

Jews and Christians in Conflict and Dialogue

The Contribution
of the Church Fathers

Who are the Church Fathers?

- Christian teachers and theologians who belong to the patristic period of the Church (from the end of the first century CE until the early Middle Ages).
- They were responsible for writing highly significant Christian texts during the period in question.
- There are western and eastern traditions:

Western fathers: texts in Latin

Eastern fathers: texts in Greek and Syriac (and later in Coptic and Ethiopic).

- Biblical commentaries, sermons, ecclesiastical rules, hymns and prayers.

The Church Fathers and the Jews

They acknowledge the Jewish roots of Jesus.

They offer a critique of the Jews for refusing to accept Jesus as the Messiah, while emphasizing that the Gentiles were prepared to do so.

Pagan attitudes towards the Jews, including criticism of their attitude towards idolatry.

The Church Fathers and the Jews

Many 'pagans' adopted a positive view towards Judaism because it was an ancient religion while Christianity was a young movement. Pagan texts criticize Christians for turning their backs on Judaism:

'Why do you, Christians, claim your origins from our religion and then, as you increase in knowledge, despise these things, even though you are unable to name anything else as your starting-point apart from our law? (Imaginary Jew being quoted by Celsus in *Contra Celsum* 2.4).

The Church Fathers (in response to pagan accusations) portray the Jews as subhuman, even diabolical, figures.

Rhetoric and Reality

- Is the anti-Jewish literature of the Church fathers based on direct experience of Jews and Judaism or is it purely literary rhetoric – image or reality?
- Was the aim to target pagans and other Christians (especially heretics) rather than Jews (as proposed by Adolf Harnack, 1851-1930)?
- Do these texts reflect actual discussions between Jews and Christians?

Jews and the Roman Empire

Rome did not regard the Jews as a national group but rather as members of *collegia* (societies) based on their membership of synagogues.

Tertullian: '*religio licita*' (legal religion).

Christians in the second century CE did not possess the same kind of legal status.

Judaism as an ancient religion (*presbyteron kreitton* – 'these things are superior').

This is why many Church fathers emphasize the link between the Church and Judaism.

Christianity and the Roman Empire

- Conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 337 CE.
- Christian Emperor favoured the Church: 'they are allowed to follow whatever worship that they wish'. His influence extended to the Eastern Empire (324 CE).
- By 380 CE (under Theodosius I) Christianity was the official religion of the Empire; gradually the attitude towards the Jews became more negative.



Persecution of the Jews

Restriction of Jewish rights:
attitude towards idolatry
and Jewish separatism.

Refusal to allow them to
hold public office (Code of
Theodosius in 438 CE).

They were not allowed to:

- - have Christian slaves
- - proselytize
- - work on behalf of the government
- - belong to the military
- - build new synagogues

- Judaism remains a *religio licita*: allowed to worship according to Jewish traditions (rituals and ceremonies) and privileges as far as other religions were concerned.
- Protection of the Jews (until the awaited second coming of Jesus) as witnesses to the truth of the Gospel that they rejected.
- Influence of Justinian I (483-565 CE) who held Jews among heretics; they were prohibited from worship; The Church took possession of their synagogues.

The Contribution of Gregory the Great (540-604 CE)

Protection of the legal rights of the Jews.

Intervention to remove violence against Jews and their synagogues.

Sicut Iudaeis ('agreement of the Jews'): a formula in papal letters/encyclicals that sought to protect the rights of Jews during the Middle Ages.

Interpretations of the Bible

The life and significance of Jesus and the role of the Old Testament as a witness to Christ.

Emphasis on continuity but also division between the Old Testament and the New

Continuity: The God of the OT is the God of the NT.

Division: the purpose of the OT is to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

The importance of typology: the Exodus is a foretaste of the deliverance from sin and death, and this is brought about through baptism.

The Church fathers lay claim to the Scriptures: accuracy of the old prophecies (rejection of the Jews, Christ accepts Gentiles).

Emphasis on the ancient character of the Scriptures.



Justin Martyr (100-165 CE)

- *Dialogue with Trypho*: discussion between Justin and a Jew.
- Trypho poses a question in order to provide Justin with an opportunity to offer an extended response. Is it based on a 'live' discussion between the Church and the Jews?
- Justin's aim is to defend Christianity against possible accusations.
- God's wrath is directed towards the Jews; God blesses the Christians.
- 'Jews no longer understand the Scriptures' (*Dialogue* 9:1).
- Christians are the inheritors of God's promises.

Justin: Christians and the Scriptures

Let the nations come together to glorify God, for he has looked upon us; let us glorify Him by the King of glory, by the Lord of Hosts. He takes pleasure in the nations; and he accepts sacrifices more joyfully from us than from you. What store should I – to whom God bore witness – place on circumcision? Is this other baptism required by the one who has been baptized by the Holy Spirit?.... These are not my words, and they were not placed together by human art, but they were sung by David, pronounced as good news by Isaiah, preached by Zechariah, recorded by Moses. Do you recognize them, Trypho? They are seen in your Scriptures, not yours but ours, because we obey them, but you – even though you read them – do not understand their meaning (*Dialogue* 29).

Justin's Interpretation

Gentiles are now part of Israel.

Circumcision (Jewish rite) is no longer required.

The Scriptures are proof-texts intended for Christians; they no longer belong to the Jews.

The laws were given due to the hard-heartedness of the Jews. Only faith in Christ can save them.

The suffering and persecution of the Jews is divine punishment. Their fate is to live on the margins ('the wandering Jew').

Melito of Sardis (140-185 CE)

The Bishop of Sardis, the home of one of the largest Jewish communities in Asia Minor (western Turkey).

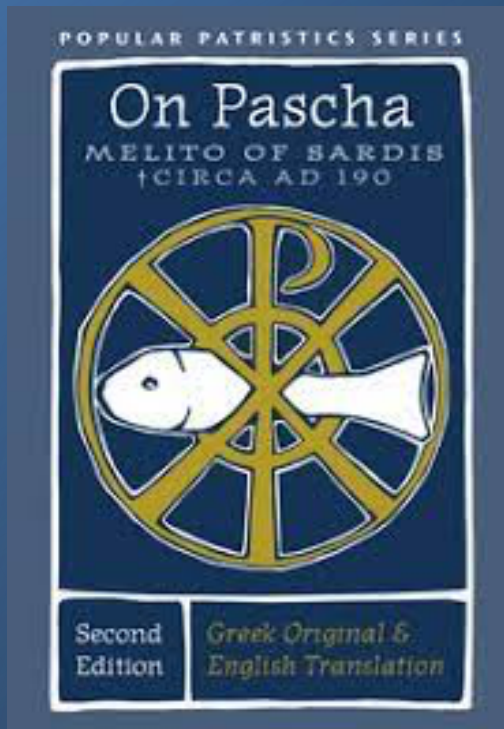
Peri Pascha (Concerning Passover) which was discovered in 1932: a liturgical sermon on the suffering of Christ that compares the celebration of Pesach to the Christian Easter.

Commentary on Exodus 12 for the purpose of Christian worship.

Melito is familiar with Jewish rituals (unleavened bread, bitter herbs).

A response to the influence of the Jewish community on Christians in Sardis (who celebrated Easter on the same day as the Jews – 14 Nisan – rather than on a Sunday).

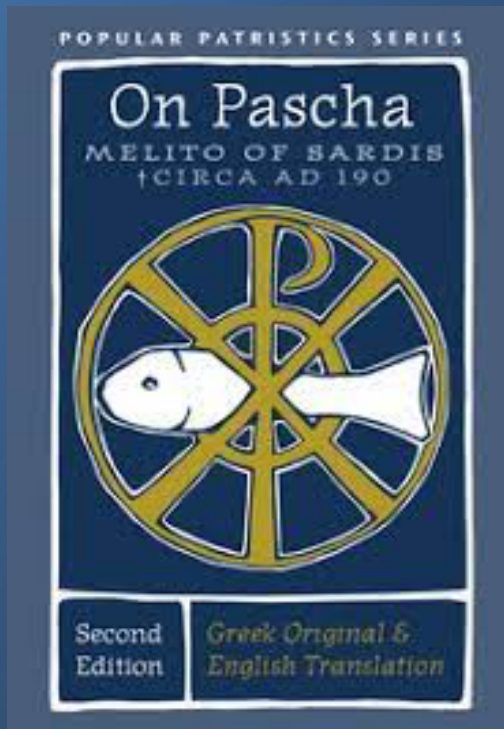
The remains of a large synagogue were discovered in Sardis (an influential group in the city?)



Peri Pascha

The history of Israel prepares the way for the coming of Jesus; after his appearance there is no further spiritual significance to be attached to Israel (supersessionist theology).

The true meaning of secret symbols such as the lamb: not the liberation of slaves from Egypt, because Jesus is the true Passover lamb and the Church is the 'true Israel'.



Peri Pascha

- The Christian Church has replaced the Jewish nation.
- The Gospel fulfils the law of Moses; the sacrifice of Christ replaces the Temple rituals.
- Emphasis on the 'old' and the 'new', on 'parable' and 'interpretation'.
- The Church has replaced the synagogue.

The Old Israel and the Gospel

- At one time the slaughtering of sheep was valuable, but now it is without value because of the life of the Lord; the death of the sheep was valuable, but now it is valueless because of deliverance by the Lord.....
- The earthly Jerusalem was valuable, but now it is without value because of the heavenly Jerusalem; the narrow inheritance was valuable, but now it is valueless because of limitless grace (*Peri Pascha*, 280-293).

Peri Pascha: The Jews and Deicide

By the end of the homily Melito adopts a far more negative and fierce attitude towards the Jews.

Here Melito accuses the Jews of deicide: they not only rejected Christ but killed him. This is why Israel has lost its status as the privileged nation of God.

Israel has murdered God. By killing Jesus they rejected the God of Israel.

It is the blindness of the Jews that prevents them from seeing God in Christ.

Melito, the Jews and Deicide

He [Christ] was killed.

And was he killed? In the middle of Jerusalem.

By whom? By Israel.

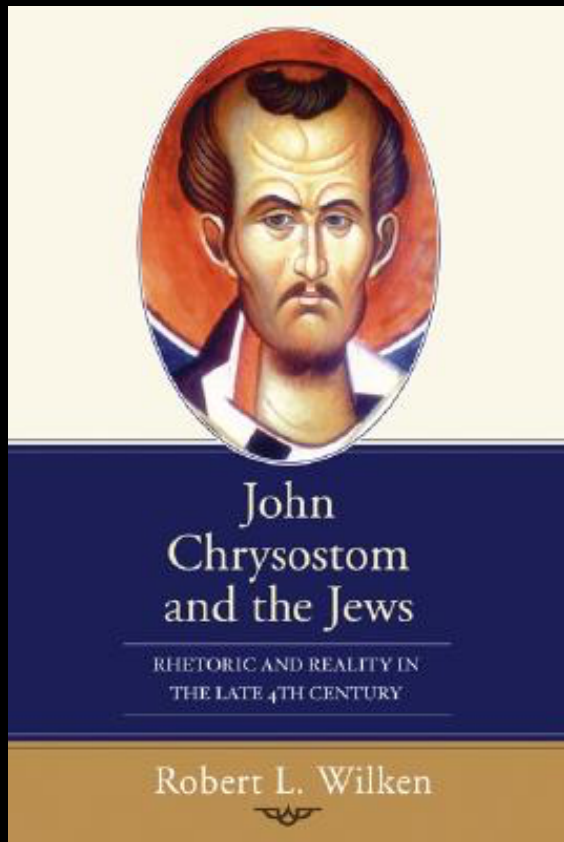
Why? Because he healed lepers
and cleansed them of their leprosy
and gave light to the blind
and he raised the dead.

This is why he died.....

What have you done, Israel? Is it not written about you: 'You are not to shed the blood of the innocent' (Jer. 7:6; 22:3)

'I killed the Lord', said Israel. 'Why? Because he had to die'
(Peri Pascha 71--74).

Antioch and John Chrysostom (347-407 CE)



John Chrysostom

- There had been a Jewish community in Antioch since the second century BCE.
- The cradle of Christianity among the Gentiles (see Acts 11:26).
- Chrysostom ('golden tongue') was baptized in 368 CE.
- He spent time in the wilderness being taught by monks.
- He was ordained priest in 386 CE and installed as Bishop of Constantinople in 398 CE

John Chrysostom

- He wrote eight sermons or homilies entitled *Adversus Iudaeos* (Against the Jews) in 386/7 CE.
- Suspicion of the Jewish community in Antioch.
 - criticism of Christians for following Jewish rites (e.g., celebration of Passover), when Jews did not follow Christian rites.
 - synagogues were not places in which to swear an oath but the home of idolatry and of the devil
- Chrysostom's use of rhetoric; use of negative language against the Jews.
- He states: their homes are the dwelling-places of thieves and murderers, and they live like pigs in indulgence and drunkenness' (I.4.1).
- Like Melito, Chrysostom uses the term 'deicide' (*theoktonia*) to describe the role played by the Jews in the death of Christ.

John Chrysostom and the Jews

This is what God did: he gave Jews the right to offer sacrifices, but they were only allowed to do so in Jerusalem and nowhere else in the world. After they offered sacrifices for a short time, God destroyed their city. Why?...By destroying the city, God led the Jews away from the custom of offering sacrifices, despite their reluctance.... Although the whole world was open to the Jews, they are not allowed to offer sacrifices there. They are prohibited from going to Jerusalem even though this is the only place where they are allowed to sacrifice ... By destroying the city, God destroyed their way of life' (IV.6.7-9).

Reasons for the Attitude of John Chrysostom

- His intention was to encourage Christians to return to the Church, not to persecute the Jews.
- Denigration of Judaism in order to protect Christianity.
- Emperor Julian (361-63 CE) sought to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.
- Some Christians adhered to Judaism (synagogue attendance, keeping the festivals).
- *Logoi kata loudaiôn* - 'Sermon against the Judaizers'.