CHAPTER 4

Religion, Theology and American Antisemitism

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People see what they want to see,
hear what they want to hear,
and remember what they want to remember; they are compelled by what appeals to them emotionally.
Logic and reason have little power to change prejudices taught, often unconsciously, from birth.

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The first manifestation of what the religious communities of Judaism and Christianity may label antisemitism, simply defined as “active hatred of the Jews and Judaism that manifests in behaviors,” makes its appearance in the second book of the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 1:8–10):

Then a new ruler, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” (New International Version)

The second manifestation, in some ways paralleling the first, appears in the book of Esther (3:8–9):

Then Haman said to King Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury.”

Summarily, we may catalogue these “complaints” against the Jews. First, there are too many Israelites present with the possibility of too many more in the future. Second, they have questionable identities and loyalty. Third, they choose to segregate themselves from the rest of the population. Fourth, their customs are different from those of the majority. Fifth, they have disrespect for the laws of the nation-state.

Tragically, the contemporary relevance of first and second charges finds itself in the Nazi propaganda against the Jews of Germany prior to the Second World War. They Nazis claimed that there were too many Jews resident in Germany—when the reality was that Jews constituted only one-half of one percent or 500,000 persons of the total population. The Nazis further maintained the infamous charge of Dolchstoßlegende, that Germany’s defeat in the First World War was a “stab in the back” and directly attributable to the Jews who in reality were a “fifth column” aiding and abetting Germany’s enemies).

The third charge becomes both limitedly true and perversely prophetic. Jewish safety and survival mandated self-segregation. Yet, after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE (more on this below) and later, Jewish wandering primarily towards and through Western Europe found Jews resident in ghettos not of their own choosing and all-too-often, they found themselves at the very mercy of the lords and priests. The fourth charge, while a true recognition of Judaic difference, both ritually-ceremonially and morally-ethically, would become, in the eyes of the Jews’ enemies, rationale for a continuous history of antisemitic behaviors. Finally, the fifth charge was false and contrary to the later Judaic principle of dina d’malchuta dina (Aramaic, “the law of the land is the law”); yet this charge would be used repeatedly to question the Jews’ loyalty. In this sense, the fifth charge can be viewed in part as a variant on the second.

Were these two textual/historical examples not enough, we could also find too many examples within the New Testament to include here, which we may term both anti-Judaic and antisemitic. These texts paint a portrait of first century Jews in collaboration with an unrepresentative Jewish Sadducean priestly leadership allied with the Romans; they were collectively portrayed as

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2 This distinction between “anti-Judaic” and “antisemitic” is important because the earliest followers of the dissident minority movement during the period of Roman oppression and its immediate aftermath were by and large Jews, and thus the earliest New Testament texts give evidence of an intra-Jewish debate wherein the minority paints a negative portrait of the majority in its attempt to assert its own bona fides. Hence anti-Judaic. However, the later generations of Christians were in the main gentiles (Hebrew, “goiim”) and, though they knew little if at all of the process of Jewish debate, they tended to accept at face value these same texts and would go on to use them against the original Jewish community. Hence antisemitic.