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overcoming antisemitism

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August 2025

Failure is Not Final

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Auschwitz Museum, Poland

“Driving out the Jew(s) from the West must result in driving out Christ with them, for Jesus Christ was a Jew.” –Dietrich Bonhoeffer

ANTISEMITISM can be defined as prejudice or hostility toward Jewish people, manifest as discrimination, hate speech, expulsion or violence directed at individuals or groups because of their Jewish identity.

From the earliest days of Judaism to today, fear of, bias against, and hatred toward Jewish people has contributed to conspiracy theories and scapegoating that, in turn, led to repeated efforts to enslave, eradicate or exile Jewish communities.

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Organized schemes to subjugate and/or eradicate Jews for being Jews began in Egypt as recalled in the Book of Exodus. Having forgotten the legacy of Joseph, an unnamed Pharaoh became afraid of the growing Jewish population and moved to enslave them *en masse*. Exodus 1:12-13 laments,

“But the more they were oppressed,

the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor, the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.”

When that plan utterly failed, the Pharaoh commanded Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, to kill all Hebrew baby boys at birth. The midwives’ heroic non-cooperation with anti-Jewish violence was the first step on the path to Israel’s exodus from Egypt eighty years later. They also provide a model for quiet resistance to organized antisemitism ever since.

Since then, history has repeated itself many times over. Judah and/or Israel continually battled with surrounding tribes and nations in the geographical region known as the Southern Levant.

The worst of these encounters were the imperial conquests in which Assyria obliterated the northern tribes of Israel (722 BC), and Babylon flattened Jerusalem and its temple (586 BC), carrying thousands of Jews into exile.

Later, when Xerxes and the Persian empire overtook Babylon,

the book of Esther recounts how Haman (Ahasuerus’ prime minister) plotted “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day” (Esther 3:13).

Gratefully, through the courage of Queen Esther and her uncle Mordecai, Haman’s scheme was foiled, and the pogrom of extinction was averted.

But still it didn’t end. The Greek holocaust began in 168 BC under ‘the beast,’ Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who occupied Judea, brutalized the Jewish people and desecrated their temple. That pogrom ended with the Maccabean revolt, but not much later, the Roman Empire overthrew Greece, occupied Jerusalem, and ultimately besieged and destroyed their temple for a second time (AD 70).

THE RISE OF CHRISTIAN ANTISEMITISM

If only antisemitism had ended then. Sadly, many of history’s chief perpetrators since then have been Christians. But first, it’s essential to recall that Christianity was initially itself a branch of Judaism. The Jewish apostles identified Jesus as their Jewish Messiah, fulfilling a renewed Jewish covenant using the Jewish Scriptures.

The Jewish leadership (especially Peter, Paul and James) convened a Jewish council in Jerusalem, where they recognized how Jewish prophecies called for Gentile inclusion into their New Covenant.

For these reasons, we do not agree with critics who claim the New Testament and its Jewish authors were antisemitic. When the Gospels speak negatively of “the Jews” who opposed Jesus, the context specifies that the *Ioudaioi* (the NT Greek term) were specifically *Judean factions* who opposed the Galilean Messiah and his movement. So when we read “the Jews” in our Gospels, the authors are not antisemitic. They are referring only to “the Judean temple establishment.”

The early Christian sect of Judaism initially experienced persecution by their non-Messianic opponents, who drove them from the synagogues. But the ugly truth is that when the Christians eventually outgrew their more insular rabbinical counterparts, the tables turned in a tragic direction. To summarize just a few horrid examples:

Early Christian Teaching: Even though Gospel references to the *Ioudaioi* were not condemnations of Jews in general, early Christian teachers weaponized them in exactly that way, especially after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Even key theologians, such as John Chrysostom, used their sermons to vilify Jews and accuse them of deicide (murder of God). History indicates that Cyril of Alexandria incited violence and played a role in the expulsion of Jews and confiscation of their property (415 AD).

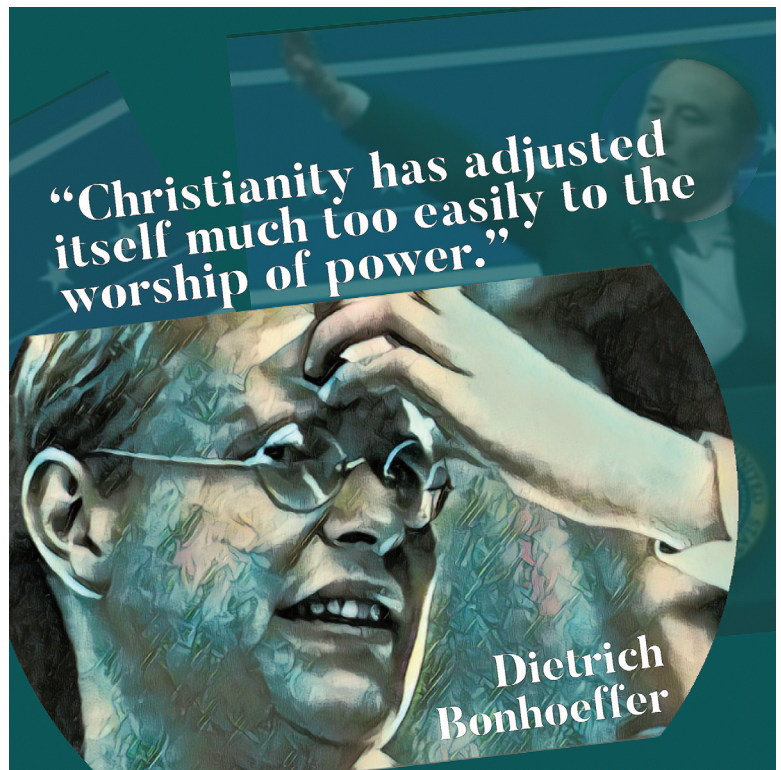
Medieval Persecutions: During the Middle Ages, Jews faced numerous assaults, including:

Blood Libel: slander that Jews sacrificed children in religious blood rituals.

The First Crusade: Christian crusaders massacred Jewish communities in the Rhineland.

European Expulsions: Jews were expelled from ‘Christian’ countries, such as England (1290), France (1306, 1394) and Spain (1492). One interesting fact: the Sephardic Jews of the Iberian Peninsula were given safe harbor in the Islamic Ottoman Empire at the time.

The Inquisition: The Spanish Inquisitors arrested, tortured and martyred Jewish converts to Christianity (the ‘*conversos*’).



Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) was a German theologian who was martyred in the last months of Hitler’s reign of terror.

His book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, is one of history’s most important works on living Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.

During studies in New York, Bonhoeffer was deeply impacted by the Black church in Harlem, giving him eyes to see the evils of racism when he returned to Berlin under Nazi rule. He saw the German National Church capitulate to Hitler’s authoritarian leadership—indeed, they voted him in and pledged allegiance to the Third Reich.

Gratefully, Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Martin Niemöller were key figures in a minority alternative, “the Confessing Church,” who opposed the Christless religion of those churches that waved the Nazi flag and turned a blind eye to the holocaust of Jews, Romanis, gay people and those with mental and physical disabilities.

Today, fascism and antisemitism are waxing again around the globe. And while hearing Jesus speak through Bonhoeffer afresh may not dam the rising tide of hatred, at least we won’t be able to plead ignorance. “How did this happen to us?” must be replaced by the Jewish maxim, “Never again means never again for anybody.”



Terezin Camp, Czechia - Photo, Justice Jersak

“FIRST THEY CAME... “

by Pastor Martin Niemöller

First they came for the Communists,

And I did not speak out—because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists

And I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists

And I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews,

And I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me,

And there was no one left to speak out for me.

Pastor Martin Niemöller was an antisemitic Nazi supporter, but his views changed when he was imprisoned for speaking out against Nazi control of churches. He survived to urge Germans to take responsibility for Nazi atrocities.

“Dear brother, fellow man, Jew, before you say anything, I say to you: I acknowledge my guilt and beg you to forgive me and my people for this sin.” – Sermon in Erlangen, Germany 1946

Ghettoization: In the 1500s, Jews in Italy and other parts of Europe were forcibly segregated into ghettos.

Luther’s Deadly Heresy: While European Christendom (Protestant and Catholic) had normalized antisemitism, it came to a deadly head in Martin Luther’s treatise, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543).

He proposed:

- Burning down Jewish synagogues, schools and homes.
- Seizing Jewish prayer books and Talmudic writings.
- Banning rabbis from teaching (under threat of death).
- Restricting movement (denial of safe conduct on roads).
- Seizing assets: prohibiting Jewish loans and confiscating money and valuables.
- Forced labor of young Jewish men.

While not all of Luther’s

recommendations were immediately enacted, he was specifically cited by Lutherans in the 16th and 17th centuries and by Nazi propagandists in the 20th century as a Christian authority endorsing persecution of Jews.

MODERN ANTISEMITISM

Technologies and systems of mass violence grew alongside the widespread hatred of Jews in the 20th and 21st centuries. Here is a sampling of just a few of many waves:

The Nazi Holocaust (1933-1945): Six million Jews were systematically murdered, along with millions of others (Romani people, people with disabilities, political and religious dissidents, and homosexuals). Hitler was not a Christian, but remember that he was elected into power by a Christian majority.

Pogroms in Eastern Europe: 49 Jews killed, 92 severely wounded, massive looting in Kishinev (1903), 1100 pogroms from 1918-21 in Ukraine killed over 100,000 Jews, then another 4000 murdered in Lviv (through July 1941).

The Baghdad Farhud (1941): Hundreds killed, many more injured, property looted.

Soviet Holocaust: Estimates of over one million more Jews killed during Stalin’s regime in an era marked by forced labor, deportation and executions.

Arab Expulsions (1948-1970s): Following the rebirth of the State of Israel, thousands of Jews were deported or fled from Arab nations, including Egypt, Iraq and Yemen.

Military & Terrorist Attacks: From the Berlin Olympics (1972) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) to the Hamas hostage incursion

(Oct. 7, 2023), Jewish populations in Israel and around the world have experienced threats from foreign states and proxy terrorists.

Holocaust Denial: Holocaust deniers claim that Jews were not exterminated in death camps and gas chambers, and claim the figure of six million casualties is exaggerated. Holocaust denial is considered a form of 'hate speech' in Canada, Israel and 17 European countries (including Russia). Unfortunately, America's First Amendment effectively protects antisemitic speech and pro-Nazi rallies.

Violent Threats, Vandalism of Synagogues, Destruction of Sukkahs: More recently, incidents of antisemitism have risen dramatically in the US, Canada and Europe over the last year.

These examples can make it seem as if antisemitism is restricted to acts of war and violence, but the reality is that antisemitism can be its own social ecosystem of stereotypes, contempt and microaggressions that put Jewish people in a perpetual state of nervous hypervigilance. And they have 34

centuries of historical receipts to show for it!

OVERCOMING ANTISEMITISM

Overcoming antisemitism starts with self-examination. For Christians, our faith and practice *must* align with the Jesus Way. In fact, for those who truly believe Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews and Lord of the nations, I propose that to follow Jesus can and must never be antisemitic. Jesus' agenda was and is to reconcile Jews and Gentiles:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Since this is Jesus' agenda, following Jesus will mean following his way of peace by:

- Consistently refusing to

participate in or justify prejudice, hostility or violence (in words or deeds) toward Jewish people. Full stop.

- Consistently trusting and pursuing Jesus' path of peace (*shalom*) and reconciliation between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors, always resisting violence as a solution since it *always* escalates antisemitism.

- Consistently listening to and platforming Jewish voices who enrich our understanding of the Jesus Way by showing us how the Hebrew prophets anticipated a renewed covenant through whom God said,

"They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

My prayer is that we would subordinate our "but what about" questions to God's promises and truly surrender our lives to the Prince of Peace. □

Brad Jersak serves CWR/PTM as Pastoral Scholar in Residence.



KAROL JERSAK (#20612) - Born 1903, Pabianice, Poland. Died March 23, 1942 in AUSCHWITZ. He was born 18 miles from Zelov, where Brad's grandfather was born and the Jersak family in exile settled in 1803. Brad's Uncle VILEM, a pastor, was later tortured for his faith by the communists.