

THE TALMUD IN ANTI-SEMITIC POLEMICS

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Preface

Recently there has been a renewal of attacks on Judaism and Jews through recycling of old accusations and distortions about the Talmud. Anti-Talmud tracts were originally developed in the Middle Ages as Christian polemics against Judaism, but today they emanate from a variety of Christian, Moslem and secular sources. Sometimes such “studies” have blatantly anti-Semitic tones; sometimes they are more subtle. Yet all of them remain as false and pernicious today as they did in the Middle Ages.

Because of their unfortunate frequent reappearance, there is a need to formally rebut these accusations and canards. The Anti-Defamation League developed the following essay that explains in an honest and scholarly way the Talmudic teachings as understood by Jewish religious authorities.

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I. Introduction

Attempts to denigrate Judaism by quoting from classical rabbinic works are on record from as early as the twelfth century. By selectively citing various passages from the Talmud and *Midrash*, polemicists have sought to demonstrate that Judaism espouses hatred for non-Jews (and specifically for Christians), and promotes obscenity, sexual perversion, and other immoral behavior. To make these passages serve their purposes, these polemicists frequently mistranslate them or cite them out of context (wholesale fabrication of passages is not unknown). They usually dismiss attempts to correct their misreadings as “hairsplitting” or dishonest attempts to portray Judaism in a favorable light.

In distorting the normative meanings of rabbinic texts, anti-Talmud writers frequently remove passages from their textual and historical contexts. Even when they present their citations accurately, they judge the passages based on contemporary moral standards, ignoring the fact that the majority of these passages were composed close to two thousand years ago by people living in cultures radically different from our own. They are thus able to ignore Judaism’s long history of social progress and paint it instead as a primitive and parochial religion.

Those who attack the Talmud frequently cite ancient rabbinic sources without noting subsequent developments in Jewish thought, and without making a good-faith effort to consult with contemporary Jewish authorities who can explain the role of these sources in normative Jewish thought and practice. Even the more traditional Orthodox stream of Judaism has developed and changed over two thousand years, and despite the unquestioned importance that the Talmud and early rabbinic literature continue to play in contemporary Jewish education, law and thought, the Jewish approach to that literature is more nuanced than the literalist readings which polemicists portray as the standard Jewish interpretations.

Are the polemicists anti-Semites? This is a charged term that should not be used lightly, but the answer, by and large, is yes. Now and then a polemicist of this type may himself have been born Jewish, but their systematic distortions of the ancient texts, always in the direction of portraying Judaism negatively, their lack of interest in good-faith efforts to understand contemporary Judaism from contemporary Jews, and their dismissal of any voices opposing their own, suggests that their goal in reading ancient rabbinic literature is to produce the Frankenstein version of Judaism that they invariably claim to have uncovered. Their tendentious argumentation, participation in extremist groups and espousal of extremist ideologies, when present, tend to support such suspicions; the invocation of classic anti-Semitic stereotypes, nearly universal among the polemicists we describe, confirms them.

In fact many anti-Talmud polemicists have never studied the Talmud at all. The consistent manner in which the same gross errors (both in citation and analysis) are passed down through successive literary generations of anti-Talmud crusaders suggests that individual writers often merely recycle old attacks. Trying to impress their readers with their purported knowledge of the Talmud, they betray their ignorance.

II. The Charges

A. Non-Jews as Non-Human

Probably the most far-reaching claim made by anti-Talmud polemicists is that Judaism views non-Jews as a subhuman species deserving only hatred and contempt from its Jewish superiors.¹ The visceral hatred that Jews are alleged to bear for non-Jews is proven, they claim, by a variety of statements in the Talmud and by Jewish law itself, which purportedly encourages Jews to exploit their non-Jewish neighbors and engage in criminal activities against them. Many go so far as to claim that Jews are intent on subjugating non-Jews around the world and even on committing genocide against them.

¹ Dilling (1964) p. 10, 54; Shahak (1994) p. 94; Hoffman (2000) p. 43; Duke (2002) p. 62.

In its long history, Judaism has had its share of bigots, racists and xenophobes, some of whom expressed their prejudices in religious terms. In certain historical periods there have even been Jewish sects whose worldview placed Jews higher than non-Jews in inherent value. But normative Judaism has never diminished the essential humanity—and the concomitant holiness, derived from the doctrine of creation in *imago Dei*—shared by Jews and non-Jews alike. Based on verses in the biblical verses in Genesis 1:26-28, the principle that all men and women are created in the image of God is codified in the Mishnah (*Avoth* 3:14) and Talmud (*Avoth* 9b):

[רבי עקיבא] היה אומר: חביב אדם שנברא בצלם. חיבה יתרה נודעת לו שנברא בצלם, שנאמר (בראשית ט:ו), "כי בצלם אלקים עשה את האדם."

[Rabbi Akiva] used to say, “Beloved is man, for he was created in God’s image; and the fact that God made it known that man was created in His image is indicative of an even greater love. As the verse states (Genesis 9:6), ‘In the image of God, man was created.’)”

This doctrine is echoed by one of the great rabbis of the twentieth century, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*Man of Faith in the Modern World*, p. 74):

Even as the Jew is moved by his private Sinaitic Covenant with God to embody and preserve the teachings of the Torah, he is committed to the belief that all mankind, of whatever color or creed, is “in His image” and is possessed of an inherent human dignity and worthiness. Man’s singularity is derived from the breath “He [God] breathed into his nostrils at the moment of creation” (Genesis 2:7). Thus, we do share in the universal historical experience, and God’s providential concern does embrace all of humanity.

In the face of these Jewish doctrines expressing concern for men and women of all religions, the attempts of anti-Semites to portray normative Judaism as bigoted and hateful are revealed as thorough distortions of Jewish ethics. They claim, for example, that the Hebrew term *goy* (pl. *goyim*), which refers to non-Jews, means “cow” or “animal.” In fact, however, the term means “a member of a nation” (see e.g. Genesis 35:11, Isaiah 2:4) and has no derogatory connotation. The Bible even refers to the Jewish people as ‘*goy*’ (Exodus 19:6) but through the millennia has become a generic term for “gentile.” Of course, like terms used for any other ethnic group, the context and tone in which it is spoken or written can render it pejorative (think of the history of the word “Jew”), but that should hardly prejudice someone to the appearance of the term in classical Jewish literature.

A far more serious accusation than name-calling is made when anti-Semites echo the blood libel and claim that Jewish law enjoins or permits Jews to murder non-Jews whenever feasible. To support this allegation polemicists cite a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud² stating in the name of R. Simeon b. Yochai (mid-second century C.E.) that “The best of the non-Jews should be killed.” But Jewish tradition has always understood this statement as referring only to a situation in which Jews are at war; at such times, R. Simeon says, the status of a non-Jewish opponent should not be taken into account, for war cannot be waged with half-measures. That R. Simeon referred to wartime may be gleaned from his life story, for he lived amidst the Hadrianic persecutions of the second century C.E. and participated in the Bar Kochba revolt against Rome. More importantly, however, every subsequent citation of R. Simeon’s statement in Jewish legal literature has appended the words “בשעת מלחמה”—“in times of war.”³ Yet polemicists continue to cite the unqualified passage from the Jerusalem Talmud in an effort to raise suspicions that contemporary Jews are secretly commanded to murder their non-Jewish neighbors. Such propagandizing is a purposeful misrepresentation.

B. *Child Molestation*

One of the more horrifying charges leveled at Judaism is that it condones the sexual molestation of young girls. This charge was made in 1892 by the Russian Catholic cleric Reverend I.B. Pranaitis in his Latin book, *Christianus in Talmude Iudaeorum*. Despite Pranaitis’ humiliation at the Beilis blood libel trial in 1913, where as an “expert” witness for the prosecution he demonstrated during cross-examination that he could not answer even simple questions about the Talmud, his book was translated into English in 1939, and the charge has been making the rounds in anti-Semitic circles ever since.⁴

² There are two editions of the Talmud; one was composed by Babylonian Jews and one by Jews who lived in ancient Jerusalem. Generally a citation from the Talmud refers to the Babylonian version, which is considered authoritative. The Jerusalem Talmud is not generally taught in even the most Orthodox Jewish schools today, though advanced Talmud scholars sometimes study it.

³ See e.g. Tractate Soferim 15:7; Machzor Vitri 527; Beit Yosef Y.D. 158:1.

⁴For more information on Pranaitis, see: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Cyprus/8815/pranaitis.html>.

The source for the charge that Judaism permits child molestation is a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Ketubot*, pg. 11b:

אמר רבא הכי קאמר, גדול הבא על הקטנה ולא כלום
דפחות מכאן כנותן אצבע בעין דמי.

Rava [a fourth century Rabbinic authority] said: If an adult has sex with a girl under the age of three, it is ignored, for it is like putting a finger in someone's eye [i.e., tears may drip from the eye but there will always be more tears to replace them; so too the hymen of a girl so young may break but it will heal].

From this quote, anti-Semites argue that Judaism permits the sexual molestation of young girls. This, however, is not true. In fact, in several places the Talmud makes clear that Judaism possesses its own version of the American law of statutory rape. A formulation of this law may be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Yevamot*, pg. 33b:

פיתוי קטנה אונס ניהו.

One who seduces an underage girl is considered as if he had raped her [i.e., the laws applicable to rapists would apply to the molester].

An honest reading of the passage from *Ketubot* shows that it is part of a technical discussion regarding the evaluation of a woman's *ketubah* – a reverse dowry that Jewish law requires a man to pay his wife in the event of divorce. A major factor in the determination of the *ketubah* in traditional Jewish law is whether the woman had been a virgin at the time of the marriage; virginity is considered a positive value that would enable the woman to claim a higher *ketubah*. The quoted passage indicates that if a girl had been molested before the age of three, she is still considered a virgin and is entitled to the higher *ketubah*. In no way does the passage or the discussion in *Ketubot* imply that it is permissible for Jewish men to molest young girls.

That anti-Semites have taken the passage from *Ketubot* out of context and ignored Judaism's law against statutory rape demonstrates their true agenda: to instill others with hatred for Judaism and Jewish people.

C. *Kol Nidrei and Jewish Truthfulness*

An equally baseless attack on Jewish tradition is sometimes made regarding “*Kol Nidrei*,” a ritualistic formula which, some polemicists allege, allows those Jews who recite it to lie without moral or religious compunction. (One recent anti-Semite cited *Kol Nidrei* as proof that Judaism is “more of a crime syndicate than a religion.”) In fact there is a prayer called *Kol Nidrei* that many Jews recite on the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)—though some congregations, sensitive to the fact that the prayer is sometimes misconstrued, have excised it from the prayer book. Far from any “license to lie,” however, *Kol Nidrei* constitutes only a declaration in advance that any voluntary religious obligations a Jew may take upon himself (while inspired by a sermon, for example), should not be binding if it subsequently becomes clear that those additional obligations were unrealistic or unnecessary. The Code of Jewish Law (*Shulhan Arukh*), considered authoritative by all traditional Jews, makes clear that the *Kol Nidrei* prayer's potency is limited to personal vows of religious obligation (Y.D. 211:4):

אין דברים הללו אמורים אלא בשבועה או נדר שנשבע ונדר לעצמו, אבל
מי שהשביעו חברו או הדירו, אין ביטול זה מועיל לו כלום.

This [prayer] refers to a vow or oath promised to one's self; if the oath was sworn at the behest of someone else, however, the [Kol Nidrei] nullification does not work at all.

Thus an innocuous prayer that frees Jews from ill-conceived personal religious vows is distorted by haters into a fiendish component of some Jewish conspiracy to deceive others or that Judaism allows Jews to lie at will.

D. Non-Jews and the Study of Torah

To substantiate their depiction of Jews as conspirators and plotters against their non-Jewish neighbors, anti-Semitic polemicists often cite a passage found in several places in the talmudic and midrashic literature stating that non-Jews who study Torah are deserving of death; in their minds, this statement amounts to a secrecy pact among Jews to prevent news of their nefarious creed from reaching the rest of the world. In his autobiography *My Awakening*, David Duke dramatizes his encounter with this Talmudic statement when he first read selections from the Talmud:

One of the first passages I read really surprised me. It said,
“A heathen [Gentile] who pries into the Torah [and other Jewish Scriptures] is condemned to death, for it is written, ‘It is *our* inheritance, not theirs.’”
(Sanhedrin 59a)

If a 16-year-old boy reads something forbidden like that, he is certain to read on. The passage was completely alien to everything I had always understood about religion. Why would they not want all men to read the holy word the same way Christians want to “spread the good news?” Just what is in these scriptures that would oblige the Jews to kill a Gentile that read them? Why would public knowledge of Jewish scriptures be dangerous to Jews? (*My Awakening*, p. 241)

Duke apparently did not read on, however, or he would have seen another Talmudic opinion on the matter. The entire passage reads:

ואמר ר' יוחנן, עובד כוכבים שעוסק בתורה חייב מיתה שנאמר 'תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה' – לנו מורשה ולא להם... ר' מאיר אומר מניין שאפילו עובד כוכבים ועוסק בתורה שהוא ככהן גדול שנאמר 'אשר יעשה אותם האדם וחי בהם' – כהנים לויים וישראלים לא נאמר אלא 'האדם', הא למדת שאפילו עובד כוכבים ועוסק בתורה הרי הוא ככהן גדול.

R. Yohanan said, “A non-Jew who studies Torah is worthy of death, as the verse states (Deuteronomy 33:4), ‘Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance’ – implying that it is for us but not for them [non-Jews]”... R. Meir said, “How do we know that a non-Jew who studies Torah is like a High Priest? From the verse which states (Leviticus 18:5), ‘...that a man shall carry out these laws by which he shall live.’ The verse does not refer to Jews but to the generic ‘Man’ – thereby teaching that even a non-Jew who studies Torah is like a High Priest.”

In its larger context, it is clear that neither R. Yohanan nor R. Meir is speaking literally—a non-Jew who studies Torah would neither be put to death nor be permitted to perform the Temple services of the High Priest (a job which is reserved for descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses). Rather, in the classic style of Talmudic dialectic the two are presenting alternative perspectives on the question of non-Jews learning Torah, both of which are to be respected, and ultimately harmonized by later authorities into a coherent approach to the subject. R. Yohanan's forceful statement stresses that in some essential way, the study of Torah is reserved for believers only, those to whom the dictates of the Torah possess binding authority. To treat Torah as the subject of detached, academic study would be akin to studying mysticism without being able to take the mystical journeys of the true practitioner, or to studying medicine while denying the efficacy of the treatments. Indeed, the dispassionate, detached study of Torah, the Word of the Living God, is viewed by R. Yohanan as bordering on blasphemy.

As developed by later rabbinic commentators, R. Meir does not disagree with the point made by R. Yohanan about the sanctity of Torah study. Yet he stresses that Torah has relevance even to the detached, non-Jewish reader. Like the ancient prophets of Israel, whose exhortations on righteousness and belief in God have inspired both Jews and non-Jews throughout history, Torah offers essential truths to Jews and non-Jews alike; indeed, on his or her own level, the non-Jew may also be elevated by the study of Torah to the stature of the High Priest in his or her service of God.

Far from Duke's depiction of Judaism as being unwilling to "spread the good news," an essential aspect of Jewish doctrine has been to spread God's light to the non-Jewish nations of the world. Though R. Yohanan's exhortations are never discounted, this mission is reflected in the Jewish legal tradition on the teaching of Torah to non-Jews, which is permitted far more often than it is prohibited.⁵

⁵ For an extensive survey of the literature on the subject, see J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems* vol. 2 (New York: Ktav, 1983), pp. 311-340.

E. Jesus and Balaam

To agitate Christian readers, anti-Talmud writers often attempt to portray the Talmud as demeaning the figure of Jesus. In the opinion of most scholars, the Talmud only refers to Jesus in a handful of places, and though these references may not reflect the courteous ecumenicism of the modern world, neither are they particularly inflammatory.⁶ But the Talmud bears much harsher animus towards the biblical figure of Balaam, the pagan magician who sought to curse the Jews as they traveled through the desert after the Exodus from Egypt.⁷ Rabbinic tradition ascribes other crimes to *Balaam* as well, and in various places describes some of the punishments he may have suffered after his death. In the nineteenth century, when the field of academic Jewish studies was in its infancy, a small group of Jewish scholars suggested that in some cases the term Balaam in the Talmud may be a codeword for Jesus. Though later scholars showed that this suggestion could not be true (for reasons pertaining to the context of the Balaam references and the lack of manuscript variants substituting Jesus for Balaam),⁸ anti-Semites have ever since claimed that the true hatred that Judaism possesses for Christianity is expressed in these coded expressions against Balaam found in the Talmud.⁹

This is not to say that historically Jews have historically borne no animus towards Jesus and the Apostles, or to Christianity as a whole. In the two-thousand year relationship between Judaism and Christianity, many of them marred by anti-Jewish polemic and Christian persecution of Jews, some rabbis have fulminated against the church, and in some places Jews developed a folk literature that demeaned Christianity. But contemporary anti-Semitic polemicists are not interested in learning or reporting about the historical development of Jewish-Christian relations. Their goal is to incite hatred against Judaism and Jews by portraying them as bigoted and hateful. Their use of the long-discredited Balaam hypothesis is another example of this phenomenon.

⁶ For an exhaustive analysis of the references to Jesus in the Talmud, see Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Rabbinic Essays* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1951; reprinted by Ktav, 1973), pp. 473-570.

⁷ See Numbers chapters 22-25.

⁸ See Lauterbach, p. 509.

⁹ See Dilling (1983), p. 14; Duke (1998), p. 244-245; Hoffman (2000), p. 48.

III. Conclusion

It is impossible in this context to deal with all of the quotes from Jewish literature cited by anti-Semites in their effort to denigrate Judaism and spread their own vile views. The above examples characterize how anti-Semites are able to mangle and distort rabbinic and Talmudic passages. Nearly every other explanation of passages cited by anti-Talmud polemicists contain similar ignorance, distortion or tendentious interpretation.

A more important point needs to be made on role of the Talmud in Judaism in general. The Talmud is more than simply a legal code; it is a twenty-volume compilation of explorations of Jewish history, philosophy, folklore, and theology, as well as law. Its final redaction took place in the fifth century, shortly after the fall of Rome. It was written in a style and within a culture that seem bizarre or alien to contemporary readers. It does indeed contain statements that many today—Jews and non-Jews—would find offensive. But many of the comments we would deem offensive are recorded not as statements of law, but as the suggestions of individual rabbis in their continuing discussions on the myriad of subjects of interest to the Jews of the first centuries of the Common Era. Jews today venerate the Talmud as one of the first great Jewish texts, but it would be wrong to view each statement it contains as expressing the “position” of contemporary Judaism.

A similar point should be made with respect to the Talmud’s legal sections. These sections comprise the foundation of Jewish law, and are consulted today as the starting point for Jewish legal research. But Jewish law has developed significantly—sometimes radically—in the fifteen centuries since the Talmud was redacted, even for Orthodox Jews. Anti-Semites use selective quotes from the Talmud in an attempt to portray contemporary Jews as bigoted, hateful, and conspiratorial, but to anyone who understands the role of the Talmud in contemporary Judaism, their efforts are disingenuous and belie an agenda far removed from genuine historical or ecumenical research. The relevance of

the literal Talmudic texts to Jewish practice today is far smaller than anti-Semites would have us believe.

To truly understand contemporary Judaism, one need only consult with a rabbi or scholar, or go to a bookstore or library to peruse any introduction to Judaism. The Talmud itself is available in two English translations. One is the Soncino edition, which was gradually produced by a team of scholars between 1934 and the early 1960s. The other is the Artscroll edition, a contemporary project that is not yet complete.¹⁰ For those who actually consult the Talmud, it is well to remember that it is a historical document rather than a modern code.

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¹⁰ Those with no knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic may prefer the Soncino edition; although its English is sometimes stilted, it takes care to include few Hebrew or Aramaic technical terms in the translation itself (a difficult task for the legal sections). The Artscroll edition contains a more modern translation, but assumes that its reader is somewhat comfortable with these two ancient languages.