Christianity is Jewish…Christianity is meant to be Jewish. That is what it is all about. Christians ought to love Jews." Christian advocates must take to heart the command to love, and the consequences of their 2nd-Century Church Fathers' mistakes. Jesus's cultural context always matters, and we cannot turn a blind eye to it. Jesus loved his Jewish people, and we Christians ought to as well by learning about his Jewish-affirming, life-giving

context.

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