2 New Testament Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism

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THE BASIC DISCUSSION

In 1974, Rosemary Ruether’s book, *Faith and Fratricide*, made a controversial claim: that anti-Judaism was deeply embedded in Christian theology, fostered and sustained by the New Testament itself.¹ Ruether’s book confirmed what some scholars and theologians already thought.² It was also heavily critiqued by both Jewish and Christian scholars as a misreading of the New Testament, a misunderstanding of early Christology (early Christian views about Christ), and an oversimplification of the history of Christianity and the causes of modern antisemitism, including its most insidious expression in the Holocaust.³ Among New Testament scholars and Christian pastors and communities, the debate still rages over whether the New Testament itself is anti-Jewish or whether its statements about Jews and Jewishness have been distorted in an anti-Jewish direction by Christian interpreters over the past twenty centuries.

The issue of whether Christology, and the New Testament, are inherently anti-Jewish is not easily addressed. What constitutes anti-Judaism? Our answers to this question will depend on how we define the criteria for judging whether a statement, idea, or belief is or is not anti-Jewish. These criteria will inevitably reflect some prior sense of what we think the answer is or should be.

The matter is further complicated by two additional points. One is the canonical status of the New Testament for Christians. It may be easier for Jews, including Jewish New Testament scholars like myself, to condemn a theological tenet or New Testament passage as

² See Gregory Baum’s frank introduction to ibid., 1–22.
anti-Jewish than for Christians, including scholars, who may be reluctant to describe their scriptures in this manner. The other is the long reception history of the New Testament, in which many of its verses have been taken out of their literary and historical contexts, generalized in particular ways, and used to justify certain attitudes and behaviours.\(^4\) Paul’s argument that Gentile Christ-confessors should not observe the laws of circumcision and kashrut was later generalized historically to argue that Judaism was a legalistic and moribund religious system.\(^5\) It can then be difficult to read Paul in ways that do not support this anachronistic reading.\(^6\)

It is not possible to approach a text completely uninfluenced by reception history and one’s own theological convictions. But the attempt to consider the New Testament origins of anti-Judaism is greatly aided by a historically contextualized approach that strives to situate the Gospels, letters, and other New Testament books in their ancient historical, social, and political milieux, and to acknowledge the polemical and apologetic usages to which they were put by later readers.

My approach to the question of criteria focuses on the possible rhetorical impact that a phrase, verse, or concept would have on a [hypothetical] ancient reader or hearer. If it seems likely that a certain formulation would have led an ancient audience to form negative views or feelings about that group that it referred to as “Jews,” then I consider that verse or passage to be anti-Jewish. For example, I conjecture that anyone who read or heard that the Jews have the devil as their father (John 8:44) would have been inclined to form negative views about Jews. This criterion is hardly foolproof; the term “Jews” in ancient, as in modern, times is extremely difficult to define (are Jews a “religion,” an “ethnicity”?) and it is likely that then, as now, any given text would elicit different responses in different hearers or readers.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) This process is not limited to anti-Judaism, which also served the purposes of antisemitism. It also concerns stances towards LGBTQIA and Black individuals and communities. For discussion, see, for example, Joseph A. Marchal, “LGBTIQ Strategies of Interpretation,” in *Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, edited by Benjamin H. Dunning (New York, 2019), 177–96; and Adrian Thatcher, “‘Cursed Be Canaan!’: The Bible, Racism, and Slavery,” in *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (Oxford, 2009).


\(^6\) For a critique of such a move, see Margaret M. Mitchell, “Gift Histories,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39.3 (2017), 221–22.

\(^7\) On the fraught question of “who is a Jew” in the ancient world, see Adele Reinhartz et al., “Jew and Judean: A Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of
Nevertheless, attention to the potential rhetorical impact of hostile statements about those whom a given text refers to as Jews can be a helpful starting point.

The contribution of the New Testament to Christian anti-Judaism is a broad and complex question, and it has generated a vast amount of scholarship especially in the post-Holocaust era. In this brief essay I will focus on three most important and potent issues: supersessionism, the deicide charge, and the association of Jews with Satan. In each case, I will concentrate on a few of the New Testament passages that express these issues most directly and powerfully. I will conclude with brief comments on the theological and exegetical questions with which I began: Are the New Testament, and Christian theology, anti-Jewish?

SUPERSSESSIONISM

The term “supersessionism” refers to the view that Christ-confessors or, later, Christians, have superseded or replaced Jews as God’s covenantal people. For Jews, the Torah is God’s revelation, and it also constitutes a contract – a covenant – between God and Israel. The terms of the covenant are set out in the book of Exodus. In Exodus 19:5 God conveys this message to the Israelites via Moses: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.” The people respond as one: “Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8). The authors of the New Testament, most if not all of them Jewish, considered the Torah to be divine. But they also believed in Jesus as God’s new and improved revelation who fulfils the “Old Testament” prophecies and now mediates Israel’s covenantal relationship with God. According to this view, since Christ’s coming, the term Israel referred not to the Jewish people but only to those Jews and Gentiles who believed in Christ. Everyone – including Jews – could participate in the covenant with the God of Israel only by believing in Jesus.


8 For a short list, see the Further References section at the end of this essay.

9 The term “Christian” was not used widely to refer to someone who believed Jesus until the post–New Testament period; I generally use Christ-confessor for the 1st- and early 2nd-century believers in Jesus as the Christ.
The theme of supersessionism is pervasive throughout the New Testament and is expressed in a number of different ways. I will address only two of the most obvious: the limitation of the Torah’s temporal authority to the period preceding Christ, and the emphasis on Jesus as a source of revelation that improves on and surpasses the Torah.

THE ERA OF TORAH HAS ENDED

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a detailed defence of his conviction that Gentile adherents to the Jesus movement, such as the members of the Galatian church itself, are not bound by – and should not follow – the laws of circumcision or kashrut. Paul does not deny that Torah is divine revelation, but he assigns it a preliminary role in the divine plan for human salvation. He supports this view by pointing out that God gave his covenantal promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–17; 17:1–8) centuries before the Torah was given on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19–20), which, in turn, occurred centuries before the coming of Christ.

Genesis 17 is very clear that the covenant to Abraham was given on condition that he, the males in his household, and all males in subsequent generations undergo circumcision (Gen. 17:10–14). But throughout Galatians Paul mounts a vigorous argument that this stipulation does not apply to Gentile believers in Christ. In Galatians 3:17–18 Paul asserts that “the law [Torah], which came four hundred thirty years later [after Abraham], does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise [in Gen. 15:5].”

Paul then asks the logical question: “Why then the law?” (3:19a). His answer: “It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator” (3:19b). Before Christ’s coming, the law served an important purpose as a guardian or disciplinarian, to keep humankind in line until Christ came and provided the opportunity to be “justified by faith” (Gal. 3:23–24). Now that Christ has come, however, humankind is no longer subject to a disciplinarian (Gal. 3:25–26). Now faith in Christ, not obedience to Torah, provides relationship to God.

But the temporal limitation of the law’s authority does not imply that the Torah has lost its divine status – on the contrary. Paul relies extensively on biblical passages to support his claims, including the very claims that limit the law’s authority on matters such as circumcision. In a mere seven verses, Galatians 3:8–14, for example, Paul draws
on five different verses from the Hebrew Bible as prooftexts for the “gospel” that he has been preaching to Gentiles:

Gal. 3:8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” [Gen. 12:3; 18:8]

Gal. 3:10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” [Deut. 27:26]

Gal. 3:11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” [Gen. 15:6]

Gal. 3:12 But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.” [Lev. 18:5]

Gal. 3:13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us— for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” [Deut. 21:23].

Like other ancient authors, Paul took the prooftexts out of their contexts in the Pentateuch. This practice was very common in midrashic readings of the Torah. What was important to Paul was that these verses provided the language that he needed to show that his message to the Gentiles was divinely ordained and approved, in order that “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” [Gal. 3:14].

JESUS AS THE NEW AND IMPROVED REVELATION

Jesus’ role as a superior divine revelation is sometimes expressed as a comparison between Moses [as the one through whom the Torah was given] and Jesus. The Prologue to the Gospel of John [John 1:1–18] concludes with these words: “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” [John 1:17–18]. These words sum up the message of the Prologue, which describes Jesus as the pre-existent Word who parallels, or

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perhaps is identified with, the figure of Wisdom as divine revelation. Like Wisdom, the Word was in the beginning with God (John 1:2; see Prov. 8:22–29 and the Wisdom of Ben Sira 24:9) and was an agent of creation (John 1:3; see Prov. 8:30–31). And just as Wisdom was identified with Torah (Ben Sira 24:23), so is Jesus identified as divine revelation. John 1:18 insists that only the Son—and not, it is implied, previous revelations such as the Torah given through Moses—makes God known.

The Letter to the Hebrews, attributed to but certainly not written by Paul, makes this same point more directly. Hebrews 3:2 acknowledges that Moses “was faithful in all God’s house” but then continues: “Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself... Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son...” (Heb. 3:3–6).

The conviction that the revelation through Christ surpasses and supersedes the Torah—and its 1st-century interpreters—comes to the fore in the section of the Sermon on the Mount known as the Antitheses [Matt. 5:21–48]. Throughout this section, Jesus refers to a number of statements from the Decalogue and other biblical passages, using the formula: “You have heard it said... But I say to you.” In Matthew 5:21, for example, Jesus states, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’” He continues in Matthew 5:22: “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Similarly, in Matthew 5:27, Jesus states: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” And he continues in 5:28: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The pattern is repeated four more times (Matt. 5:31, 33, 38, 43), with reference to the corban sacrifice, divorce, the taking of oaths, and the “golden rule.”

In each section, Matthew’s Jesus creates the sense of an antithesis using the term “but.” In what follows, however, Jesus does not negate the Mosaic ruling but extends it from the realm of action into the realms of emotion, intent, and speech. “You shall not murder” is extended to include anger and insults; “you shall not commit adultery” is extended to include lust even if that emotion does not lead to physical adultery. The Golden Rule of loving one’s neighbour is broadened to include loving one’s enemy (Matt. 5:44–47).
These extensions do not negate the biblical law. Rather, they imply that Jesus has now exposed the true meaning of the law that others—perhaps Jewish interpreters—have read in a more limited fashion. If there is an antithesis, it is not between two sets of laws but two interpretations. If we read this in the context of Matthew’s diatribe against the Pharisees in Matthew 23 (“woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!,” 23:13 and throughout), then the contrast may be between what Matthew’s Jesus views as a narrow interpretation of the law and Jesus’ extended, compassionate interpretation. The basic message is that the true meaning of the biblical law can be understood only through the lenses that Jesus provides.

A related point is made in John 5:39–47, in which Jesus accuses his Jewish opponents of misreading their own scriptures. Jesus describes Jews as “searching the scriptures” for the key to eternal life but failing to understand that “it is they [the scriptures] that testify on my behalf” (John 5:39). He then admonishes: “Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (5:40). A few verses later he admonishes: “Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (5:45–46). In the Gospel of John, the critique is not of the Torah but of the Jews’ failure, or refusal, to read the Torah christologically as a set of prophecies of the coming of Christ as the messiah.

These are but a few of the many expressions of supersessionism in the New Testament. It is not surprising that a new movement would describe itself as a new and improved version of the very same worldview that provided the framework for its own perspective on the relationship between God and humankind. I doubt that the New Testament authors imagined that within two or three centuries, the power relationship between Jews and Christians would tilt from Jews to Christians and grant Christian authorities the power to enact measures against Jews. Nor did they foresee the elaborate theology that would develop around supersessionism, a theology that included the description of Judaism as a moribund and spiritless religion that would surely die out in time. Yet it is a fact that such descriptions, and the supersessionism upon which they are based, contributed to the denigration of both Jews and Judaism well into the 20th century.11

THE JEWS AND SATAN

One of the most potent aspects of Christian anti-Judaism, and modern antisemitism, is the association of Jews and Satan. The association is expressed vividly in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9. In Revelation 2:9, the seer writes: “I know the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.” This statement occurs in a letter to “the angel of the church in Ephesus” [2:1]. Revelation 3:9 conveys much the same sentiment, in a letter to “the angel of the church in Philadelphia” [3:7]: “I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying – I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.”

While it is clear that “synagogue of Satan” is a negative term, its exact meaning remains uncertain. Is the seer referring to a congregation of Jewish Christ-confessors? A group of Gentile Christ-Confessors who have adopted Jewish practices? 12 Ironically, while the phrase itself conveys hostility towards “the synagogue,” the reference to those “who say that they are Jews and are not” indicates that the target is a group of Christ-confessors, and not Jews who do not confess Jesus as messiah.

The association of Jews and Satan likely stems not from Revelation but from the Gospel of John, where, in contrast to Revelation, it is indeed directed at non-Christ-confessing Jews. The key verse is John 8:44, in which Jesus tells a group of Jews: “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.”

Some scholars have attempted to explain away the hostility conveyed by this verse by arguing that it reflects a standard convention of ancient rhetoric, akin to schoolyard name-calling. 13 Labelling it so does not, however, empty the verse of its hostile content or emotional impact. Furthermore, the idea that Jews have the devil as their father is deeply intertwined with the Gospel’s Christology, that is, its understanding of Jesus’ own identity, in at least two ways.

First, it is embedded in an argument drawn from the Aristotelian theory of epigenesis. According to this theory, a child’s father, that is, his semen, contributes the personal traits and attributes of a child, while

12 See John W. Marshall, Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse (Waterloo, 2001).
the mother contributes the medium of growth, that is, her uterus, in which the embryo grows into a baby ready to be born. Under ideal circumstances, the child will resemble the father perfectly, sharing his identity in every way from gender through to personality.

Epigenesis was the most widely accepted theory of animal and human reproduction in the ancient Mediterranean world.\(^{14}\) Although the term does not appear in the Gospel, it undergirds the Gospel’s claims that Jesus is God’s son, and that he acts only as God acts, and on God’s behalf.\(^{15}\) It also explains John 8:44. John’s Jesus proclaims that by murdering and lying, the Jews demonstrate that they are not the children of God, as they assert in 8:41, but the children of the devil. As Jesus states in John 8:42, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here.” But because they do not accept him (8:43), the Jews cannot be God’s children but rather must have the devil as their father.

The second way the John 8:44 Satan passage links to Christology is through its connection with supersessionism and, specifically, the claim that Jesus, as God’s Son, is now the one who mediates the covenantal relationship to the people Israel. To be related to God through this covenant requires faith in Jesus as the messiah and Son of God (cf. 20:30–31).

John 8:31–59 makes this argument in a detailed way by presenting a dispute between the Jews and Jesus as to the terms of God’s covenant with God’s people. The Jews’ brief comments assert their covenantal relationship with God by emphasizing three key points: that Abraham is their father (8:33, 39), that they have never served or been enslaved to anyone or anything (8:33), and that they are children of God (8:41). In claiming to be children of Abraham, the Jews draw attention to Abraham’s status as the patriarch of the Jewish people. As the first monotheist, Abraham is known in Jewish tradition as the first person to recognize the one God as the creator of the world.\(^ {16}\) The Jews are Abraham’s children insofar as they too maintain a firm commitment to monotheism.

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The Jews’ claim that they have never served or been enslaved to anyone is more ambiguous. In a literal sense, the Jews certainly were once enslaved, in Egypt under the Pharaohs. But the verb normally translated as “to be enslaved” has another, well-established meaning, namely, “to serve,” as in, to serve many gods. The Jews’ boast that they have never “served” anyone or anything (8:33) is thus an expression of their devotion to the one God of Israel. Indeed, to serve another “divine” being – such as Jesus claims to be – would be tantamount to slavery.

Finally, the Jews’ covenantal relationship with God bestows upon them the status of God’s children. In Exodus 4:22–23, for example, God coaches Moses on what to say to the Pharaoh as he tries to secure Israel’s release from slavery: “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son... Let my son go that he may worship me.’” Thus the Jews’ three major claims – that they are children of Abraham, have never served any other beings, and are children of God – all make the same point: Jews are in an eternal covenantal relationship with God.

The Johannine Jesus, in turn, insists that the Jews can no longer lay claim to this special relationship. For Jesus, the Jews’ rejection of his messiahship proves that they cannot be the children of Abraham. Whereas Abraham accepted God’s messengers (cf. Genesis 18), the Jews try to kill God’s son (8:40). Despite their boasts to the contrary, the Jews continue to be enslaved as long as they refuse to believe. In 8:34, Jesus proclaims: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” Finally, the Jews cannot be the children of God: “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me” (8:42).

By mounting this argument, the Fourth Gospel aims to persuade its audience of the supersessionist claim that the Jews’ rejection of Jesus has ousted them from their covenantal relationship with God, and thereby revealed their true ancestry as children of the devil. The association of the Jews and Satan has a long history, continuing to the present day on antisemitic and white-supremacist websites. Its vituperative

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17 In the Septuagint (2nd-century BCE Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), this verb is sometimes used to refer specifically to the worship of God or gods. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses this verb in a way that implies both worship and slavery (Gal. 4:9; cf. Jer. 5:19).
power carries on independently of the Gospel of John’s covenantal argumentation, and of its deployment of Aristotle’s theory of epigenesis.

**THE DEICIDE CHARGE**

All four canonical gospels hold the Jews and/or their leaders to blame for the process that leads to Jesus’ crucifixion. (1 Thessalonians 2:14 also alludes to this, though many consider this passage to have been written by someone other than Paul.)\(^{18}\) The Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke tell the same general story of this process in their last few chapters, usually referred to as the Passion Narrative. Judas betrays Jesus to the authorities; Jesus is cross-examined by the high priest and other leaders and convicted of blasphemy; he is then taken to Pilate, where he undergoes further questioning. Pilate is disinclined to follow through, but when he offers the release of a prisoner, the Jewish authorities clamour for Barabbas, an insurrectionist or “robber,” rather than Jesus. Pilate reluctantly agrees to send Jesus for crucifixion.\(^{19}\)

The Gospel of John sharpens the point by recounting an incident that is not paralleled in the other three canonical Gospels. In the aftermath of Lazarus’s dramatic resurrection (John 11:38–44), many of the Jews who witnessed the miracle believed in Jesus. Others, however, went to report the event to the Pharisees (John 11:45–46). The chief priests and Pharisees called an emergency meeting of the Council, the Jewish leadership, exclaiming: “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (11:47–48). At this point, Caiaphas the high priest says: “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11:49–50). And “from that day on they planned to put him to death” (11:53).

By recounting the Council meeting and decision, John’s Gospel places the moral responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion squarely on the Jewish leadership. To ensure that Caiaphas’s culpability remains in the front of the mind, the narrator later reminds us that “Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one

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person die for the people” (18:14). The blame is extended to “the Jews” and their leaders throughout the Passion Narrative. When Pilate attempts to remove himself from the situation – “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law” (18:31a) – the Jews reply, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death” (18:31b). Later, the chief priests and police should “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Later, they cry out: “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” (19:15). Pilate finally gives in and hands Jesus over to be crucified (19:16).

The Passion Narratives in all four canonical Gospels mark the Jews as guilty of deicide – killing God – even though Pilate was the one who ordered Jesus’ crucifixion. They do so by showing Pilate to be reluctant to prosecute Jesus and depicting the Jewish crowds and leaders as eager for his death. The most damaging passage, however, is found in the Gospel of Matthew. As the Jews continued to shout for Jesus’ crucifixion, Pilate feared that a riot was beginning (Matt. 27:24a). He then “took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves’” (Matt. 27:24b). The people – who are Jews – then responded, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matt. 27:25). “So, he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified” (Matt. 27:26).

In Matthew 27:25, the Jews accept responsibility for Jesus’ blood for themselves and future generations. It must be stressed that this statement, like John 8:44, is not a transcript of words actually spoken by historical individuals or groups but scripted by the author[s] of Matthew’s Gospel. To their credit, many mainline Protestant and Catholic Churches have repudiated the deicide charge. The 1965 Vatican II document Nostra aetate states explicitly that while “the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.” Like supersessionism and the association of Jews and Satan, however, the deicide charge has not entirely disappeared.21

20 Unfortunately, Nostra Aetate did not address supersessionism; it continued to refer to the Church as the “new people of God.” www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

EARLY CHRISTIAN RECEPTION

The New Testament themes of supersessionism, the association of Jews and Satan, and deicide continue in early Christian literature into the 2nd century, and beyond. *The Letter of Barnabas*, dated to the late 1st or early 2nd century, states that the Jews have been deceived by the “evil one” (8:7) into transgression and the false view that thinking that circumcision is still necessary for relationship with God.22 In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr tells Trypho the Jews that “[the gifts] formerly among your nation have been transferred to us . . . The Scriptures are not yours, but ours. For we believe them; but you, though you read them, do not catch the spirit that is in them.”23 He also castigates the Jews for deicide: “You have slain the Just One, and his prophets before him; and now you reject those who hope in him . . . cursing in your synagogues those that believe in Christ.”24 And the heading of Dialogue Chapter 16 reads: “Circumcision [was] given as a sign, that the Jews might be driven away for their evil deeds done to Christ and the Christians.”25 “The lament of Melito of Sardis provides an apt summary of the anti-Jewish thread of early Christian thought:

What strange injustice have you done, O Israel?
You have dishonored the one who honored you,
you have disgraced the one who glorified you,
you have denied the one who owned you,
you have ignored the one who made you known,
you have murdered the one who gave you life.26

26 Melito, On Pascha: With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans, 2nd ed., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series, no. 55 [Yonkers, NY, 2016], 57, paragraph 73.
The New Testament provided subsequent Christian theologians and leaders with plenty of fodder for what later became a widespread, though not universal, anti-Jewish agenda that went far beyond what New Testament authors would have envisaged or (I conjecture) desired. In some cases, the statements that express, or that can be read as expressing, hostility towards non-Christ-confessing Jews point to the efforts by the Jesus movement to develop an identity that was distinct from Jewishness yet adopted many elements of Jewishness. For Paul and many post-New Testament authors, such differentiation was part of a polemical discourse targeted not so much at non-Christ-confessing Jews as at Jewish Christ-confessors. The tension between Christians of Jewish origin who retained Jewish practices such as circumcision and the dietary laws, and Gentile Christians who did not engage in such practices became more intense as the latter group grew in number and influence. When read, as they often were, without regard to the immediate historical and literary contexts, however, these statements became embedded in Christian theology, literature, and liturgy. Rosemary Ruether may well have been right that anti-Judaism is deeply embedded in Christology and Christian theology more generally. Understanding something of the historical context, along with other measures such as those undertaken by Vatican II, can help.

**Further Reading**


Cohen, J., *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion, from the Bible to the Big Screen* [New York, 2007]. A history of the deicide myth from the New Testament to the present, including patristic, medieval, and modern theology, as well as art, music, theatre, and film.


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A collection of essays, by P. Fredriksen, J. G. Gager, E. P. Sanders, A.-J. Levine, and A. Reinhartz, re-evaluating the historical figures and canonical texts that have fostered the negative characterizations of Jews and Judaism.


Reinhartz, A., *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lanham, MD, 2018). A book arguing that the Gospel’s anti-Jewishness is evident both in the Gospel’s hostile comments about the Jews and in its appropriation of Torah, Temple, and Covenant that were so central to 1st-century Jewish identity.