The Antisemitic Imagination

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The scholarly study of antisemitism has been a small, specialized enterprise overshadowed and absorbed by the larger field of Holocaust Studies. In fact, many of the classic studies of antisemitism were precipitated by the rise of Hitler and can be seen as attempts to explain the Nazi culmination of this millennial hatred. Scholars such as James Parkes (writing from 1930), Cecil Roth (1938), Joshua Trachtenberg (1943), and Leon Poliakov (1955) were engaged in an investigative process of trying to comprehend how six million Jews could be annihilated in the very heartland of modern civilization. Historically, the field has interpreted antisemitism as a Western phenomenon, a product of Christendom, although one influenced by ancient anti-Jewish attitudes expressed largely by writers of the Roman Empire in the period between Nero and Hadrian (54-138 CE). With our focus shifting today to so-called “new” forms of antisemitism, especially to that of the Islamic world, it is important to re-examine our assumptions and clarify, once again, our definition of this phenomenon.

Jewish tradition explains antisemitism as natural to the structure of human existence. Quite simply, Esau hates Jacob. This primal hatred of the Jews exists in all places and in all times, independent of culture or religion or socio-economic circumstances. The rabbis did not contextualize antisemitism, it was not understood as a cause and effect phenomenon, but existed as an eternal aspect of existence bound up with the destiny of the Jewish People. This traditional rabbinic understanding of antisemitism rests upon a conception of Gentiles as an undifferentiated mass, whose inner core—or Esau-ness—remains consistent across time and space despite historical and cultural differences. It is also true that this conflict was perceived as a case of mutual hostility, rivalry, and competition rather than a simple one-sided assault against Israel. While there is much to be learned from this traditional reading of antisemitism, and one can certainly understand the perspective of the rabbis given the persistent and irrational nature of Jew-hatred, this kind of ahistorical interpretation is fundamentally inadequate.

Antisemitism is not a seven-headed hydra, popping up in different places at different times, as some kind of constant presence in human history. One of humanity’s most culturally specific and historically determined phenomena, antisemitism is the product of the rancorous separation between Judaism and the Jesus Movement of the first century. During the following four hundred years, Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were finally and irrevocably divorced with the Church in control of the state and its legal code as the

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new imperial religion. In this period, we know that the Church worked relentlessly to
purify itself by rooting out “judaizers”—those individuals still sympathetic to Judaism—
and to separate Christians and Jews to prevent them from celebrating holidays, and
observing Shabbat, together. The Church’s Theology of Separation was seen as necessary to
establish its authority over society and became the basis for European legislation regulat-
ing Jewish existence under Christendom for centuries. Natural and inevitable, the separa-
tion between Jews and Christians was not. Retrospectively, we know that the triumphant
and controlling position of Christianity in the empire and eventually throughout Europe
led to the systematic exclusion of Jews, as a collectivity, from mainstream Christian society,
to their deep and abiding marginalization, eventual demonization, and to their peculiar
positioning in Western societies as middlemen associated with the despised money occu-
pations. What we see in the history of antisemitism is a compounding of stigmatization
and hatred, which over time results in the production of a composite character that com-
bines extremely negative characteristics associated with, and resulting from, a variety of
European anti-Jewish religious and economic accusations.

By approximately 1000 CE, the continent of Europe was Christianized, albeit un-
evenly and idiosyncratically in many places. The period of the High Middle Ages (1000-
1300 CE) was in fact the actual laboratory that created what we know as the antisemitic
imagination, and it was during these specific centuries that antisemitism first became a
popular mass phenomenon. This vivid, image-obsessed imagination was Catholic and
was fed not just visually but also aurally. It had a character at its center that appeared to
have the power and determination to control the world, to influence events, and to
wreak utter havoc in society. That character, that figment of the European Christian
imagination, is “the jew.” He is the tormentor and killer of Christ—the Savior of uni-
eral humanity, according to Christian theology—who continues until the end of time to
work against the Church and its Gospel; he is the ritual murderer and host desecrator
who compulsively re-enacts the crucifixion with these homicidal anti-Christian Jewish
rituals; the well-poisoner and the magician, both of whom are in league with Satan
against Christian society; and of course the usurer who recalled Judas Iscariot, the tax
collector and archetypal traitor of the Gospels. It is this character of “the jew” that
populates the antisemitic imagination; it is by the appearance of this character that we
know we are in the presence of antisemitism and not some form of xenophobia or hostil-
ity, be they the product of culture, politics, or even personal conflict.

It is important that we acknowledge the paradox at work in the history of anti-
semitism. The phenomenon itself is not transhistorical. It is first created, and determined,
by the history of Christianity and its relationship to the Jewish people, and continues to
evolve in correspondence with the historical development of specific cultural and
economic relationships unique to different regions of Europe. At the same time, how-
ever, the basic characteristics of the caricature that this history produces and releases into
the world from the 12th century on are remarkably consistent across time and place.
Regardless of European region, denomination, language, or nationality, the characteris-
tics of “the jew” are consistent. In other words, we see shifts in the articulation of perception
over time in different contexts but not in the basic perception itself.1 This continues to be the
case today with contemporary forms of antisemitism.

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