



## **Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

### **Script 23: Antisemitism 101: An Introduction**

#### **What is antisemitism and when did it start?**

In the beginning of the Biblical Book of Exodus we read in chapter 1, verses 8-10:

“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise up against us.’”

This statement by an unnamed Pharaoh, dating back over 3,000 years, may well be the first description of antisemitism in history.

Antisemitism is defined by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a global leader in fighting all forms of hate and extremism, as “...a belief or behavior that is hostile towards Jews just because they are Jewish. Antisemitism may take the form of religious teachings that proclaim the inferiority of Jews or political efforts to isolate, oppress, or otherwise injure them. It may also include prejudiced or stereotyped views about Jews.”

Antisemitic behavior includes:

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews, Jewish communities or Jewish institutions in the name of a radical ideology or extremist view of religion;
- The active propagation of stereotypes that cast Jews as “the other”; and
- Harmful words and actions against individuals or communities specifically because they are Jewish.

#### **Antisemitism and the New Testament**

Many of the texts within the New Testament were composed within, or in response to, a Jewish setting. Consequently, the New Testament polemics against Jews or specific groups of Jews, such as the Pharisees, might more accurately be understood as an *internal* Jewish debate. However, as Christianity and Judaism grew apart, New Testament passages that negatively portray Jews became a foundation and justification for antisemitic activity.

Historical Church-sponsored antisemitism is based in part on Romans Chapter 11, verses 25–26:

“I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: ‘The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.’”<sup>1</sup>

This text has two very important points that led to the development of antisemitism. The first concept is that by rejecting the teachings of Jesus, Jews are acting like the ancient evil Biblical Pharaoh from whom they fled. In Exodus, Pharaoh is willing to release the Israelites, but God hardens Pharaoh’s heart so that he refuses to let the Israelites go. God is stronger than Pharaoh. Thus, Romans is saying that God is stronger than the Jews and that their suffering, at the hands of the Church, is God’s will. Just as the ten plagues afflicted Egypt, eventually leading to Pharaoh’s capitulation, so will the actions of the Church against the Jews lead to their capitulation and salvation.

The second important statement in Romans 11:25-26 is that evangelism is key to the salvation of the Jews. That is the traditional understanding of the text, “...until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.” Missionizing to the Jews, as well as to all unconverted people, became a major focus of Church teaching. Ideas like those described here contributed to the development of religiously-motivated anti-Jewish sentiment, especially throughout Europe from the time of the Emperor Constantine in 312 of the Common Era.<sup>2</sup> until the issuance of the groundbreaking Vatican declaration *Nostra Aetate* in 1965.

## **Antisemitism Throughout History**

As Christianity developed into a worldwide religion, the refusal of Jewish communities to accept the beliefs of the church led to teachings that cast Jews into the role of people who defied the message of Jesus. Over time, this led to various persecutions of Jewish communities by the Church and to the development of ideas that today we would label as antisemitic. One of the most damaging of these teachings was the idea that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. This was a central theme during many Easter sermons over the course of centuries. It was not uncommon for people hearing this message on Easter to leave church and attack local Jewish communities.

Antisemitic acts across the past two millennia include multiple expulsions of entire Jewish communities from their homes. The Jewish community of England--about 3,000 people--

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<sup>1</sup> New International Version

<sup>2</sup> Common Era, abbreviated as CE, is nomenclature used by Jews and many Christians instead of AD.

was expelled in 1290 of the Common Era. Jews were not permitted to return to England again until 1657, more than 350 years later. The most well-known expulsion of a Jewish community was the exile of Jews from Spain in 1492. The estimated number of displaced Jews was between 40,000 and 100,000. There were even expulsions of Jewish communities in America. In 1862, during the Civil War, Ulysses S. Grant expelled the Jews of Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky, giving them only 24 hours to leave their homes and businesses and move elsewhere.

In 1965, under the leadership of Pope Paul VI, the Second Vatican Council published *Nostra Aetate* (Latin for “In Our Time”), an historic effort to reflect on anti-Jewish and antisemitic teachings of the Catholic Church and to improve relations with the Jewish community and other non-Christian religious groups. Since then, there have been additional efforts to create greater understanding between Catholics, Jews, and other religious groups.

Despite certain advances, antisemitism continues to proliferate around the world in modern times. According to surveys throughout Europe and the United States, one in four Jews has experienced an antisemitic incident over the last several years. Antisemitism is driven by hate and fear of people who are viewed as “different” or subversive in some way. The best strategy to thwart and dismantle antisemitism is through the honest efforts of well-meaning individuals of all backgrounds to build a base of trust and understanding with one another.

Antisemitism is arguably the oldest forms of hate in the world, with roots in scriptural texts and a sordid history of hateful words and actions directed at Jews and the Jewish faith. In our next episode, “Antisemitism: Myths and Modern Times,” we explore some antisemitic tropes that have continued to plague humanity to this very day.

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**Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic**  
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