Zur Geschichte der Juden im vierten Jahrhundert

von

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The History of the Jews in the Fourth Century

By

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Introduction

The fourth century AD is the time when the Talmud was developing. Historians do not know too much of the political history of the Jews in the Roman Empire. This doctoral thesis aimed at analyzing important personages of the era and their influence on the Jewish history and to learn more about the measures taken against the Jews.

Chapter I

The Jews and the Church Fathers of the Fourth Century

1. Basilius

The successor of Eusebius of Caesarea was Basilius the Great (329 - 379). At that time, the most central belief of Christianity was the common conviction that humanity would be redeemed by the man-God, the savior. Basilius believed therefore that the Jews were far away from God and would not be willing to repent, be it with softness or with harshness. He called the Jews “rulers of Sodom” whose hands were stained with the blood of Christ and all later generations inherited this old guilt. It was believed that the Jews wanted to save its people and its land through the crucifixion, however they had lost it all. Basilius developed rules for monasticism which are still valid today in the Greek-catholic church. Monks should make efforts to convert opponents through Christian propaganda. He was convinced that the Jews would one day receive an epiphany for the respect of God and convert.

2. Athanasius

Church Father and bishop Athanasius (296 - 373) had a different approach which went down in history. Athanasius claimed that the son of God was part of the divinity and was one with him. If someone did not believe in this sentence, then they were Jews or pagans. However, paganism and Judaism were not able to bring humanity in a communion with God. One who fought against the son, also fought against God. For the recognition of his teachings, Athanasius used his full force. He loved ascetism and he did not appreciate the worldly activities of the Jews.

3. Chrysostom

Also archbishop and early Church Father Chrysostom (347 - 407) supported Christology against the Jews. According to his opinion, the Jews did not understand the teachings of the sacred texts. They laughed about the fact that Christians pray to somebody who was crucified, and the Christians felt sorry for them. For the Christians, the cross was the sword. Chrysostom was a big supporter of the monastic life and therefore blamed the Jews for their immoral and corrupt life style and their wealth, especially the patriarchs. The Jews believed, so Chrysostom, to have been scattered across the world in order to be teachers for other nations. They were worse than pagans, crueler than beasts and worse than the Sodomites, so Chrysostom. They were not able to be good and were only interested in the bad. He called the synagogue a house of fornication, a place for demons and idolatry; Jews were diabolic people of impure spirit.

4. Hieronymus

Latin priest Hieronymus (340 - 420) tried to gain a deeper understanding of Judaism. He also believed that the Jews killed Jesus, the son of God, and therefore turned into servants of sin. Jews were unable to understand salvation because they lack basic understanding of all wisdom, the belief in Jesus. Hieronymus was in contact with Jewish-Christians, who accepted the virgin birth but who still believed in the Jewish laws. These people tried to be both, but Hieronymus called them neither Jews nor Christians. He strongly warned of accepting Jews into the church and yet to allow them to continue with their Jewish beliefs. These Jews would never fully become Christians, however, they would convert Christians into Jews, so Hieronymus' approach. In the interest of Christian propaganda, and to avert Jewish propaganda, Hieronymus studied the Hebrew language. He called Jews the enemy of the Christians and that they are like Judas the impure traitor.

5. Ambrosius

Bishop Ambrosius of Milan (337 - 379) believed as well that the Jews murdered God and that they were still pursuing Christ hostilely. Because the Jews did not accept Christ as their savior Ambrosius called them apostates who were guilty of the death penalty;

however, if they chose to accept Christianity, they would be received with open arms. To him, the Jewish lifestyle was incomprehensible and unacceptable with their void wealth for which he believed, the Jews would pay eternally. He referred to the devil as the father of the Jews: they commit crimes, are greedy, leprous and lustful. Ambrosius called the Jews the worst enemy of Christianity.

6. Augustin

Augustin is viewed as one of the religiously most important Church Fathers of his time and was heavily influenced by Ambrosius. The fact that Jews do not believe in the divinity of Jesus is for Augustin inexcusable and he is asking why God does not simply destroy them. In safeguarding the Jewish people, Augustin views them like Cain, who received a mark from God but was kept alive. In his opinion, the Jews do not understand their sacred texts which include evidence for the truth of Christianity. He even dared to claim that the Jews who crucified Jesus were less guilty than the ones who lived later and who refuse to believe in the divinity of the enthroned Jesus in heaven. Portrayed as enemies, Augustin viewed the Jews as enemies and slaves of Christians who are never allowed an official position or any form of leadership.

Chapter II

Motive and course of the fight

1. Christology

Christianity in the fourth century was almost exclusively the belief of God's redemption through his man-God. The spiritual atmosphere was filled so intensely with the belief in Jesus that any other concept became unimaginable. The Church Fathers were in constant battle to enforce this dogma and suppressed anything or anyone that was not conducive to their teachings. The Jews however, worked with zeal against the teachings of a man-God. The Jews would say with pride that they are Israel, God's people – they have only one God, there is no other one beside him.

2. The ideal of ascetism

The Jews belonged to the rich or wealthy class of society. The Jewish wealth was earned through agriculture or trading. In that time period, Jews were successful in the agricultural area – this is proven through many Jewish laws about slaves and various other relevant documents from this time. Evidence for the fact that many Jews were traders can be drawn from a law in 396, when Jews were given permission to fix their prices according to their Jewish supervisors. Rich Jews were great merchants while the poorer Jews were employed by them. Due to their wealth, the old Church Fathers bore a grudge towards the Jews. Since they were fanatics, rigid and stubborn, they condemned and denounced the worldly way of living of their worst enemies: the Jews. The dedication and affliction of their religion intoxicated their senses – the harsher they defended their own faith, the more excessive hatred and rebuke the monks had for the foreign religion. In the same way as they would torment and torture themselves for their own faith, they despised the principles and sources of Judaism.

3. Jewish propaganda

In the year 195 disturbances broke out among the Jews and made the emperor realize that Jews were active with propaganda; therefore, national laws were introduced to penalize any activities of this kind. A conversion to the Jewish religion was punished with castration (later this was punishable by death). If a Roman citizen wanted to circumcise himself or his slave, then they would be expelled and their property seized; the physician who performed the procedure would be killed. Not only the Judaization of Christians was harming the interests of the church, also intermarriages between Christians and Jews were a big issue and were penalized. In the year 339, Constantin the Great passed a law that punished such a connection between Christians and Jews with the death penalty for the Jew. When it comes to the laws against the Jews then the slavery laws need to be mentioned. In 335 Constantin prohibited the circumcision of slaves in order to prevent conversions to Judaism. If a slave was found to be circumcised, then his master would face the death penalty. In 339 a law was passed prohibiting Jews from purchasing slaves from different nations or sects. If a Jew bought a Christian slave then, as a punishment, he would lose all his wealth. Regarding the whole issue of synagogues, there was a question of preservation of old synagogues and the building of new ones. The matter of synagogues

understandably coincided with the issue of Jewish propaganda, that is why the Church Fathers did their best to insult the Jewish faith and destroy Jewish places of worship. Valentinian I (364 - 375) gave his protection to synagogues. At that time, Christians used to utilize them as military barracks or lodgings. Valentinian commanded that people, who were looking to spend the night in synagogues, be turned away. Theodosius protected synagogues as well. He understood that the issue of synagogues was a matter of recognition or dismissal of the Jewish faith in the Roman Empire. While Christianity was forbidden earlier, Judaism was permitted and has been under the protection of the state since olden times. With this in mind, Theodosius commanded in 393 that Jewish places of worship in Roman Empire were not allowed to be damaged or destroyed. In 412 Honorius forbade to disturb religious gatherings of Jews in Synagogues. When Theodosius II ascended the throne, the church obtained a greater influence than before. In that period, monks moved through the provinces with imperial powers to suppress non-believers and forbade the building of new synagogues. And yet, if a new synagogue was erected nonetheless, it was as if it was built for the Catholic church and a financial penalty needed to be paid. In 448 the Emperor decreed to have all pamphlets against Christianity burned.

In order to understand the issue of synagogues in connection with Jewish propaganda it must be noted that back then synagogues were much more than just places of worship: they were libraries and schools where Jewish law was studied. However, Jewish law had a great attraction on the non-Jewish population, which is what the church wanted to fight in its struggle against synagogues.

4. Jewish hostility against Christians

Christology, the ascetic ideal and possible propaganda activities of the Jews made the Church Fathers to resolute opponents of the Jews in the fourth century, in addition to the old myth of the profound hostility which the Jews allegedly had for the Christians. The legend of Jewish hatred for Christians turned into a weapon which was used frequently in world history.

When Basilius and Augustin said that Judaism is an enemy of Christianity; when Athanasius said that Jews are the most horrific desecrators of churches; when Chrysostom described the terrible prosecutions the martyr were subjected to because of the cruelty of the Jews; when Hieronymus said that Jews avoid Christians as if they were impure and

defiled and Ambrosius stated that Jews were the worst rebels; then these Church Fathers were bothered by the issues of their time and from these they inferred the sentiments and views of the Jews.

The Jews had connections to the Persian royalty. They held conversations about who was more powerful: the Persians or the Romans. When hostilities broke out between the Persians and the Romans, the Romans accused the Jews of having joined forces with their enemies. The Christians said that the Jews were roaming around the country together with the Persians looking for Christians who were hiding. Later, when the violent prosecutions of Christians in Persia broke out, the Christians believed the Jews to be the instigators. Altogether, about 16,000 clerics, monks and nuns were executed in these frightening times.

Around the year 373, allegations were made against the Jews that they were allegedly burning a Haman on the festival of Purim in order to show their hatred against the Christians. This led to serious violence against the Jews until the Emperor had to intervene and pass a law which prohibited hurting innocent Jews or destroying synagogues.

5. Christian Nation

In the times of Emperor Theodosius, Jews held positions at the court and in the provinces as Imperial Commissioners and representatives for various transactions. Higher positions which involved immunity, principality or civil servants in the senate were not available for Jews. These circumstances changed in 404 under Emperor Honorius, when Jews were excluded from serving in the military. It is not clear what prompted this decision. In addition, Jews were denied access to judicial careers; in 425 it became prohibited for Jews to practice a traditional legal profession. Jews should be majorly humiliated and not have any honorable positions and consequently, many Jews left the Christian state for Babylonia. That is why, instead of rabbis and Jewish educational institutions of Judea, the Babylonian Talmud, Babylonian schools and teachers gained dominant influence among the Jewish people.

Chapter III

The preservation of Judaism

1. Religion

While paganism was dying out, Judaism managed to maintain its existence and rejected the Christian philosophy. The Jews felt superior to the orthodox-Christian population through their belief of the one and only, outer-worldly, spiritual God. Monotheism became the idealism of the Jewish people. The Jews called themselves the teachers of the world and did not consider the belief in Jesus to be everlasting but perceived it as a cloud that would eventually fade away with better understanding. They saw themselves as the chosen people which did not stem from arrogance or conceit but from a deep belief and energetic philosophy. The Jews were also proud of their religious laws which they perceived to be an embodiment of the honest and logical revelation and which would lead to their eternal salvation. Due to the deep belief the Jews had for their law, many Christians and pagans were drawn to it as well. An important part of the energy and vital force that kept Judaism alive was, apart from the belief in God, the belief and the laws of the Messiah. Messianism was present in all parts of Jewish society as an inexhaustible force and a joyful expectation for vengeance in a hostile world. Israel, God's chosen people, would survive the enmity of the Christian Romans and would eventually return to Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem would be a magnificent city and its gates will be adorned with precious stones and gold. All nations would adhere to the laws and convert to Judaism. The arrival of the Messiah was calculated; the new exodus would come and was compared to the exodus of Egypt. The Messiah would redeem the Jews and subjugate the Romans; the massive fighting would turn into eternal peace. The Christians could not change the Jews' strong belief in their one and only God – sometimes mobs and fanatic monks tried to disturb the Jewish worship service. A real fight was only hypothetical, it was just a wild rage which had no legal basis. There are no sources that prohibit Jewish dietary laws; nowhere is it written that it was forbidden for Jews to perform circumcisions; celebrating the Shabbat and the Jewish festivals was not only permitted, Jews were protected celebrating them.

2. Politics

The Christians were afraid of eternity and tried to reach it through the ideal of ascetism which pushed against the sharp edges of reality. The Jews, on the contrary, strove for all the goods of the world. Christians tried to convert the Jews to Christianity and were even willing to pay them for it. Being baptized in general helped to achieve all honors and high positions while being Jewish harmed those aspirations. In 397, emperor Arcadius decreed that Jews were not allowed to be baptized until they paid all their debts; in 416 it was decreed that Jews who converted to Christianity out of dishonest reasons were able to return to Judaism. These two decrees seem to have been enacted for the good of the Jewish people – the benefits of these laws were to make it more difficult, and sometimes impossible for Jews to be baptized. Arcadius also decreed that Jews, who of course were subject to Roman law, had to adhere to Roman law in all matters which did not include their religion; there was the possibility of settling disputes among Jews in the Jewish courts. The Jewish patriarch Gamliel VI extended the power of the Jewish courts to matters that included disputes between Jews and Christians which became prohibited in 415. The Christians hostility against the Jews was aggressive and fanatic but was restrained by the Christian belief that the Jews were necessary for Christianity: they would convert at the end of days, which saved the Jews from the worst. This is the reason why Jewish property and life were saved – this was not much but it prevented a barbaric destiny and the church from bloodshed.