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CONSTANTINE’S SWORD
The Church and the Jews

A History

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main extrabiblical source of information about Palestine in the first century, Josephus was an upper-class Jew who served in the Roman army and wrote about it in Jewish War. His patrons included the emperor Vespasian and the emperor’s son Titus. Josephus was friendly to Rome, yet the callousness of its colonial administration and the brutality of its war machine clearly come through in his writing. His important work about Judaism is Jewish Antiquities. He is regarded by most scholars as a more or less reliable witness, although readers should always keep in mind his broad purpose of advancing his brand of establishment Judaism at the expense of marginal groups.

“When Pilate,” Josephus wrote, “upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us...condemned him to be crucified...” Indeed, the death of Jesus, Crossan writes, “by execution under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical ever can be.” Yet our knowledge of what are taken to be sure facts of history goes beyond that. Thus it is a “fact” that Jesus proclaimed a God of love over against the Pharisees’ God of legalism and revenge, a “fact” that Jesus attacked the money changers in the Temple and proposed to destroy it, which is why the Jews accused him; a “fact” that, in actions and words, Jesus “fulfilled” key prophecies of Jewish Scripture, proving the truth of claims made about him by his followers; a “fact” that those claims (he was the Messiah, he was Christus, he was Son of God) were rejected by Jews; a “fact” that some of those followers were attacked and killed by Jews (Stephen, James, the brother of Jesus); a “fact” that Christianity did not thrive as a new religion until it broke free (in Antioch, Asia Minor, Rome) of a limiting Jewish culture; a “fact” that the meaning of Christianity, even in a non-Jewish world, would depend on Jews, far more than on pagans, as the permanent embodiment of what Christians were not.

But what happens when such foundational “facts” are remembered without regard for the social and political ground out of which they grew? As with Jim Morrissey, partially remembered “facts” can turn the truth on its head. The “longest lie” is what Crossan calls the web of distortions that are thus woven into the primal Christian narratives. It is a lie about the Jews — or is it, first, a lie about Jesus? As with my mother’s uncle, is there an overgrown but reliably engraved tombstone in the presence of which we can finally face the truth?
Aryan Christ emerged as something to be taken seriously. Under Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), pan-German nationalism jelled, spawning a unifying racial theory, which led to a purified notion of a German Volk. Similar efforts had marked Christian dogma and practice, going back to the early times of the Church, but nineteenth-century nationalism brought a new edge to such discussions. Ideas of racial purity as a component of social identity influenced religious identity, leading to a notion of Christianity stripped of all Semitic influence. As important a figure as the philosopher Johann Fichte (1762–1814), for example, had posited a Jesus who was not Jewish at all, and throughout the century theologians followed suit. This would be one of the ways that German Protestant scholars tilled the soil for Nazi antisemitism, promulgating an idolatry of Aryan racial identity by defining Jesus over against Jewishness, not only religiously but racially. Eventually German Protestant hymnals would be "de-Judaized" by the removal of words like "amen," "hallelujah," and "hosanna."

In the Christian world, the influence of nineteenth-century German Protestant theology was so dominant that it was felt even within Roman Catholicism, especially in the matter of a historical quest for Jesus that led to his removal from the Jewish milieu. As critics of that "quest" remind me now, the illustrated books used in Catholic schools that I attended as a child had been subtly shaped by visual cues. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and all their intimates, save one, were portrayed with the racial and sartorial characteristics—blue eyes, light brown flowing hair, graceful robes—of northern Europe, in stark distinction to the pictured Pharisees, Sadducees, and high priests, with their odd headaddresses, phylacteries, tasseled prayer shawls, oversized noses, and dark skin. It was as if the residents of the towns of Galilee were of a different racial strain than those of Judea—indeed, in the nineteenth century Jesus commonly came to be referred to as "the Galilean," or "the Nazarene," an implicit distancing from "Judea," the region of the Jews. The only obvious Semite in Jesus' inner circle, of course, was the one named for that region, Judas. The betrayer functioned in this filtered narrative as the one Jew, and the story forever emphasized his motive as greed.

The occupations of the fishermen friends of Jesus, like Jesus' own trade of carpenter—think of those pastel scenes of the boy and his dad in that airy, neatly swept workshop, making cabinets—were emphasized to contrast with the Judas-like moneygrubbers whom Jesus would go to Judea to attack. The nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus, in other words, in its effort to get behind the façade of an overly divinized Lord, led to the application of nineteenth-century racial categories and cultural stereotypes to first-century Palestine, a way of making Jesus human without making him Jewish. I have been saying "nineteenth-century" emphasizing the German Protestant origins of this mindset, but this was all still thoroughly in place in the crucifix and stained glass of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Alexandria, Virginia, and in the textbooks and bulletin-board posters of my parochial school, by which, despite myself, I continue to measure God. One would think that six years of Scripture study and theology in a rigorous seminary at the time of the revolutionary Vatican II would have remedied this shallow notion of who Jesus was, but German Protestant theology and scholarship, still largely uncritiqued for its implicit anti-Judaism, was in the early 1960s more influential in Catholic circles than ever.

True, the most patently childish notions—that cabinetmaker's workshop, Jesus hand-carving birds, then bringing them to life—had dropped away. But an idea that distanced Jesus even further from Jewishness had taken over my understanding. I learned to think of Jesus as a mystical genius whose direct experience of God the Father, whom he called Abba ("Daddy"), was such that he had no need of any mediating culture. Religion is by definition such a culture. Here is how one of the theologians I learned this from, Bernard Cooke, explains it: "What was distinctive about Jesus' experience of God was its intimacy and immediacy. All the textual evidence points to the fact that Jesus' knowledge of his Abba was immediate personal acquaintance."

The word "religion" shares a root with "ligament," meaning "tie." Religion exists to overcome the gulf between creatures and Creator. It is a system of beliefs and rituals that ties the human to God. But Jesus was presented, in this understanding, as the one man who had no need of such a tie. "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me," the Gospel of John reports him as saying. The theology that develops from that mystical union makes Jesus himself the ligament. So the question of the religious identity of Jesus never arises—not Jewish religion, not Christian religion—because his knowledge of God is immediate. He has no need of the ligament of religion. If he at first participated in Jewish ritual, he did so for the sake of form, not because he needed it. And the Gospels show him distancing himself from Jewish religious observances. As Paula Fredriksen points out, for example, the Gospel of Mark shows Jesus dismissing central religious traditions of Judaism like "Shabbat, food, tithing, Temple offerings, purity—as the 'traditions of men.' To these he op-
poses what Jesus ostensibly proposes as 'the commandment of God' (7:8). The strong rhetoric masks the fact that these laws are biblical and, as such, the common concern of all religious Jews: It is God in the Torah, not the Pharisees in their interpretations of it, who commanded these observances.9

When the disciples of Jesus asked him how to pray — this story became the core of my belief in him — he replied with the Our Father. Christians recite this prayer in rote fashion, as if it were the farthest thing from religious revolutionary, when in fact it is nothing less than an invitation to call God "Daddy" — that is, to think of the Almighty One, the Ineffable, in the most intimate way. Ironically, this aspect of Jesus' spirituality, which for most Christians has had the effect of distancing him from Judaism, actually shows him participating in its vital and at that time multifaceted manifestation. As the Catholic scholar John Pawlowski has written, "In particular, Jesus' stress on his intimate link with the Father picks up on a central feature of Pharisaic thought."10 Indeed, there is evidence that, by the time of Jesus, Jews were regularly praying to God as Father.11 But that was never explained to us. The intimacy Jesus claimed to have with God the Father was made to seem unique, entirely his. More than anything else, to us, it set him apart from Jews.

Based on what was presented to us, we could only have concluded that, if anything, Jesus' Abba experience put him at odds with Jewish religion, for, as Cooke puts it, "There were fundamental incongruities between the Abba he experienced and the God known and explained by those around him."12 This spirituality had the simple effect of deleting any reference to Jewish cult in the life of Jesus. It was impossible to picture him in that tasseled prayer shawl, wearing phylacteries, entering the Temple not to protest but to pray. Having learned in parochial school that Jesus was racially not Jewish, I learned in graduate theological school that he was religiously not Jewish either. Susannah Heschel characterizes the Aryanizing of Jesus as an effort "to create a judenrein Christianity for a judenrein Germany,"13 but this spiritualizing of Jesus was a judenrein of such subtlety that I did not know, until reflecting on Heschel's recent work, that it had completely dominated my religious imagination.14 What religion was Jesus? I'd have surely answered Jewish, unlike those ill-informed college freshmen — but their answers were more honest than mine.

What is a Jew anyway? At the end of the second millennium, Jews themselves carry on the argument, with the ultra-Orthodox of Mea Shearim, their enclave in Jerusalem, aiming anathemas at the secular children of David Ben Gurion, modern Israel's first prime minister. Hitler said that a Jew was anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent, and, as if to spite him, many Jews adopted that definition. The rabbis, holding to matrilineal descent, define a Jew as someone having a Jewish mother. In the state of Israel, a Jew can be an atheist, although not a baptized Christian. Part racial, part religious, the meaning of Jewishness today is ambiguous. In his memoir, the drama critic Richard Gilman described a life's journey that had taken him from the Jewish faith into which he was born, into unbelief, then into Roman Catholicism, from which he subsequently "lapsed." And where did that leave him? As "a lapsed Jewish-atheist-Catholic. Fallen from all three, a triple desertor!" But not quite. In the end, he had, without choosing it, resumed his original identity, "The difference is that you stay Jewish in your bones and pores, there's no lapsing from that; changed names or nose jobs won't do."15

The contemporary argument among ultra-Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews, and secular Jews over the question Who is a Jew? points to a piece of the social and political context that is mainly missing from the Christian memory of foundational events. To imagine that first Jesus and then his followers were in conflict with "the Jews," a conflict with the sequential climaxes that occurred when "the Jews" killed Jesus and then certain of his followers, is, of course, to ignore the fact that Jesus and his first followers were themselves Jews. But on a more basic level, it is to assume that there was a social-religious entity called "the Jews." Obviously, a period of time had to pass before something called "Christianity" came into being as a distinct community, but emphasis on that evolution ignores the fact that, in the same period, there was no clearly defined "Judaism" either. Indeed, the suffix "am," suggesting a set of coherent ideological boundaries, a membership definition, a precisely notated theology and cult, is anachronistic. If my great-uncle's story was misrepresented by my family, it was because the post-1936 Irish imagination could no longer contain the ambiguous experience of a dual loyalty to London and Dublin. If the story of Jesus is misrepresented, with devastating effect on the Jews, however defined, it is first because a later Christianity presumed a univocal — and, not incidentally, flawed — Judaism against which to define its uniqueness and value. But there was no such Judaism.

"When Jesus was born," the Columbia University scholar Alan Segal writes, "the Jewish religion was beginning a new transformation, the rabbinic movement, which would permit the Jewish people to survive
the next two millennia. The complex of historical and social forces that molded rabbinic Judaism also affected the teachings of Jesus, helping to form Christianity into a new and separate religion. Segal entitled his book *Rebecca's Children,* reflecting a theme already noted, that it is useful to think of the two religions as siblings, which, like Jacob and Esau, struggled against each other even in their mother's womb. The history of the origins of Jewish-Christian conflict suggests that the metaphor of rivalrous fraternity is more than a metaphor; it actually defines the way these two religions came into being. In Jesus' lifetime and shortly after it, Segal writes, "Dislocation, war, and foreign rule forced every variety of Jewish community to rebuild its ancient national culture into something almost unprecedented, a religion of personal and communal piety. Many avenues were available to Jews for achieving this new sense of personal piety, one of which was Jesus' movement."27

When a Christian asks Who is a Jew? he risks falling into the trap of a myopic projection of perennial Christian anxiety, defining Jewishness in a way that serves a Christian purpose. Obviously, Judaism defines itself in its own terms. Is it trying to understand the origins of Jewish-Christian conflict, perhaps it would be more useful to put the question as those first rivals within the broad Jewish community might have, which would be to ask, in effect, Who is the "true Israel"?28

Competing answers were offered by the groups characterized in the New Testament. There were the Pharisees, whose movement evolved into rabbinic Judaism, referred to earlier. Some Pharisees were priests, although most were laymen, and their religious impulse, competing with Temple sacrifice, emphasized the study of Torah in their synagogues and the rigorous keeping of the Law. Josephus says that six thousand Jews were Pharisees. There were Sadducees, whom we might recognize as aristocrats, and some of them were high priests whose religious focus was the sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem Temple. They were inclined to cooperate with the Roman occupiers.29 It is not clear how large this party was, but according to the distinguished scholar E. P. Sanders, there were many thousands of priests. Josephus argues that the majority of Jews would have inclined toward such cooperation with Rome.30 The Sadducees, in effect, formed a core of the establishment. There were Essenes, famous now for their caves in Qumran,31 but in the first century they were a counteract that rejected the corruptions of the cities, and in particular of Herod's Temple, which to them was a Hellenized blasphemy. Herod the Great (c. 73–4 B.C.E.), the half-Jewish Roman puppet, had ruled as king of Israel, including Judea and Galilee, since 37 B.C.E. He is remembered by Christians for the story of his slaughter of the innocents at the time of Jesus' birth, but his greatest undertaking was the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, which for him fulfilled a political purpose as much as a religious one. The Temple was designed to impress his Roman overlords as much as his Jewish subjects. But because of that duality, the Temple was a flashpoint to the Essenes, who wanted to replace the Romans as rulers of Israel with their own leaders. Josephus put their number at more than four thousand.32

The numbers offered by Josephus, while not to be taken as precise, indicate that relatively few Jews belonged to the identifiable parties. But the broader population would have had clear sympathies one way or another. At one extreme — in our terms, perhaps, the "liberals" — would have been the Hellenizers, those open to the customs of the Gentiles. By and large, these Jews would have been of the Diaspora — Greek speakers, men and women who had learned to live within and take for granted the pagan culture of Greek and Roman cities. Most famous of these would have been Philo of Alexandria (c. 30 B.C.E.–45 C.E.), who wrote favorably, for example, of the emperor Augustus. But many Palestinian Jews would probably have rejected Hellenization, and that is especially true of the rural people, whose experience of the wider world would have been limited.

At the other extreme from "liberals" would have been "zealots," whether pacifists or violent revolutionaries — pietists or apocalyptic believers who looked for divine intervention as a means of restoring Israel. An example of such a movement, perhaps, would have been that of John the Baptist. He was a radical spiritualist, yet his direct challenge to Herod, for which he was beheaded, demonstrates the impossibility of separating religion from politics in this milieu. In addition to the main parties and the sects, there were powerful regional divisions among those who identified themselves as the "true Israel." Judeans were dominant because the cultic center was in Jerusalem, yet there were Samaritans who, worshiping at their own Mount Gerizim instead of on Mount Zion, were disdained by Judeans.33 And there were the villages of Galilee, whom city-dwelling Judeans would have looked down upon as peasants. In turn, Galileans would have regarded the Jewish oligarchs of Jerusalem both as near traitors for accommodating Rome and as idolaters for allowing images of Caesar to be venerated, if only on coins. (Jesus' question about the coin, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" is a sly jibe at his challengers' idolatry.)
The late-twentieth-century ferment in Christian theology, symbolized by the Second Vatican Council, apart from the trauma of the Holocaust, including the failure of the Christian churches to resist it.)

Between half a million and a million Jews lived in Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth. Some scholars put the Jewish population there as high as two and a half million, with a few hundred thousand Gentiles. Sanders accepts a figure of "less than a million, possibly only about half that." Later we will see that Josephus posits Jewish casualty figures in the war with Rome that Sanders finds too high. Whatever the totals, the ratio of Jewish dead in Palestine at the hands of Rome may well approximate the twentieth-century record of one in three. Already, when Jesus was born, the inhabitants of his region were a defeated, violated people. The brutally effective Roman general Pompey (106–48 B.C.E.), undertaking a major clampdown on the Asian provinces of the empire, had set his legions loose throughout the area little more than half a century before (63 B.C.E.). He conquered Jerusalem. Thus began a period of oppressive colonial occupation that would climax twice: when Roman garrisons leveled Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and again—once and for all—in 135 C.E.

Largely because we are heirs to a Roman imperial culture that controlled the writing of history, we are inclined to read Rome's story through rose-colored lenses. We tend to see the march of the Roman Empire as a civilizing work of human progress. Every schoolchild knows that the darkness of barbarianism was penetrated by Julius Caesar, who brought order to its chaos. "All Gaul," we learned, "is divided into three parts." But we never asked who was doing the dividing, or how the dividing felt about it. We accepted the idea of a system according to which only citizens had rights, and roles in the story. Saint Paul's story, for example, takes a dramatic turn when, as Acts tells it, he announces his citizenship. Only then are the Romans who arrested him bound by what we call due process. In the story of Rome, all others, especially that invisible mass of slaves, are the forever unnamed—and forever untitled to any semblance of due process. We mark Rome's progression from a republic to a dictatorship, and while we take note of the madness of a Caligula (37–41 C.E.), who had himself worshiped as a god, or a Nero (54–68 C.E.), who killed himself saying "What an artist I perish," reports of their brutality serve mainly to emphasize the relative worthiness of most rulers. We are conditioned to think of the decline and fall of Rome sentimentally, as tragedy pure and simple. The gradual dissipation of imperial power, leading to vulnerability before the northern hordes, is the condition only of a new darkness.

But what if Roman imperial power itself, not in decline but at the peak,
was the real darkness? A British critic and author of several important works on early Christianity, A. N. Wilson, says that Rome "was the first totalitarian state in history," the first to extend absolute control over the lives of a vast population. When compared to other empires of antiquity, Rome comes off well in some ways. The Greeks under Alexander, for example, imposed their language on those they conquered, while the Romans allowed local languages and cultures to remain intact. That is why Greek was the lingua franca of the Hellenized world. In addition, the breadth of religious diversity in Rome itself shows that the caesars tolerated, and even admitted to the pantheon, local gods. But the Roman war machine, once set running, was ruthless beyond what the world had seen. And though local gods were left alone, Rome was perhaps the first empire to require of its subjects an at least outward show of ascent to the proposition that the emperor, too, was God.86

It is the glories of Roman dominance that are emphasized in the cultural memory of Western civilization — those arrow-straight roads, elegant aqueducts, timeless laws, conjugated language — to the exclusion of what the imposition of those glories cost those on whom they were imposed. What if, when we thought of Caesar, we thought less of Cleopatra's lover or Virgil's patron or Marcus Aurelius's delicate conscience than, say, of a Joseph Stalin or a Pol Pot whose program we would? How would history tell the story of the twentieth century if it were the first century of the thousand-year Reich? Is it all depends on where you stand. It may be anarchistic to judge the policies of a great empire of antiquity by the standards of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, but if being human means anything, it is that a minimal level of decent treatment is required in every culture and era.87 It is clear that from the point of view of those on the bottom of the Roman pyramid — indeed, under it — that such a minimal standard was not met.

To the peasant peoples of the Roman-dominated world, to the millions of slaves and petty laborers (in Rome itself, fully one million of the population of two million were slaves*), to the lepers and beggars, to the troublemakers whose lives could be snuffed out with little notice taken, no characterization of Caesar's evil would have been too extreme. We have looked back at Rome from above — from the point of view, that is, of those who benefited from its systems, traveled its roads, beheld its architectural wonders, learned to think in its language — but what of that vast majority who drew no such benefit? There is no understanding either the Jesus movement itself or the foundational memory of its violent conflict with the Jews if we cannot look back from below, from the vantage of those for whom the Roman systems were an endless, ever-present horror. It was to them, above all, that the message of Jesus came to seem addressed.

Most of the subjugated peoples in the Mediterranean world yielded to the Romans in what Romans regarded as essential, and those who refused to do this found themselves required to yield in everything, surrendering whatever was distinctive in their cultural identities to the dominant occupier. That is why we know so little of the Phoenicians, say, or the Nabateans. The people in Palestine proved to be especially stubborn, clinging doggedly, and despite efforts at coercion and co-optation, to a self-understanding that permanently set them apart. But Jewish resistance arose from something far deeper than some pseudogenetic stiff-necked stubbornness that would one day inspire an anti-Semitic stereotype. For the Jews of Palestine, the indignity of an emperor-worshiping colonizer's foot on the throat was compounded by the religious convictions that no such emperor was divine and, more pointedly, that their freedom in this now violated land was a gift from the one true God — their God. Despite everything that set them apart, the rivalrous groups of Jews agreed that the land was a sacred symbol of that God's enduring promise. So for Palestinian Jews of all stripes, the Roman occupation as such was a religious affront as well as a political one. Furthermore, and equally across the board, a Jew's belief in the covenant included the belief that, one way or another, sooner or later, God would fulfill the promise again, as God had done repeatedly in history. God would do this once the purpose of this humiliating defeat — some, like John the Baptist, said its purpose was to bring the people to repentance — was fulfilled. God would do it by vanquishing the foreign invader and restoring to Israel its holy freedom. In other words, Jews as Jews had a reason to resist Rome, and a reason to believe, despite Rome's overwhelming military superiority, that the resistance would be effective.

What Jews did not have was anything approaching agreement on the form this resistance should take. And it is here that the other, negative meaning of Jewish sectarianism surfaces. Typically, imperial powers depend on the inability of oppressed local populations to muster a unified resistance, and the most successful occupiers are skilled at exploiting the differences among the occupied. Certainly that was the story of the British Empire's success, and its legacy of nurtured local hatreds can be seen wherever the Union Jack flew, from Muslim-Hindu hatred in Pakistan...
and India, to Catholic-Protestant hatred in Ireland, to, yes, Jew-Arab ha
tred in modern Israel.\textsuperscript{66} Rome was as good at encouraging internecine re
sentments among the occupied as Britain ever was. At one level, it is a matter only of exploiting the temperamental differences that perennially divide conservatives, moderates, and radicals from one another. E. F. Sanders says that for Jews confronted with "the great empires of the Medi
terranean," the various parties had to decide "when to fight, when to yield, when to be content with partial independence, when to seek more. In
terms of internal affairs, the primary issue was who would control the na
tional institutions: the temple, the sacrifices, the tithes and other offer
ings, and the administration of the law."\textsuperscript{67}

Sectarian conflict amounted to more than mere squabbling. There were
great tensions involving the life and death of the nation of Israel, and
every aspect of its existence could be disputed because Israel's God had
become involved at every level. Today, even believers take for granted the
"wall of separation," in Jefferson's phrase, between areas of God's concern
and those of government's, but it was not so at the time of Jesus. "There
was no simple distinction," Sanders says, "between 'church' and 'state' or
'religion' and 'politics,' God, in the eyes of Jews, cared about all aspects of
life; no part of it was outside 'religion.' Thus, in any case in which there
was a choice — whether between would-be rulers, competing architec
tural plans for the temple, or various prohibitions on the sabbath — Jews
would attempt to discern and follow God's will. Not infrequently they dis
agreed.\textsuperscript{68} In every case, their disagreement served the purposes of Rome.

To the radical revolutionaries who wanted to mount an immediate, vi
olent assault on the occupier, the impulse of aristocrats to cut the best deal
with the enemy looked like collaboration or treason; equally, from inside
the Temple precincts, the radicals' fanaticism looked like suicide. So the
establishment party of Sadducees, associated with the priestly class, par
ticipated from their place at the Temple in the administration of Roman
power in Jerusalem; the separatist Zealots, like the monastics at Qumran,
pursued a rejectionist path; the Pharisees advocated an adherence to Mo
saic law as a way of ushering in God's liberating intervention; and the
Scarii launched knife-wielding terrorist attacks against agents of the oc
cupiers. What the Romans could depend on — a classic exercise of divide-
and-keep-conquered — was each group's readiness to identify a compet
ing group as the primary enemy, often leaving Rome above the fray. For
our purposes, the point is that even in the way events of this era are re
membered, the unleashed sectarian impulse continued to keep the Ro
man overlords at the margin of the story.

Take two examples, one from the beginning and one from the end of
the story of Jesus, as his followers told it to each other and the world.
First, in the year 4 B.C.E., which also happened to be the year of Jesus' birth,\textsuperscript{69} Herod the Great died. His death left a temporary power vacuum,
which caused violent outbreaks among forces loyal to various pretenders
to succeed Herod as Rome's client king and among the followers of messi
anic movements who sought to seize an opening against Rome.\textsuperscript{70} The
Romans smashed every rebellion and, with those legions pouncing from
Syria, restored direct imperial rule. As summed up by the scholars Rich
ard Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman: "The Roman armies had swept
through many of the towns and villages of the country, raping, killing,
and destroying nearly everything in sight. In Galilee, all centers of rebel
lion were brutally suppressed; the rebel-held town of Sepphoris was
burned to the ground, and all its surviving inhabitants were sold into slav
ery.\textsuperscript{71} Thousands of Jews were killed. Villages in Galilee were laid waste.
In Jerusalem, where rebels had briefly taken charge, the Romans showed
the lengths to which they were prepared to go to maintain control by
swiftly executing anyone even suspected of collusion in the rebellion —
Josephus puts the number at two thousand.\textsuperscript{72} The Roman means of execu
tion, of course, was crucifixion, and Josephus makes the point that indeed
the victims were crucified. This means that just outside the wall of the
Jewish capital, crosses were erected — not three lonely crosses on a hill, as
in the tidy Christian imagination, but perhaps two thousand in close
proximity. On each was hung a Jew, and each Jew was left to die over sev
eral days the slow death of suffocation, as muscles gave out so that the vic
tim could no longer hold himself erect enough to catch a breath. And
once squeezed free of life, the corpses were left on their crosses to be eaten
by buzzards. This grotesquery was its own justification. Its power was
magnified because for Jews, coming into contact with a corpse made one
ritually impure — a priest, for example, could not bury a parent. Such im
purity could even be acquired by "overshadowing" a corpse, or being
"overshadowed" by one.\textsuperscript{73} The shadows of those crucifixes, in other words,
were also the point. The Jews who'd been left alive were being reminded
whom they were dealing with in Rome, reminded for weeks by the sight
and stench of the bodies. The image of those scores of crosses would
stamp Jewish consciousness for a generation.\textsuperscript{74}

The opening chapters of the Gospel of Matthew evoke the political and
social stresses of the world into which Jesus was born, but doesn't it seem
odd that the ruthlessness displayed in Matthew's account of the slaughter
of the innocents — the murder of every male child under two in the town
of Bethlehem, a very few miles from those crossers — belonged not to the Romans but to the Jewish king Herod! This is not to dismiss that crime, if it occurred, nor to deny Herod’s brutality, especially in the madness of his last years, but only to note that in the Christian memory — the Gospel of Matthew, usually dated to the decade of the 80s c.e., was written long after these events took place — the Roman crime is forgotten while the Jewish one is highlighted. Similarly with the Gospel of Luke, which was composed about the same time as Matthew. Luke’s nativity-narrative reference to Caesar Augustus (63 B.C.E.—14 C.E.) as issuing a decree “that all the world should be enrolled,” which moved the action of the Mary and Joseph story to Bethlehem in the first place, cries out for elaboration. It was the same Caesar Augustus who declared himself “Savior of the world,” making him anathema to Jews. When he came to power with the Senate’s authority in 27 B.C.E., it was as the head of a republic, but when he died in 14 C.E., it was as the emperor of a dictatorship, one tool of which was that world census. The perfect symbol of Caesar’s regime was the gibeon on which those who refused to be part of his all-encompassing blasphemy were hung to die.

Now the second example, from the end of Jesus’ life. When that Roman gibeon finally enters his story, by an extraordinary set of narrative machinations it is hardly Roman at all. Certainly the Gospel accounts are explicit in describing the Romans as the executioners of Jesus, but if they are coconspirators with the Jewish high priests and leaders of the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin, they are decidedly unindicted coconspirators, which in modern law is a distinction between parties to a crime and perpetrators of it. According to the Christian memory, as conjured again by Matthew, the hand of the hand-washing Pilate (whose term as procurator, or appointed governor, in Judea ran from 26 to 36 C.E.) is forced by the bloodthirstiness of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” Pilate says. This procurator is remembered somewhat differently by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who lived when Pilate did, and wrote sometime around 41 C.E. that the Roman used “bribes, insults, robberies, outrages, wanton injuries, constantly repeated executions without trial, ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty.” Crossan, having cited these words, nevertheless asserts that Pilate “was neither a saint nor a monster.” Fredriksen, however, makes the point that Philo, Josephus, and the Roman historian Tacitus all single out Pilate “as one of the worst provocateurs.” Even by the standards of brutal Rome, Pilate seems to have been savage. When, six or so years after the death of Jesus, he wantonly slaughte
was a reason for it. The followers of Jesus had just been slandered, defined not merely as Rome's mortal enemy but as violent insurrectionists. It was not true, and the Gospels were slanted, in effect, to emphasize that followers of Jesus fully intended to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's. Sectarian tensions between Christians and what Wilson calls the "generality" of Jews may have been exacerbated by the narrow scapegoating, but again, those tensions were multi-layered, still decidedly intra-Jewish. But soon enough, after the Gospels had jelled, Rome's murderous assault on the Jews of Judea would make Nero's violence seem benign, and explode the boundaries against which Christian-Jewish stresses had begun to press. The trauma of bloodshed on an imperial scale, unprecedented for the Jews, is the necessary context for understanding what was happening in those years among the Jews. Christian anti-Judaism, in others words, is not the first cause here; the Roman war against Judaism.

By the Irish analogy, think of the ultimate effect of British imperial power among the Irish themselves. The Irish war with England, begun in 1916, was extremely violent, including as it did the twentieth century's first indiscriminate shelling of an urban center, Dublin. Part of England's "draconian reaction" was the unleashing on an unarmed populace of the criminal-terrorist Black and Tan and the post-1916 deployment of trench-veteran tommys, who viewed the Irish war as an extension of the no-holds-barred war against the Hun and fought accordingly. And the first result of all this violence? The Irish population, which in 1916 had been overwhelmingly inclined to favor London — as my great-uncle probably would have — over the self-appointed, self-aggrandizing liberators of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, by 1922 thought of London as the devil's own. The fierce, universal Irish hatred of England, a twentieth-century cliché, was in fact born in the twentieth century — just then. Thus even a diehard like Winston Churchill came to recognize that an English victory over this despicable people, short of the outright elimination of the native population, was impossible. Empowered to do so by Eamon de Valera, Michael Collins negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. There would not be another until 1986.

There was a second result of the violence of that war. In addition to a unifying Irish hatred of the English, there would be a terrifying disuniting Irish hatred of the self. "I tell you this — early this morning I signed my death warrant," Collins wrote to a friend after agreeing to the treaty, instinctively grasping what awaited him at home. No sooner had the An-

igo-Irish war ended than the even more dispiriting Irish civil war began. Forces loyal to de Valera would eventually murder Collins, proving him a prophet. De Valera rejected the central terms of the treaty — an oath of allegiance to the Crown, British hegemony over the six counties in the north — but would later accept them once the paradox of Irish self-hatred had run its course. The Irish civil war — unlike, say, the American one — accomplished nothing, except to enable one Irish faction to vent its rage on another. Irish sectarian hatred served the overlords' purpose well, resulting in an Irish impotence the English could depend on for most of a century. Indeed, Irish sectarian violence was efficiently, if slyly, stoked by London all that time, from Lloyd George's government to Margaret Thatcher's.

Intra-Jewish conflict served Rome's purposes in just such a way. There is perhaps something craven in the Gospels' emphasis on "Jews" as a threat to order in the empire, as opposed to "Christians," and it does not mitigate the Gospel writers' responsibility for driving this wedge to note that they were responding to Roman oppression. But the more fundamental point is that in doing this, the followers of the murdered Jesus were only demonstrating how effective the imperial overlords had been in infecting the dominated population with its own cynicism and contempt. This dynamic becomes even clearer in the context that has provided us our starting point: One measure of the diabolical efficacy of Nazi torment in Auschwitz, besides the way Jews were victims of SS guards, was the way Jews were victims of fellow Jews, the capos who served as SS surrogates. The collapse of the moral universe that led Jews to participate in their own destruction in the death camps, or to take upon themselves a feeling of guilty responsibility for the evil around them, only emphasizes the abject evil of an absolutely oppressive system. That evil lies in the system's capacity to destroy the innocence of everyone it touches. When Jewish factions turned Rome's venom against each other, Rome won yet another victory. There is no question here of "Christian innocence," because among human beings there is no innocence when the question becomes survival. Extreme violence and extreme measures to survive it form the ground on which this entire story stands.

It is nevertheless important to emphasize that, well after the life of Jesus, those who remembered the conflicts surrounding both its beginning and its end mainly as conflicts among Jews — Herod's villainy, not Caesar's; the high priest's, not Pilate's — were being true to the ways these events had come to be understood in the period of heightened Jewish sec-
tarianism that followed Jesus’ death. Not “innocent,” yet they were not liars either. The Gospel of Matthew was not composed by someone who had been there, not composed by someone who knew well that Pilate was a sadist who’d have thought nothing of dispatching an unknown Galilean troublemaker, and, knowing this, still consciously and falsely portrayed the Romans as innocent and “the Jews” as guilty. It would be a slander to say such a thing of Matthew (or the writers of that Gospel), just as it would slander my mother to say she lied to me when she led me to think her uncle was a hero of the Easter Rising.

Earlier, I cited John Dominic Crossan’s 1995 characterization of the claim that the Jews murdered Jesus as “the longest lie,” but in a subsequent work, in 1998, he amended that judgment. The authors of the foundational Christian documents, writing years after the event, did not say this; I know that the Roman authorities crucified Jesus, but I will blame the Jewish authorities; I will play the Roman card; I will write propaganda that I know is inaccurate. If they had done that, the resulting text would have been a lie.” Crossan does not attribute such venality to the Gospels, because to do so would impose a post-Enlightenment notion of history on a far more complex phenomenon. Rigid concern for “how it happened” is a contemporary preoccupation of ours, but no such emphasis informed the way the ancients wrote history. Reports of the words and deeds of the late Jesus evolved as his movement grew, and so did the understanding of who his friends and enemies were, depending on the experience through time of who the friends and enemies of the movement were. "As Christian Jewish communities are steadily more alienated from their fellow Jews, so the ‘enemies’ of Jesus expand to fit those new situations. By the time of ‘John’ in the 90s, those enemies are ‘the Jews’—that is, all those other Jews except us few right ones. If we had understood (the literary genre) gospel, we would have understood that. If we had understood gospel, we would have expected that. It is, unfortunately, tragically late to be learning it.”

Just as the original fate of Jesus was shaped in part by intra-Jewish disputes, the communal memory of how that fate unfolded was itself shaped by those disputes, especially when Roman domination of Jews started to unravel. Writing fifty or seventy years after the death of Jesus, the Gospel authors continued to be influenced by the climate of crisis and dispute, Roman terror and Jewish polemic. But around the time of their writing, something new, and for this story something deadly, began to happen.

Another thing wrong with blaming the anti-Jewish texts of the New Testament on a primitive and essential “Christian” hatred of Jews is that doing so continues the victim's habit of exonerating the true villain in the story, which was and remains Rome. I acknowledge the apparent absurdity of this attempt, two thousand years after the event, to reconstruct its shape and meaning with more accuracy than the people who lived only a generation or two later. But in this one regard at least—the crucial influence of a dominant overlord—we have a distinct advantage over those first Christians and rabbinic Jews. For us, the grip of the overlord has long since been released, and the myth of hierarchy has been broken. The blighting fog of an imperialist occupation blinded those who lived through it to the all-encompassing nature of Roman oppression. Similarly, the Romans, by controlling the future, controlled the way even their extreme savagery would be remembered by Jew and non-Jew alike. Yet neither of these facts excuses us from emphasizing that the story of Jesus, at a fundamental level, is one part of the story of Israel’s refusal to yield to Rome. And this can be perceived more clearly now than it was then.

The empire’s contest with Israel was one that, even if it took centuries, Rome was fated to lose. Worship a man in a toga because he wears a laurel wreath? Does not worship belong alone to the one God? Honor that man's face on coins or battle standards, much less on altars, when God has forbidden the honoring of images? Acknowledge the sovereignty of the invader over land that is itself the seal of God’s covenant with God’s people? Depend on Rome when God has long since proven to be absolutely dependable? Beginning with the violent arrival of Pompey’s legions in 63 B.C.E., most Jews may have decided against open defiance of the occupiers, but there was never any question of the people’s being folded into
the ideal and the real, and Augustine knew that the ideal would not be re-
alized until God brought about the fulfillment of Creation at the end of
time. Therefore, he held, the human condition was by definition flawed.
Gospel was addressed to human beings, not to angels. Because Augustine
carried the day against the Donatists, Christians could come together be-
fore God, confessing sin, and knowing that the Church itself, too, re-
mained imperfect. The Church would not be a sect of the saved but a
community open to all. Augustine is commonly credited as the father of
Western Christian theology, but he is, perhaps more basically, the father
of the inclusive Western Church we know, in both its Catholic and
Protestant manifestations.

Augustine took his baptismal instructions from the great Ambrose. For
our purposes, it is worth noting that the mediating link between Au-
gustine and Ambrose was Augustine’s mother, Monica. She was a devout
Christian, but the young, unchurched Ambrose had fled her, leaving her
standing “wild with grief” on the pier in Carthage. But she followed him
to Milan. There, while he continued his preconversion life as a pagan,
she became a devoted follower of Ambrose. When the bishop was physi-
cally besieged by barbarian Arians in his basilica in 386, for example,
Monica was with him, sharing the mortal danger. She formed the habit of
ending each day by chanting hymns that Ambrose had composed. The
pattern of such devotion, especially focused on a prelate — in my mother’s
case, it was Cardinal Spellman — is familiar to sons who follow their
mothers into piety.

The Confessions tells a mammoth story, but a central theme is Augus-
tine’s flight from his mother. Like Helena, she was a disappointed wife of a
withholding husband, and she turned the laser of her need on her son. Her
love seemed overbearing and suffocating until — well, until it seemed
like love. “Not long before the day on which she was to leave this life —
you knew which day it was to be, O Lord, but we did not — my mother
and I were alone, leaning from a window which overlooked the garden
in the courtyard of the house where we were staying at Ostia. . . . We
were talking alone together and our conversation was serene and joyful.”

Monica died in 387, not long after her son’s baptism. Garry Wills takes the
view that “too much is often made of her role in Augustine’s life,” but Au-
gustine’s own testimony is poignant: “I closed her eyes, and a great wave
of sorrow surged into my heart.”

In the enclosed garden of his consciousness, Augustine watched as what
his mother had planted in him came to flower. “Words cannot describe
how dearly she loved me,” he writes in The Confessions, “or how much

Augustine Trembling

The previous Easter, in 387, this same Ambrose had taken a
thirty-three-year-old man naked into a pool of water, and three
times, pushing by the shoulders, he had forced the man under,
saying, “I baptize you, Augustine.” After Constantine, the con-
version of Augustine (354–430) may be the most momentous in the his-
tory of the Church. He was born seventeen years after Constantine died.
He was a bishop in Hippo, a small city in North Africa, but it is as a writer
that he is remembered. He wrote nearly a hundred books, by his count,
and thousands of letters and sermons, most of which survive. Garry Wills
describes his method. “Augustine dictated to relays of stenographers, of-
ten late into the night . . . He employed teams of copyists. His sermons,
several a week, were taken down by his own or others’ shorthand writers.
In some seasons, he preached daily. His letters were sent off in many cop-
ies. He paced about as he dictated, a reflection of the mental restlessness
and energy conveyed in the very rhythm of his prose.” His greatest work,
to which we will turn, may be The City of God, a meditation on the rela-
tionship of the Church and the empire, of politics and virtue, of history
and hope. But his most compelling work is surely The Confessions, the
Western world’s first great autobiography. This book, with its realistic ex-
ploration of human psychology and its affirmation that subjective experi-
ence is of ultimate value, stamped the mind of Europe. Its search for God
in an act of memory makes each person a center of Christian revelation.
That idea is the birthplace of modern individualism, for good and for ill.

Augustine’s solid grounding in the classical intellectual tradition pre-
pared him for the task of applying categories of Platonic thought to
Christian theology. To take only one example of the importance of his
ideas, he marshaled the definitive argument against the Donatists, who
held that saintly virtue was a prerequisite for full membership in the
Church. Augustine’s position was rooted in Plato’s distinction between
greater was the anxiety she suffered for my spiritual birth than the physical pain she had endured in bringing me into the world."

You were there, before my eyes," he says to God (and, one infers, to Monica), "But I had deserted even my own self. I could not find myself, much less find you." When he found God, he put into a new kind of language what the experience of God could be for human beings. In his milestone work of theology, The Trinity, Augustine detects the very structure of God’s inner life in the dynamics of human consciousness and human relationships—an approach that could have rescued Christian theology from the dead-end disputes that had racked the Church for much of the previous century, when Christians went to war over definitions of words like “essence,” “substance,” and “person” as applied to God. "The reader of these reflections of mine on the Trinity should bear in mind," he begins, "that my pen is on the watch against the sophistries of those who scorn the starting-point of faith, and allow themselves to be deceived through an unreasonable and misguided love of reason." The point for Augustine was that whatever the aspects of the Godhead (or, as a Jewish sage might have put it, such activities of the Godhead as Word or Spirit) are to each other, they are in relation to each other. Relationship is the ground of divine being, an idea that opens up monotheism by moving the meaning of God’s oneness away from “unit” and toward "unity." This tempering of the constant human temptation toward exclusivism could reasonably be expected to have tempered the universalist totalitarianism gripping the empire and the Church by then. The Trinity is a celebration of love as the basis of Christianity. As such, it may not be too much to detect its source in the love Augustine had experienced from and for Monica, the full range of which was revealed to him only in the writing of The Confessions, which he completed in c. 397. He completed The Trinity in c. 410, but in that same year Alaric’s Gothic hordes sacked Rome. "When the brightest light was extinguished," said Saint Jerome of that event, "when the whole world perished in one city, then I was dumb with silence." The culture-wide trauma of the Germanic tribes’ arrival in Rome marked a turning point in Augustine’s life and attitudes.

I referred to Augustine’s assertion of the idea that the human condition implies a perennial state of finitude, weakness, and sin, all of which will be overcome, even for the Church, only with the end of time. Augustine’s theology of original sin and the Fall has influenced all subsequent generations of Western Christians, none more so than Luther and Calvin in the Reformation era. Augustine is thus regarded as the father of a severe, flesh-hating, sin-obsessed theology, but that dark characterization misses the point of his insight. His honest admission of the universality of human woundedness is a precondition for both self-acceptance and forgiveness of the other, which for Augustine always involved the operation of grace, God’s gift. Only humans capable of confronting the moral tragedy of existence, matched to God’s offer of a repairing grace, are capable of community, and community is the antidote to human woundedness. Augustine sensed that relationship as being at the heart of God, and he saw it as being at the heart of human hope, too. This is a profoundly humane vision.

But hope faded. As was true of many of his contemporaries, Augustine’s spirit was gradually weighed down as Alaric’s armies began an inexcusable movement east and south from Rome, while Attila’s Huns took over the north, all the way to the Rhine. These invasions signaled what was even then taken to be the beginning of the end of the empire. With the coming invasions of the Vandals, clouds darkened Augustine’s essentially positive outlook, marking his late writings with apprehension and unrest. By then Augustine was a man waiting for the end of the world, with reason. The Vandals destroyed the Roman order in North Africa in the summer of 429, wiping out all that Augustine had built and loved. Not long after his death in 430, they would overrun his city of Hippo.

Scholars draw a contrast between the early and late Augustine, between the life of the early Augustine and the naysayer. It was the late Augustine who, no longer depending on the force of reason, justified the use of coercion in defending, and spreading, the orthodox faith: "For many have found advantage (as we have proved, and are daily proving by actual experiment)," he wrote in a treatise ominously entitled The Correction of the Donatists, "in being first compelled by fear or pain, so that they might afterwards be influenced by teaching." He supported the passage of laws against pagans and heretics, and he offered a theological justification for a policy of correction. He could not advocate the extension of such fierce evangelizing without a qualm, but finally he did. And now the fierceness was armed. "What shall I say as to the infliction and remission of punishment in cases in which we only desire to forward the spiritual welfare of those we are deciding whether or not to punish? . . . What trembling we feel in these things, my brother Paulinus, O holy man of God!" This is from a letter Augustine wrote to Paulinus of Nola around the time of Alaric’s invasion of Italy.

"What trembling! What a darkness! May we not think that with reference to these things it was said, 'Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me. And I said, O that I had wings like a dove, for then I should fly away and be at rest.'"
But the time when Augustine could flee was past. As a bishop now, he too had to make the hard decisions, in this brutal age, attendant on the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He had taken his place with those prepared to use violence in stamping out heresy; indeed, he gave them their theological rationale. In *The City of God*, his last great work, written to rebut the charge that the empire’s embrace of Christianity had led to the collapse implied by Vandal victories, Augustine firmly justified the harsh, even totalitarian policies of the Christian rulers. If anything, they had not been harsh enough. Now, for Augustine, the world was divided between those who lived in the flesh of the City of Man and those who lived in the spirit of the City of God. The latter could look forward to heaven, the former to hell, and if hell began for them on earth, so be it. The dualistic Manichaeism of Augustine’s youth reasserted itself with a vengeance. The basic theme of *The City of God*, as Peter Brown puts it, is “that the disasters of the Roman Empire had come not from neglect of the old rites, but from tolerating paganism, heresy and immorality in the new Christian empire.”

Augustine’s was a tragic vision, for it was authentically grounded — despite the shivers caused in us by his *correction* — in the idea of God as love. The offer of that love, even to inhabitants of the City of Man, was permanent. If that was so, then violence could have no sacred significance, because it did not represent any attitude or action of the loving God. The City of God is based on love; the City of Man is based on war. Violence, Augustine felt, was not built into the nature of things, and so was not inevitable. Furthermore, while never to be seen as sacred, violence in defense of an endangered neighbor could be an act of love.

Despite the unbridled ruthlessness of his age, Augustine, building on the religious argument of the Hebrew Scriptures, initiated history’s first political argument against war, an argument that has come down to us as his widely misunderstood theory of the just war. Instead of being a rationale for state-sponsored violence, as its critics are wont to say today, the theory is a rather desperate effort to curtail it, to hem war-making in, that is, by stringent conditions. The idea of the just war, the introduction of limiting principles, and a notion of war as always involving evil, even if a lesser evil, were profoundly humanizing innovations.

The tragic purity of Augustine’s intentions — tragic because all too pure — was fully on display when he turned to the question of the Jews. Rampant violence, sanctioned by the Church and the state, was ubiquitous.
Persian dominance, where a so-called exilarch was recognized as the head of the Jewish people. Jewish academies in Persia, building on the Mishnah, would bring to full flower Jewish literary and spiritual impulses in the masterly Babylonian Talmud. Here is an important difference between Jewish and Christian development: Jewish study of Torah and commentary, conducted at a remove from Christianity, led to a more or less independent self-understanding.

Beginning in this period, Jews stopped acting like sibling rivals in a contest over a shared legacy and began to see their own legacy as having nothing to do with the developing theology or opinions of Christians. Jewish sages, commenting on the commentaries, interpreting the interpretations, had entered an entirely new room of the religious imagination. The discourse of rabbis became multilayered. They derived meaning as much from the nuances of text as from its obvious significance. Exegesis became a way of recovering the past, and Midrash, from the Hebrew word for “interpretation,” became a way of infusing the present with awe. The elusiveness of God came to be reflected in the circumpection of the esoteric elucidation of God’s Word in the Jewish tradition, Moshe Halbertal comments, “the centrality of the text takes the place of theologico-consistency. Jews have had diverse and sometimes opposing ideas about God: the anthropomorphic God of the Midrash, the Aristotelian embodied mover of Maimonides and his school, the Kabbalistic image of God as a dynamic organism manifested in the complexity of his varied aspects, the sefira. These conceptions of God have little in common and they are specifically Jewish only insofar as each is a genuine interpretation of Jewish canonical texts.” Israel, as the critic Sida DeKoven Ezralah put it, “was transfigured into texts-in-exile,” and the “literacy of exile” would give shape to the Jewish religious imagination.

The rabbinic method itself, in other words, was seen as a worshipful embodiment of the holy. Much of this was spoken in instruction, meditation, and prayer, as masters trained disciples, but nearly always there were disciples taking careful notes of what was said, and then editors compiling new texts, which themselves served as the touchstone of contemplation and, more prosaically, as instruction manuals in Jewish spirituality. Among this most literate people, an oral tradition quickly became a living sacred literature. At the heart of this enterprise, of course, remained the Pentateuch of Moses — the Torah. Mishnah, and ultimately Talmud, built a kind of moat around the Torah, as the study centers themselves served as a bulwark of the Jewish people.

But Jews in the crumbling Roman Empire remained at risk because their very presence challenged the integrity of both a transformed Church membership and a radically new Christian self-understanding to which Jews remained important. Augustine’s treatment of the question must be seen against this backdrop. Among Church fathers, Augustine is remarkable for his sensitivity to the Jewish character of Christian faith, which derived from his close reading of Paul. Augustine was far less polemical in his reading of the Old Testament than other Christian thinkers. “Augustine forbears derogatory comparison,” Paula Fredriksen has written. “If the Old Testament is a concealed form of the New and vice versa, then each is alike in dignity and religious value.” Fredriksen also makes the point that Augustine argued “against Jerome that both Jesus and the first generation of Jewish apostles, Paul emphatically included, were, as Christians, also Torah-observant Jews.”

But Augustine’s writing about Jews of his own time, especially his treatise in the Adversus Judaeos genre and in book 4 of The City of God, both of which date to about the year 425, is marked by a typical expression of Christian contempt. In one place, denouncing them for their rejection of the “obvious testimonies” of the prophets, he declares Jews to be “the House of Israel which [God] has cast off . . . They, however, whom He cast off . . . are themselves the builders of destruction and rejecters of the cornerstone.” In another, he asserts that “the Lord Christ distinguished between His faithful ones and His Jewish enemies, as between light and darkness.” Jews were “those on whose closed eyes He shed His light.”

Augustine calls on Jews to repent and come into the Church. But if they refuse! The danger to Jews was that, in a brutal age in which the Church was finally in a dominant position, key Christian thinkers were openlycondemning that the Jews’ continued existence could no longer be justified. Whether out of an essential humanitarienism or not — and one would like to think he came to his position as a result of a firm attachment to God as a God of love — Augustine met that argument head-on, and rejected it. That is, he rejected not only Chrysostom but his mentor, Ambrose. Against those arguing that Jews were the enemies of Jesus, Augustine would insist, in effect, on considering the question in the light of Jesus’ own Jewishness. And even if such enmity was to be established, he could ask, Where in Jesus does one find an execution order?

Buehler writes, “The difference between the treatise of Augustine and the sermons of John Chrysostom does not lie in any difference of basic doctrines about the status of the Jews, but in the fact that Augustine writes in the detachment of his study with no Jewish threat in sight, while Chrysostom speaks in the heat of battle.” But is that so? Nothing in
connection with the Jewish people. As for us, we find those prophecies sufficient which are produced from the books of our opponents; for we recognize that it is in order to give this testimony, which, in spite of themselves, they supply for our benefit by their possession and preservation of those books, that they themselves are dispersed among all nations, in whatever direction the Christian Church spreads.

In fact, there is a prophecy given before the event on this very point in the book of Psalms, which they also read. It comes in this passage, "As for my God, his mercy will go before me; my God has shown me this in the case of my enemies. Do not slay them, lest at some time they forget your Law," without adding, "Scatter them." For if they lived with that testimony of the Scriptures only in their own land, and not everywhere, the obvious result would be that the Church, which is everywhere, would not have them available among all nations as witnesses to the prophecies which were given beforehand concerning Christ. 26

The impact of this passage on those who read The City of God boiled down to that admonition ingeniously culled from the Psalms: Do not slay them! Augustine made it seem like the very voice of God. This was a direct contradiction of the imperative — Slay them before me — that Chrysostom attributed to a brutal Christ. Subsequent history resounds with the cry of Augustine here: Do not slay them.

Why not? Because the Jews (unlike pagans, unlike Christian heretics) still had a role in the salvific plan of God. They were to be "as witnesses to the prophecies which were given beforehand concerning Christ." Frederiksen argues that Augustine saw Jewish devotion to the Law as a kind of sacrament, and because it was out of that devotion that Jews rejected Jesus, their "continuing 'fleshly' allegiance to their Law made Israel, even after the establishment of the church, uniquely witness to Christ. Thus God himself protects them from the dures of religious coercion. 27

But the excerpt just given, perhaps reflecting the darkness of the later Augustine, nevertheless points to the precarious position in which Jews now found themselves. The irony in this passage is heartbreaking, as the entire misbegotten pattern of the Jewish-Christian disconnect is recapitulated. Those first, grief-struck followers of Jesus had created a narrative of his Passion and death in part out of reports of what had happened, but more out of the consoling Scriptures of their Jewish religion. All too soon, that creative narration had come to be understood as "history remembered" instead of "prophecy historicized." Later Christians, especially those not Jewish, could only misread the details of the narrative that had been gleaned from the Psalms and the Prophets as referring to things
that had actually happened. Then, in generation after generation, such fulfilled prophecies were used against the Jews as proofs. Augustine, as we saw, was disinclined to a polonymical pairing of Old and New Testaments, and he saw the tradition of Jewish Law observance as a positive witness to Christ, yet here the meaning of Judaism was reduced to Jews witnessing . . . in spite of themselves to those selfsame prophecies. A continuing Judaism would serve as a source of authentication for the prophecy-based claims of Christianity. As long as Jews existed, with their ancient texts, the ancient — and therefore noble — character of Christianity was apparent, because those texts "foretold" Christ. The dispersion of Jews helps with this, and so it is God's will — Scatter them! — that they be allowed to live as exiles everywhere. By this schema, they would be allowed to be at home, "at their own table," nowhere.

As this tradition took hold in the minds of Christians, it brought along what Fredriksen calls a "trail of pseudo-Augustinian anti-Jewish writings that grew in its wake." It was not only the Diaspora that provided Jewish witness to the truth of Christian claims, but the negative condition of exile: Jews came to be seen as witnesses in the very desperation of their status. They must be allowed to survive, but never to thrive; their "backs" must be "bent down always." Their homelessness and misery are the proper punishments for their refusal to recognize the truth of the Church's claims. And more — their misery is yet another proof of those claims.

The legacy of Augustine's teaching on the Jews is a double-edged sword. On one side, against Chrysostom and even Ambrose, it requires an end to all violent assaults against synagogues, Jewish property, and Jewish persons. Jews are henceforth exempt from the Church-sanctioned, state-sponsored campaign to obliter ate religious difference. Polytheists will disappear from the Roman world because they were given the choice to convert or die. Jews could have disappeared then, too. Judaism endured in the West for two reasons," Jacob Neusner writes. "First, Christianity permitted it to endure, and, second, Israel, the Jewish people, wanted it to. The fate of paganism in the fourth century shows the importance of the first of the two factors." It is not too much to say that, at this juncture, Christianity "permitted" Judaism to endure because of Augustine. "His teaching on the special place of Israel and the Jews in the economy of Christian redemption," Fredriksen writes, "protected Jewish communities in Europe for centuries." As the eighteenth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Mendels-
tic is used by those who suffer from the abuse of power. The language of love is not enough. Because the language of love does not protect us from our failures to love; only the language of justice does that.

Democracy assumes that a clear-headed assessment of the flaws of members extends to everyone. But even the leaders of democracies, especially in the United States, salt their speeches with Christian chauvinism or an excluding religiosity, assuming that a democratic polity could be called univocal — no voices, that is, for religious minorities or those of no religion. And that, finally, is why a democracy assumes that everyone must be protected from the unchecked, uncriticized, and unregulated power of every other, including the well-meaning leader. The universal experience of imperfection, finitude, and self-centeredness is the pessimistic ground of democratic hope. We saw that in Spinoza’s story,9 which was, after all, the story of a man constructing the democratic ideal out of the cruelties inflicted in the name of God. The Church’s own experience — in particular, of its grievous sin in relation to the Jews — proves how desperately in need of democratic reform the Church is.

Vatican III must therefore turn the Church away from monarchy and toward democracy, as the Catholic people have in fact already done. Vatican III must restore the broken authority of the Church by locating authority in the place where it belongs, which is with the people through whom the Spirit breathes. Vatican III must affirm that democracy itself is the latest gift from a God who operates in history, and the only way for the Church to affirm democracy is by embracing it. The old dispute between popes and kings over who appoints bishops was resolved in favor of the pope, but bishops now should be chosen by the people they serve. The clerical caste, a vestige of the medieval court, should be eliminated. Vatican III must establish equal rights for women in every sphere. A system of checks and balances, due process, legislative norms designed to assure equality for all instead of superiority for some, freedom of expression, and above all freedom of conscience must be established within the Church — not because the time of liberalism has arrived, but because this long and sorry story of Church hatred of Jews only lays bare the structures of oppression that must be dismantled once and for all.

Vatican III must finish the work that Vatican II began in its implicit, but ever more clear, reaction to the events of 1933–1945. Otherwise, we Catholics are condemned to ask, with David Tracy, “How can we stand by and continue to develop theologies of the church and the tradition as if the Holocaust did not happen?” 10

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Agenda Item 5: Repentance

PULL OUT HIS EYES,” the children chant in the mind of Stephen Dedalus. “Apologize, Apologize, PULL out his eyes.” The impulse to apologize for the Holocaust is properly distrusted, because words are cheap and apology has become an arrow in the well-equipped politician’s quiver. An American president apologizes to Afri
cans for failing to stop a genocide, while the United States, the richest na
tion in the world, ranks ninth in the percentage of national wealth given to combat worldwide AIDS, which kills more Africans than all the conti
nent’s wars put together. British Prime Minister Tony Blair acknowledges the failure of “those who governed in London at the time” to avert the famine known to the Irish as the Great Hunger; but Blair was hooted at by Ulster Unionists who said, “The Irish mentality is one of victimhood —
and to ask for one apology one week, and another on a different subject the next.” The Vatican issues “We Remember; A Reflection on the Shoah” as an “act of repentance,” yet puts responsibility for failure on the Church’s children, not the Church; it never mentions the Inquisition, and it praises the diplomacy of Pius XII. John Paul II offers a millennial mea
culpa early in the year 2000, and while, as we have noted, there was a pro-
found significance in that apology, as far as it went, it revealed how far is the distance that must be traveled yet.

As the document “Memory and Reconciliation” put it, “Memory be
comes capable of giving rise to a new future.” 11 But the current leadership of the Church seems interested only in partial memory and a limited reck
oning with the past. Otherwise John Paul II would not have devoted so much of his papacy to maintaining the very modes of thought and gover
nance that were the historic sources of Church failure. Apologies offered too glibly, in other words, can be a sly way of asserting one’s own moral superioriry while reifying the victim status of the group to whom apolo-
gies are offered. This is especially so if the structures of that victimization remain in place.

"When Willy Brandt fell on his knees on the site of the Warsaw ghetto in 1975," the scholar Ian Baruma has written, "it was a moving and necessary acknowledgment of a great crime. But such symbolic gestures are too precious to become routine. Official tears have become too cheap, too ritualistic. Piety is often a substitute for knowledge and understanding." Knowledge and understanding have been our purposes here, and the next council will accomplish nothing if it falls back, as the Church has so regularly done, on piety. But something else seems possible now, in the aftermath of John Paul II’s millennial call for "the purification of memory."

That is more than a matter of mere words. Far more important than uttered apology, for example, was his momentous act in Israel only two weeks after the liturgy of repentance, an event that transcended the routine symbolic gestures of which Baruma warns. In Jerusalem, John Paul II left his wheeled conveyance to walk haltingly across the vast plaza before the Western Wall. For two thousand years, beginning with the Gospels, Christian theology has depended on the destruction of the Temple as a proof for claims made in the name of Jesus, the new Temple. Nothing signifies Christian anti-Judaism more fully than this attachment to the Temple in ruins, which prompted the pagan emperor Julian to order it rebuilt in the fourth century, and which underlies Vatican ambivalence toward the state of Israel in the twentieth. So when John Paul II devotedly approached the last vestige of that Temple, and when he placed in a crevice of that wall a piece of paper containing words from his previously offered prayer for forgiveness — "We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer" — more than an apology occurred.

Though the news media missed its significance, this moment outweighed even the pope’s later, emotional visit to Yad Vashem. By bending in prayer at the Western Wall, the Kotel, the pope symbolically created a new future. The Church was honoring the Temple it had denigrated. It was affirming the presence of the Jewish people at home in Jerusalem. The pope reversed an ancient current of Jew hatred with that act, and the Church’s relationship to Israel, present as well as past, would never be the same. Referring to the sight of the stooped man in white with his trembling hand on the sacred stones of the wall, a senior Israeli official said, "This is a picture that will appear in the history books — both Catholic and Jewish."

* * *

An authentic confrontation with history results in the opposite of self-exoneration. That is why the members of Vatican III, in taking up repentance as an agenda item, must do so only after having confronted the questions embedded in this narrative, and the consequent questions of antisemitic texts, power, Christology, and democracy, all of which point to attitudes and structures of denigration that must be uprooted if the Church is truly going to turn toward Jews with a new face. Remove over the silence of the Church in the face of the Shoah — the faute to which the French bishops confessed — is not enough. Neither is guilt over the ways two millennia of Church antisemitism prepared for the Shoah.

Authentic repentance presumes what we Catholics used to call "a firm purpose of amendment," which Jews call "desisting" from what led to sin. Simply put, repentance presumes change — at every level of the Church’s life, because it is at every level that the poison of antisemitism has had its effect. Teshuvah is the word Jews use to describe the process by which repentance and forgiveness take place. The word means "return," and here is Rabbi David R. Blumenthal’s summary of what teshuvah, in this context, implies: "All the words, documents, and genuine expressions of contrition will avail naught without concrete actions... The way the Church deals with terrorist incidents, antisemitism, Church files on the period of the Shoah, Judaica deposited with various Church entities and not returned, Catholic education about Jews and Judaism, the nature of Catholic missions, relations with the State of Israel, relations with local Jewish communities everywhere, etc. are, thus, the action-yardsticks by which Catholic teshuvah is measured." Such changes — education, mission, relations — require the changes in doctrine and structure I have indicated. I call for those changes as a Catholic, but in fact I am following, as Tracy put it, "Jewish theology [which], in its reflections on the reality of God since the Tremendum of the Holocaust, has led the way for all serious theological reflection."

Why would it take a Vatican Council to accomplish Catholic teshuvah? Because more than one moral failure is at issue here. How do we measure the offense of the Church against the Jew? Perhaps by returning to a figure cited early in this book — that, since Jews made up about 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire when this story began, their world-wide population today — but for intervening tragic factors — would have been, as a percentage of the total, about 200 million, instead of 15 million. The Church, while not the sum of those factors, was their driving spirit, their engine, their sanctification. And the symbol of that sanctification was the cross. From Constantine forward, the cross became the symbol of
all that Christians must repent in relation to the Jewish people. Mary Boys, a Catholic theologian and veteran of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, wrote, "The cross is a symbol Christians have been given to image the hope that God is with them even in pain and tragedy and ambiguity. It is a symbol of the longing to give themselves over to a project larger than their own self-interest... Yet it is not a symbol that can be re-appropriated without repentance."38

Thus we "arrive where we started," in T. S. Eliot's line, "and know the place for the first time." The cross at Auschwitz, when I beheld it on a dark November day in 1996, was what inspired this long examination of a Catholic conscience. I vaguely grasped the necessity of learning, as Paul van Buien put it, "to speak of Auschwitz from the perspective of the cross... by first learning to speak of the cross from the perspective of Auschwitz."39 And how does that cross look now? I have in front of me a pair of maps, "The Auschwitz Region" and "Auschwitz I." The first offers a diagram of the locality, the Vistula and the Sola Rivers, indicated by wavy channels, intersect above the center of the map. Railroad tracks, black lines with teeth running in four directions, intersect just below the center. These intersections, I confess, look like crosses to me. There are symbols for houses and factories, and the three camps are indicated by hash-marked rectangles: Auschwitz III, the Monowitz Labor Camp; Auschwitz II, Birkenau; and Auschwitz I, the main camp.

The Auschwitz I map shows a carefully drawn compound with guardhouses, sentry towers, a crematorium recognizable by its chimney, and twenty-eight barracks buildings, arranged like peaked-roofed dominoes around three avenues. The camp wall is indicated by tiny crosses on a line, like barbed wire. At one end of the camp is the largest building of all, identified in the map key as the "Old Theater, then storehouse for valuables removed from bodies, site of the Carmelite Convent." Next to that building, along the wall that abuts Barracks 15, the starvation bunker, is an unmarked area that I recognize as the field in which the cross now stands.

I began this book at the mercy of an instinctive wish that the cross at Auschwitz could be made simply to disappear. I would have been relieved to learn that it had been spirited away in the middle of the night by anonymous agents of some Vatican commission or the World Jewish Congress. The cross at Auschwitz: the object of furious controversy, not only between Jews and Christians but among Christians themselves; a new symbol of Polish national revival; the vestige of argument over the convent, which has been moved, and over other crosses, which have been removed; the symbol of the practical impossibility of reconciliation among conflicting claims that are all absolute. And the cross there is a heartbreaking symbol of Pope John Paul II's tragic ambivalence, his longing to identify with the Jews who were crushed around him when he was young, his blindness to the weight of a Catholic past that helped make that crushing lethal. We return to our basic idea, that Catholic history, while not causing the Shoah, was a necessary, unbroken thread in the rise of genocidal antisemitism as well as the source of the Church's failure to openly oppose it. The Catholic past and the cross at Auschwitz are profoundly connected.

My wish is different now, the product not of instinct but of this history. The cross at Auschwitz, transcending whatever benign intention attaches to it, embodies supersessionism, medieval absolutism, the cult of martyrdom, the violence of God, the ancient hatred of Jews, and the Christian betrayal of Jesus Christ. This is the cross that was stolen by the emperor Constantine, perverted by the crusaders, and blasphemed by the editors of Le Crist. Pius XII, in the encyclical Mystici Corporis Christi, issued in June 1943 as the roundup of Jews was peaking, declared, "... but on the gibbet of his death Jesus made void the Law with its decrees, [and] fastened the handwriting of the Old Testament to the Cross, establishing the New Testament in His blood... On the Cross then the Old Law died, soon to be buried and to be a bearer of death."40 In the name of the cross, even in 1943, Jews were implicitly being accused of causing death, and not just Jesus'. And in recent years, by self-proclaimed Christian friends of Jews, the cross has been imposed on them, whether they wanted it or not. "Like the cross of Christ," the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann declared, "even Auschwitz is in God himself. Even Auschwitz is taken up into the grief of the Father, the surrender of the Son and the power of the Spirit."41 The cross has thus been twisted into an apologetic tool and a source of slander. It has consistently been made to serve the purpose of power. Auschwitz is the final disclosure of this truth.

Therefore the Christian Church should come here and perform a simple penitential rite. This rite must be conducted in silence, to compensate for the sinful silence of the Church, but more, to push beyond all the words that have come too easily. The most precious Christian words — Golgotha, redemption, sacrifice — have no place here. Therefore, in silence the sin of the Church is acknowledged as the sin that was part of what led to genocide. There is no more talk that exempts "the Church as such" from this judgment. Instead, with Rahner, who wrote generally of
the "sinful Church of sinners," the confession is made that the failures that brought the Church here are "the actions and conduct of the Church herself." The piety of the Church herself is renounced as the piety that has kept the structure of victimization of the other so firmly in place, even until now. Rivals in victimization no more. Rivals for the blessing of God no more. Rivals no more at Auschwitz.

Silence does not preclude expression. The acknowledgment of sin requires expression, but the proper word of acknowledgment here is an act. A sacrament of the Church accusing itself. The penitential rite would consist of a dismantling of this cross, a removal of the horizontal beam, an uprooting of the vertical, a reversal of the instruction Constantine gave his soldiers. In this way, the cross would be returned to Jesus, and returned to its place as the cause of his death, not the purpose of his life. For Jesus, the cross could have been nothing of conquest or power. For Jesus, therefore, the cross could not conceivably have become a symbol of triumphalism, nor a sign of the defamation of his own people. To remove this cross is to begin the reversal of all that we Christians here confess. And to remove this cross is to retrieve the cross as a sign that God has come to a failed and sinful Church, and only confessing itself as such can the Church fulfill its mission as witness to God's unconditional love for all.

More important, to remove the cross from Auschwitz, deliberately, recently, and in the presence of living Jews, would restore Auschwitz to those who were murdered here, asking nothing of them in return.

Epilogue: The Faith of a Catholic

When our children were young, my wife, Lara, and I traveled with them through Europe on a Eurailpass, which let us hop on and off trains with abandon. It was 1989. Lilly was nine, and Pat was seven. Beginning in Amsterdam, we passed through Brussels, then made our way to Paris for the centenary celebration of the Eiffel Tower, which our children dubbed the birthday tower. In that pre-euro era, what we loved most was crossing borders, and we decided to cross as many as we could.

Lizzy had a preoccupation that tracked us like a cloud. In Amsterdam, we had visited the Anne Frank House. The small rooms of the hidden annex had left us all short of breath, but it was our daughter who carried away the image of Anne as a locating compass rose. Lizzy's identification with the young girl, whose diary she had begun to read, was complete. When our train crossed from Holland into Belgium, Lizzy asked, "Whose side were these on?" The Belgians, she meant. Were they on Anne's side or Hitler's? Anne's, we answered. Then, the same thing when we crossed into France. "Whose side were these on?" Anne's, we said again, giving France a large benefit of the doubt. At each border she asked again. And when we said, at the crossing from Switzerland, that Italy had been on Hitler's side, we could see judgment setze her gaze as she turned to look out the train window, as if surely the landscape itself would tell her how such a thing had been possible. All of history was present to her as she stared out at the Italian countryside. For the first time, regarding the fate of Anne Frank and her people, I felt completely ashamed.

The next summer, we began in Amsterdam again, but now we went where we hadn't gone the year before, which was Germany. I had to overcome Lizzy's implicit objection — I wanted my family to see Wiesbaden, where I had been as a boy. The previous November, the Berlin Wall had