

The *Origin* of Anti-Semitism

by Gerhard O Marx

The question of anti-Semitism first came to my attention at College in the 60s when the lecturer in a class on ecclesiastical history posed the question, "Why are the Jews persecuted and despised so much?" This question triggered in me a desire to delve deeper into the question, *why* have the Jewish people throughout history been singled out more than any other people as an object of hate and derision? Why has that race been the target of perpetual persecution from time immemorial, culminating in the Holocaust?

This question of *why* is still being asked in early 2005 following the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Unfortunately there are still many historically inaccurate, theologically contrived and highly superficial answers on the market. None of them provide convincing answers to the question of why the Jews have historically been targeted for all the hatred and persecution that history records.

Here a few key examples given attempting to show the reason for anti-Semitism:

- Their status of wealth, reflected by an excessive love of money, highlighted by the Jews becoming moneylenders in the Middle Ages and culminating in many holding high positions in financial institutions.
- An unwillingness 2000 years ago to accept Jesus of Nazareth as their long prophesied Messiah.
- Divine accountability for the crowds in Jerusalem who called for Christ's "blood to be on us and our children"(Gospel of Matthew 27:35).
- The perpetuated belief of many, first formulated by a Roman attired Christianity, that the Jews alone were responsible for murdering the Son of God.
- ❖ The *first* assumed reason stated above lacks any historical backing since the Jews were persecuted long before they became moneylenders in the Middle Ages. Lending the nobility and sometimes kings money was a direct outgrowth of the Jews not being allowed to own land in many Christian countries as well as being barred from other professions in outwardly Christian societies. As a consequence, they became moneylenders in order to survive, seeing that agricultural employment was prohibited.
- ❖ The *second* reason, that the unwillingness to accept Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah serves as Divine rejection of the Jewish people, is countered by the apostle Paul in detail in the New Testament book of Romans, chapter 11. All too

many professing Christians take the view that God cast the entire Jewish people aside for not believing in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul categorically denies this assumption when stating, "*I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin*"(Romans 11:1). In verse 7 we read that the majority of Israel were blinded spiritually, *not only* at New Testament times but also at the time of Moses, as the apostle to the Nations states, "*But their minds were blinded. For unto this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies in their heart*" (2 Corinthians 3:14-15).

The belief that the people of Judah deliberately and knowingly refused to accept the long expected Messiah and with full knowledge of the implication of such a rejection is countered by the apostle John, "And the light shines in darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it." And again: "He was in the world and the world did not know Him"(John 1:5.10). The world mentioned here would also include Romans, Greeks, North Africans and other non-Israelites. Had Jesus as Messiah appeared in Rome or Athens or Alexandria or any other geographical area (scripturally not acceptable), the indigenous people would have rejected Him as well. That is the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.

- ❖ The *third* reason, based on the belief that the Jews in Jerusalem brought anti-semitic feelings upon all Jews everywhere by calling for Christ's blood to be upon them and their children is flawed, both historically and theologically. The historical fact is that the vast majority of Jews at the time of the crucifixion were living outside the geographical bounds of the Holy Land. Historians have estimated that no more than a third of the Jews were actually living in Palestine at the time of Christ, with an additional third living in Babylonia where they had been given permission to settle along the Chebar river, a tributary of the Euphrates, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah by King Nebuchadnezzar some 600 years prior to the Christian era. A generation later, when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 AD, the Persian king allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judea, but many didn't take up the offer and stayed behind.

Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy and Spain were other main areas where they had settled in the centuries leading up to the time of Christ. Most Jews living in Judea, Samaria and Galilee at the time of the Passover in 31 AD neither witnessed the crucifixion nor were present at the trial of Jesus under Pontius Pilate. Only some of those who assembled before Pilate and heard the religious authorities forcing Pilate's hand in condemning Jesus were responsible for those foolish words, "His blood be on us and our children"(Matthew 27:35). Is every Jewish man, woman and child throughout all generations to be tainted with the same brush? Are they all guilty on account of an event that occurred some 2000 years ago? Would a just God hold a whole people accountable for the ill-judged words of a few? Did Christ's prayer shortly before his death go unanswered when He asked, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do*"?(Luke 23:34).

- ❖ The *fourth* reason for anti-Semitism, that the Jews alone were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, is equally flawed scripturally. Certainly the Jewish religious leaders wanted Christ dead and influenced the Jewish masses to support their action to be rid of this Teacher of righteousness. “*But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus*”(Matthew 27:20). Christ did make it plain that the religious establishment were responsible for “killing the prophets” in bye-gone days (Matthew 23:37) who were sent to Jerusalem to prepare a people spiritually for the coming of the long expected Messiah.

Since God revealed His truth initially *only* to the Israelites (See 1 Kings 8:53 and Amos 3:2), He equally expected those who “sat in Moses seat”(Matthew 23:1) not only to teach the moral standards He set for the people and to live by them, but to reveal the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah foretold in the Holy Scriptures. The religious establishment was aware of all the prophecies linking Jesus as the true Messiah, but denied that reality, no doubt being fearful of losing their position in the religious hierarchy. With knowledge comes responsibility. For their part they paid dearly in that they lost the spiritual authority they had been given to lead God’s people, soon to be given to the apostles and the New Testament church. Their temple would be destroyed and the office of the high priest cease to exist. “*Your house is left to you desolate*” is the way Christ stated it in Matthew 23:38.

That the Jewish leaders on the eve of the Passover were implicated in Christ’s death is not in doubt. Their action led to the destruction of the temple and with it their spiritual authority in Jerusalem, when the office of the high priest ceased to function. But are there others who are implicated in Christ’s death? The Holy Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, declare plainly that Jesus Christ died for everyone on account of all having sinned, having transgressed God’s immutable Law. “*Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness*”(I John 3:4). “The wages of sin is death,” we are told in Romans 6:23. Christ died in order to atone for everybody’s sins because all human beings have broken God’s Law. Just as the gift of everlasting life is offered to people outside the commonwealth of Israel, so every human being’s sins are atoned by Christ’s death. “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” the apostle Paul wrote (Romans 3:23). All human beings are implicated in Christ’s death because we all have sinned and “*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness,*” (Hebrews 9:22). Christ’s death was therefore inevitable and His atonement for our sins opens the door to everlasting life. But on God’s terms, and one of those terms is that we recognise that we individually, not only the Jews, are responsible for Christ’s death.

Some of the early Church fathers of the 3rd century onwards refused to see it that way, holding to the view that the Jews alone were guilty of Christ’s death. Notice early church father Origen’s comments (182 – 251 AD): “We may thus assert in utter confidence that the Jews will not return to their earlier situation, for they have committed the most abominable crimes, in forming this conspiracy against the Saviour of the human race”(as quoted in Leon Poliakov’s *The History of Anti-*

Semitism, page 23). “From the beginning of the third century, the thesis of the divine punishment of the Jews was explicitly formulated by Origen,” states Poliakov.

This concept of the sole guilt of the Jews fostered ill feelings among future generations, often encouraged by eminent individuals like Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, the German Reformer Martin Luther and Empress Maria Theresia of Bohemia, all of who recommended that Christians should have no dealings with the Jews.

- Constantine: “And consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews...” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson ed., v. 1 p. 199)
- Luther: “In short, one should not tolerate the Jews by us. One should neither eat nor drink with them” (See Luther’s *Stellung zu der Geschichte der Juden*, Reinhold Levin, p. 80).
- Maria-Theresia: “In the future no Jew is any longer to be tolerated in the kingdom of Bohemia” (See Willy J Pasedag, *Christus und Israel*, p. 67).
- History records that England late in the reign of Edward I in 1290 expelled the Jews from this island
- Spain, during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, expelled the Jews in 1492, hastening the search of some Jews in Spain to find the Lost Ten Tribes believed to reside somewhere in the East (See *Sail of Hope – The Secret Mission of Christopher Columbus*) by Simon Wiesenthal).

Widely circulated statements from eminent people and expulsions from major nations like England and Spain served to poison the relationship even more of Christendom towards the Jewish people.

We have looked at the stated reasons why a nominally Christian society dealt so harshly with the Jews during the Middle Ages. We have seen that they were singled out as the people who not only rejected Jesus as Messiah, but were also responsible for Christ’s death. But that isn’t the whole story. The initial reason for anti-Jewish feelings goes much deeper and has its beginnings in Old Testament times, long *before* the Christian era. The Jews were a special target for persecution as far back as the Greek and Persian periods. There are traces of it even earlier. Throughout their recorded history they have faced threats to their collective existence. Here are some examples:

- Within years of ancient Israel establishing its headquarters in Jerusalem, Asaph the chief musician in King David’s kingdom, laments the plight of his people among the nations around him as we read in Psalm 83:3-4:

*“They have taken crafty counsel against Your people,
and consulted together against Your sheltered ones.
They have said: ‘Come and let us cut them off from being a nation,
That the name of Israel may be remembered no more’.”*

- Some 500 years later, during the Persian period, we find another recorded attempt to destroy the Jews as a people. The initiator this time is Haman, whose exact words are recorded in the Book of Esther:

“Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus...”(Esther 3:6).

As we come to the Greek period of influence (4th to 1st centuries B.C.), we have to rely on secular history to record another chapter in the saga of Anti-Semitism. (There were no books written in the few preceding centuries before the advent of Christianity which were recognised by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem as divinely inspired and therefore were given no entrance into the Holy Scriptures. The apocryphal books fall into this category). History as recorded in the secular Apocrypha and elsewhere depicts a conflict that the Jews had with the Syrian Greeks in the 2nd century B.C. This is what the historian William Langer wrote:

- “Led by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, the Jews rebelled against Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) (175-164 BC), who *had* declared Judaism illegal (168 AD)” (*The Encyclopedia of WORLD HISTORY*, p. 32, 1960 edition).

The motive Antiochus had for suppressing the religion of the Jews is very revealing and goes a long way in addressing the reasons why the Jews have been hated and despised more than any other race. It concerns their *religious* way of life. *That* is what Antiochus hated. “In 175 BCE Antiochus Epiphanes became king of Syria...From the very beginning he hated the Jewish people. His chief reason was that they remained faithful to their own God and their own religion and refused to accept the idol-worship of the Greeks.” (*A Pictorial Treasury of Jewish Holidays and Customs*, by Morris Epstein, p. 50). Some may see in this statement a purely Jewish explanation of anti-semitism with no other factual backing. Not so. The Holy Scriptures of the pre-Roman period back up this view. Take a closer look at two Old Testament references already referred to and we will see the validity of the above quotation.

Psalm 83:1-2: “*Do not keep silent, O God! Do not hold Your peace, and do not be still, O God! For behold, Your enemies make a tumult and those who hate You have lifted up their head.*” How is this hatred exhibited? Verse 3 shows that that hatred against God is directed towards “Your people” – the people of Israel.

Centuries later, Antiochus tried to put restrictions on the way the Jews worshipped with the following edicts:

- “The Jews shall eat forbidden foods! They shall not keep the Sabbath! And they will bow down before the altars of our Greek gods.”(Epstein, p.51).

It should be remembered that the people of Israel, well over a thousand years before it became fashionable in other civilisations, were the first people on earth to believe in the existence of *one* God, *invisible* and *eternal* instead of a plurality of deities (at the time of Abraham – Genesis 21:33; Moses --Exodus 3:14 and Hebrews 11:27; King David --Psalm 96:5; the prophet Isaiah – Isa. 40:28; See also the Assyrian Black Obelisk of the 8th century B.C. in the British Museum re. king Jehu, in whose

name was incorporated the name 'Yahweh' (literally. *Everlasting* or *Eternal*). Did the ancient Israelites fashion this concept of an eternally existing God who the prophet Isaiah describes as the one "who inhabits eternity"(Isa. 57:15) on account of superior intellect or was it because the religion that the Israelites were asked to embrace was of Divine origin? From the book of Genesis to Revelation the religion described within its pages, which the people of Israel were to embrace, is one of Divine revelation. Human intellect has nothing to do with it, as the Holy Scriptures clearly point out.

The plain fact is that the Jews were different from others in that they worshipped on a different day from the day the Greeks, Persians and Romans worshipped on. Then there was the prohibition of worshipping idols which was a common practice in the entire known world except in Judea. This set the Jew apart from other societies, a fact that was often detested among pagan societies where superstitious beliefs and immoral practices were commonplace

A prime example of Jews not worshipping idols and images of their God is reported to us by the Roman historian Tacitus. Writing in the late first century A.D. he describes a visit the Roman General Pompeii made to the Jewish temple after he conquered the Holy city in 73 B.C. He had heard that the Jews indeed have no statue of their God in the temple. This Pompeii was not about to believe. He was to investigate the whole matter by entering the most Holy Place of the temple and found, in the words of Tacitus, "no single likeness of a god but an empty and forsaken sanctuary." The Jewish belief, revealed from above, that it is not possible to worship the eternity embracing, invisible God with images and statues was unthinkable to the mind of the Roman conqueror of Jerusalem.

During the earlier Persian period, Haman the enemy of the Jews who wanted them all destroyed as already mentioned earlier, gives a similar motive for his planned action. We read of it in the Book of Esther, chapter 3. In verse 5 he has to get permission from the king, Ahasuerus and gives a reason for his final solution of these people by stating "their laws are different from all other peoples." Again we see it's the way of life that the Jews exhibited that provoked Haman to action. Of course their laws were different because the origin of these laws, like the Ten Commandments and many other laws on human relationships, came from God.

The early church father Justin Martyr (2nd century), directed this statement of his against the Jews when he said, "But we do not trust through Moses or through the Law... For the Law promulgated on Horeb [The 10 Commandments from Mt. Sinai] is now old, and belongs to yourselves alone, " adding, "Christ has given us an eternal and final law, after which there shall be no law, no commandment, no ordinance..." (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, p.199, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson ed.). A good century later Constantine the Great issued the following statement: "We ought not therefore to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Saviour has shown us another way: our worship follows a more legitimate and convenient course..." (*Ibid*).

In more modern times, Adolf Hitler passed this blunt verdict on The Ten Commandments, the Law of God that all too many nominal Christians have rejected as the fundamental code of morality.

- "This is what we are fighting against...the great law of divine nature. Against the so-called Ten Commandments, against them we are fighting...It's got to get out of our blood, that curse from Mount Sinai! That poison with which both Jews and Christians have spoiled and soiled the free, wonderful instincts of man..."(Both quotations from: *The Ten Comandments, Ten Short Novels of Hitler's War Against the Moral Code*, edited by A L Robinson with preface by Hermann Rauschning, Cassel and Co. London, 1945).

When one is made aware of the anti-Law of God sentiments of one of the most evil men that ever lived and then is equally aware that all too many theologians and religious leaders teach that the Ten Commandments need not be kept by Christians since the Law of God was given to the Jews only, one shudders in disbelief.

The apostle Paul shows that to the Jews were "*committed the oracles of God*" (Romans 3:2). In Genesis 49:10 Jacob, the forefather of the Israelites, was given to understand that the tribe of Judah (the Jews) would be the people who would codify God's Law. The apostle to the Nations, Paul, has this to say about Law that originates with God, "*therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good*" (Romans 7:12). What a contrast from the views of those like Hitler who are hell-bent on destroying the moral code given at Mt. Sinai and again highlighted by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. Man, left to his own natural instincts, has an aversion to keeping that divine law "*because the carnal [natural] mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be*" (Romans 8:7). The human proclivity is to despise and reject God's Law, unless the human mind interacts with the mind of God and so allowing His laws to be written in our minds and hearts. This acknowledgement leads to a recognition that we are sinful on account of having transgressed the immutable laws of God which can only be erased when we accept the atoning act of Christ's supreme sacrifice.

Just like the Jews were hated in pre-Christian times on account of teaching (even if not always living) the validity of God's Laws in human relationships, so the true followers of Jesus Christ are persecuted for highlighting the importance of God's Law in their lives. In all of this, we might ask whether there is not some *unseen* hand behind the anti-law campaign. The last book of the Bible gives us a clue. Notice Revelation 12:17, "And the dragon [Satan] was enraged with the woman [the true church], and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus." The archenemy of God hates the laws of God and throughout the ages has influenced man's rebellion against the very laws that were established for man's benefit.

Jesus Christ promised that He would build His church and "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). But the "prince of the power of the air"(Ephesians 2:2), Satan himself, will keep at it but will not be able to destroy the true church which has the 'testimony of Jesus', highlighted by the annual Nisan 14 evening observance of the Lord's Passover (I Corinthians 5:7), and keeps the Commandments of God as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures and expanded by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere.

That particular church, the spiritual body of Christ, abhors any feelings of anti-Semitism in that its members realise that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of

God”(Romans 3:23). But God sent Jesus Christ to earth with a rescue plan that entitles anyone who stands humbly before his Creator to an invitation to everlasting life. That includes the Jewish people as well.

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Dorset, England.

[Comment by Gerhard Marx: I am sending you by email my revised article on *The Origin of Anti-Semitism* which appeared in the *Ministerial Quarterly* 05. You are welcome to include it in your list of research articles. What I did was take my original research of college days (which was more a 'Source Material' research of quotations from various quarters) and put it more in article form.]