

By: Mary C. Boys

Christians might well have regarded the New Testament passages that disparage various Jewish beliefs and practices as a “period piece” if the rivalry with Judaism had not widened and deepened in Christianity’s formative years. Early church writers added new layers to anti-Judaism in their assertions that Judaism had become obsolete.

Christianity was a minority religion without legal status in the Roman Empire until early in the fourth century. Thus, we must read the church writers in the second and third century as apologists for an insecure, fledgling group experiencing opposition on three fronts: pagan, Jewish and Christian.

To many in the pagan world, Christians must have seemed a strange lot. They claimed continuity with Israel, even to be the new Israel. They retained Israel’s scriptures, and asserted they had inherited its covenant. Yet, they had abandoned to one degree or another the very practices commanded in those scriptures: circumcision, dietary laws, festivals and observance of the Sabbath. The philosopher Celsus wondered in the late second century if God had given “contradictory laws to this man from Nazareth,” given the differences in the teaching of Jesus from that of Moses. “Who is wrong?” Celsus asked, “Moses or Jesus?” “Or when the Father sent Jesus had he forgotten what commands he gave to Moses? Or did he condemn his own laws and change his mind, and send his messenger for quite the opposite purposes?” (True Doctrine 7:18).<sup>17</sup>

The apologists had to justify Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism, which was well established and respected, and undergoing its own process of transformation as it adapted to the loss of the Temple and Jerusalem. In retrospect, it is clear that Christianity’s inextricable connection to Judaism complicated its theological differences: The closeness of the traditions, perhaps best imaged as a sibling relationship, made the disagreements all the more powerful.<sup>18</sup> For example, over against the more authoritative Jewish tradition, Christians brashly asserted that their interpretation of the Scriptures was the correct one—even as they used some of the same exegetical techniques.

Within Christianity itself, Marcion (d. 160) elicited a heated debate by declaring that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a cruel and capricious God of Law, utterly unlike the loving God of Jesus Christ. Therefore, he argued, the Christian Bible should not include either the Old Testament, or any texts that reflected Jewish influence. Marcion’s Bible was thus a slender volume: ten letters of Paul and an edited version of the Gospel of Luke.

The challenge to articulate Christian identity in relationship to these three audiences demanded a finely tuned articulation of both continuity and newness—an arduous task for a small band belonging to an illicit religion in the Roman Empire.

In many respects, Marcion's radical proposal sharpened the terms of the debate. Those who refuted him, most notably Irenaeus, Origen and Tertullian, maintained that the God of Israel was indeed the God of Jesus Christ. They explained: Salvation unfolded in history, first in the promises to the Jews and now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Thus, Christians must retain the Scriptures of the Jewish people as the "Old Testament" because those texts contain the story of the promise essential to the narrative of the fulfillment. Augustine's later formulation synthesized their perspective in a dictum that has exercised a great deal of influence on Christian interpretation of the Bible: "In the Old Testament the New Testament lies hid; in the New Testament the Old Testament becomes clear" (Questions on the Heptateuch 2.73).

While the apologists maintained the superiority of the Christian revelation, their emphasis on continuity with Israel countered the extreme anti-Judaism of Marcion, who was condemned as a heretic and excommunicated.

Nonetheless, even as they reacted to Marcion's antipathy to Judaism, early Christian writers added a new layer to the disagreement with the synagogue. They believed a new era had arrived, and that Judaism would, therefore, give way to Christianity. After all, the Jews no longer had a Temple since the Romans destroyed it in 70, and after 135 Jerusalem had become a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina. So history seemed to confirm what their theology suggested—Judaism had been unfaithful to the covenant, and now its time was over.<sup>19</sup>

Origen (ca. 185-254) is explicit: The Jews had committed "the most impious crime of all when they conspired against the Savior" of humankind in the "city where they performed to God the customary rites" that symbolized profound mysteries. "Therefore," he concluded, "that city where Jesus suffered these indignities had to be utterly destroyed. The Jewish nation had to be overthrown, and God's invitation to blessedness transferred to others, I mean the Christians, to whom came the teaching about the simple and pure worship of God." (Against Celsus 4.2.3.)

In late second century, the bishop of Sardis (in modern Turkey), Melito, (d. ca. 190), preached an eloquent sermon articulating what became the leitmotif of anti-Judaism: in killing Jesus, the Jews had murdered God. This charge of "deicide" echoed in the church for nearly two thousand years, formally repudiated only in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council in its decree, *Nostra Aetate*. Major Christian figures of the fourth and fifth centuries, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and John Chrysostom (347-407), intensified the separation. Augustine argued that because the Jews had rejected Jesus, they were cursed to wander in exile as reprobates. Yet they must not be killed so that the world will see the consequences of rejecting the Christ. Chrysostom authored some of the most vitriolic denunciations of Jews, who were "called to sonship, but . . . degenerated to the level of dogs" (Homily One Against the Judaizers). (We understand something of the rhetorical style of this period when we see how Chrysostom recycled some of the same vitriol in attacking Arian Christians, whom he regarded as heretics.)

These texts vividly describe what the more abstract term “supersessionism” means: To Christians belong the blessing and the covenant because of the infidelity of the Jews. Judaism is obsolete. The logic of the early church writers established a theological trajectory: Antiquated Israel would give way to the new creation of Christianity.

But Judaism did not vanish. Meanwhile, Christianity had acquired political ascendancy in 379 as the official religion of the Roman Empire. As a result, the church found itself without a theology adequate to explain itself in light of the enduring character of Judaism, but with the political power to advance its own growth while placing restrictions on Judaism. Regional councils in various areas from the late fifth through late seventh centuries reflected the church’s insecurity by decreeing the separation of Jews from Christians. They had two preoccupations: to keep Jews from proselytizing and to persuade them to convert.