



# **DIVERGENCE**

Examining Jewish-Christian  
Relations in the Early Church

R. L. SOLBERG



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***To Paul and Daniel***

*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their  
toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is  
alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!*

*Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*

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# Preface

When I began the research that eventually turned into this book, I had no idea the world was about to witness another wave of anti-Semitism. It breaks my heart when any people group suffers hostility and prejudice at the hands of anyone else. I find it even more tragic when the people doing the hating are Christians, and the people being hated are Jews. Not all Christians harbor anti-Semitism, of course. But the problem is pervasive enough that I felt moved to do something about it. That is why I am donating every penny of profit from this book to a non-profit organization that fights anti-Semitism around the world. (See [DivergenceBook.com](http://DivergenceBook.com) for details.) And I was thrilled when my publisher Williamson College said they wanted to join me in that effort.

There is a unique, complex historical relationship between Jews and Christians. Israel is a nation supernaturally called forth by God. The historical thread that began with Abraham sometime around 1,900 BC has evolved down through the centuries into a glorious, colorful tapestry. It continues to grow today, and we Christians have been woven in.

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.  
For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are

Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

(Galatians 3:26-29)

Christians can rightly view the Jewish people as our spiritual cousins. Indeed, the Gospel is a Jewish story. This is something the early Christian writers roundly affirmed.

Interestingly, anti-Semitism is not the main point of this book. My research was initially inspired by the apologetic work I do in defending biblical Christianity against the growing modern heresy known as *Torahism*. These are folks who profess faith in Jesus, and at the same time, teach that Christians are required to “keep Torah.” (You may have heard of the Hebrew Roots Movement or the Black Hebrew Israelites?) These groups believe we should be keeping all of the Old Testament Laws given to Israel, including the Saturday Sabbath, dietary restrictions, biblical feasts, and so on. At the root of Torahism is the idea that Christian theology was corrupted in the early centuries of the faith by rampant anti-Semitism. It is this foundational belief that I set out to investigate.

My goal was to understand the true nature of Jewish-Christian relations through the first three centuries of the faith. I chose this specific period of history because it is here that Torahism (among others) claims Christian theology was hopelessly corrupted. The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 is seen as a crystallizing event. It was there that the Church officially embraced the anti-Jewish attitudes of the early Christians. Right?

After studying scores of early writings and the work of modern Jewish and Christian scholars, I discovered things weren't nearly as black-and-white as we think. The relationship between Jews and early Christians was complex and nuanced. As Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin points out in the preface to his book *Borderlines*, “The affiliation between what we call Judaism and what we call Christianity is much more complex than most scholars, let alone most lay folk, imagine” (p. xi). The two groups were entwined by a shared history,

common sacred texts, and a conjoined theology. They were each trying to work out what this whole Jesus thing meant. And they were fumbling for solid footing amid ever-shifting political and cultural sands.

I discovered that anti-Jewish sentiment absolutely did exist in early Christianity, but it wasn't what our modern minds would expect. The clashes were chiefly based on issues of theology, not race. In fact, racial theory in antiquity was markedly different from today, which had to be figured into my findings. In addition, during these early centuries, Jewish-Christian tensions were more of a two-street than we realize.

In the end, I was both enlightened and encouraged by my research into the formative centuries of our faith. And I pray you find a little of each in this book, as well.

For His glory,  
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# Introduction

There is a growing religious movement known as *Torahism*,<sup>1</sup> which claims the sermons preached every Sunday in Christian churches contain a long-corrupted theology. The root of this allegation is ultimately traced back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, in which it is claimed anti-Semitism ran rampant among the early Church fathers. Torahism holds that these anti-Jewish views ultimately came to a head at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. It was there, Torahism claims, that the Christian Church officially separated itself from the Jewish roots of the faith. At Nicaea, the Church chose Easter over Passover, Sunday worship over the Saturday Sabbath, and made other declarations aimed at divesting Christianity of its Jewish heritage. Thus, says Torahism, the teachings initially given by Jesus and the Apostles had become corrupt by the time of Nicaea and remain so today. Could that be true? In this book, we will examine the first three centuries of Jewish-Christian relations. Our goal is to piece together an accurate understanding of the nature and degree of anti-Jewish sentiment present during this historical period. And, further, to see if we can determine what sort of impact anti-Jewish sentiments had on Christian theology.

Our survey will begin with the New Testament (NT) writings, focusing on passages that convey the theology and attitudes of Jesus

<sup>1</sup> *Torahism* is an umbrella term for the belief that followers of Jesus are required to keep the Law of Moses. It is also known as Torah-observant Christianity. Torahism includes groups such as *Hebrew Roots Movement*, *Black Hebrew Israelites*, *119 Ministries*, and others.

and the NT authors concerning Judaism and the Jewish people. We will use the results of this analysis as our baseline. Next, using the writings of Church fathers and rabbis—supplemented with the work of modern Christian and Jewish scholars—we will trace Christian theology and its attitudes toward the Jewish people from the New Testament through the writings of the early Church fathers to the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Finally, we will compare the state of Christian theology and attitudes at the conclusion of the Council of Nicaea to our NT baseline.

Our goal is to determine if, by the conclusion of the Council of Nicaea, Christian theology was altered due to anti-Jewish attitudes. And if so, how, and to what extent, was it changed. To help with this comparison, two contentious Jewish-Christian issues will serve as theological markers. First is the Jewish Sabbath, which is observed on the last day of the week, versus the Christian tradition of gathering on the first day of the week, Sunday, as the Lord's Day. Second is the matter of the Jewish observance of Passover versus the Christian celebration of Easter. These two issues are discussed in the New Testament, in the writings of the early Christians, and at Nicaea. As we work our way through the first three centuries of Jewish-Christian relations, these two issues will provide us with a consistent point of measurement of the degree and nature of anti-Jewish impact on Christian theology.

# Historical Context

BECAUSE OUR STUDY CENTERS ON EARLY WRITINGS AND EVENTS, it's important we begin by establishing a framework for the historical era we're examining. This will give us the proper context for the ancient documents we're going to review. Let's take a brief look at three areas: persecution, public discourse, and racial relations.

## PERSECUTION

The legal status of Judaism and Christianity differed within the Roman Empire during the ante-Nicene era (~AD 30-325). Judaism was considered a *religio licita* (permitted religion) and, as such, was largely exempt from the requirements the Romans imposed on other religions. However, Jews did undergo occasional persecution at the hands of Rome. For example, in AD 19, Tiberius expelled the Jews from Rome,<sup>1</sup> and thirty years later, in AD 49, Claudius did the same.<sup>2</sup> Rome originally saw Christianity as just another Jewish sect. That is until AD 64 when the emperor Nero blamed a massive fire on the “the Christians.” After that, Christianity was viewed as separate from Judaism and branded a *religio illicita* (illegal religion).

<sup>1</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars: To Which Are Added, His Lives of the Grammarians, Rhetoricians, and Poets*, trans. Alexander Thomson (Charleston, South Carolina: Bibliobazaar, 2008), 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Claudius 25.4

The burgeoning Christian church suffered a great deal of persecution at the hands of the Roman state. But maltreatment also came from some groups who held opposing beliefs, such as Jews and Gnostics. Martyrdom was not an uncommon occurrence. Some Christians, such as Ignatius, counted themselves blessed to be martyred for their faith. After being called to Rome to face execution, Ignatius wrote the Roman church, begging them not to interfere with his impending death: “Pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am His wheat, ground fine by the lion’s teeth to be made purest bread for Christ.”<sup>3</sup> And, indeed, that is the fate Ignatius met.

Christian persecution ebbed and flowed across the Roman Empire, differing from region to region. In extreme cases, believers were beheaded, crucified, burned at the stake, used as torches to light roads, fed to wild beasts in the arena, and met other violent ends for their profession of faith in Jesus. Roman authorities frequently forced suspected Christians to pay homage to the emperor as a deity to test their faith. (Jews were exempted from this obligation as long as they paid the *Fiscus Judaicus*.) There are recorded occasions when Christians of Jewish descent would claim to be Jewish and were taken to the local synagogue to validate their declaration. Jewish authorities were apt to refuse to acknowledge the Christian as a fellow Jew, which sometimes led to their execution.<sup>4</sup>

Because Jewish religious leaders wielded a level of authority and political clout in Jerusalem, they could bring a great deal of pressure on the developing Christian community. As we will look at in detail in the next section, the New Testament records much of the persecution that early Christians endured at the hands of Jewish religious

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans* (AD 110).

<sup>4</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans, and Christians in the Mediterranean World: From the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (London: Penguin, 2006).

authorities. Writings after the New Testament reveal that Jewish leadership continued to persecute Christians even after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jewish Christians were increasingly pushed out of the synagogue and lost the protected status granted to Judaism. While Christians during the ante-Nicene era spoke out against unbelieving Jews, they stopped short of maltreatment or violence.<sup>5</sup>

## PUBLIC DISCOURSE & RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS

In the Roman Empire, the nature of public discourse and the intensity of religious convictions were markedly different from today. Thus, to accurately evaluate literature from this period, it is crucial to understand the culture and climate in which those writings emerged. What seems shocking to our modern Western minds (such as burning someone at the stake for their religious beliefs) was the reality in which the early Christian writers, including the New Testament authors, operated. In antiquity, one's religious convictions could be a matter of life and death.

In a culture where both state and religious authorities would oppress and even execute people based on matters of faith, the nature and intensity of public discourse naturally followed suit. Believe it or not, modern dialogue in the public sphere is significantly more civil and respectful than the exchanges of the Roman Empire during this era. Scholars Smith and Covino note “praise and blame in the form of panegyric [elaborate praise] and invective [insulting or abusive language] were essential components of Greek culture”<sup>6</sup> and “much of Roman rhetoric and literature, including poetry, is encomiastic

<sup>5</sup> Sadly, Christianity did not remain so. Beginning late in the fourth century, parts of Christendom took a decidedly unbiblical turn in their opinions and treatment of the Jewish people. Christian leaders such as John Chrysostom began preaching against the Jews as a people, using disparaging and hateful rhetoric. Over the centuries, this grew into the Christian anti-Semitism we see today.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Smith and Ralph Covino, *Praise and Blame in Roman Republican Rhetoric* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2011), p. 3.

[praising highly] or vituperative [bitter and abusive] in form.”<sup>7</sup> It was not uncommon for public conversations between opponents to include caustic comments of scorn and ridicule that would cause our modern sensibilities to bristle. Ancient historian Dr. Martin Jehne of Technische Universität Dresden offers an example:

The famous speaker and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), for instance, when he defended his supporter Sestius, did not shrink from publicly accusing the enemy Clodius of incest with brothers and sisters.

Even in ancient Rome, incest was an unlawful sexual practice and considered deeply immoral.<sup>8</sup>

## RACIAL RELATIONS IN ANTIQUITY

It is also important to establish an understanding of racial relations in antiquity. We hear heartbreaking modern-day stories of anti-Semitic Christians verbally and physically attacking Jews as “Christ-killers.” Scenes like this play out between school kids and grown adults alike. It is a pernicious thread of sin that has wound its way down the centuries. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, called for the destruction of Jews in Germany, writing, “First, set fire to their synagogues . . . Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed.”<sup>9</sup> In the documentary film *Forbidden Peace*, Rose Price, a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor, recounts how the Nazi camp guards would tell her they were following Jesus’ orders as they struck her.<sup>10</sup> (Amazingly, Rose later came to faith in Christ.)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Mihai Andrei, “In Ancient Rome, Political Discourse Was Sometimes Like an Internet Fight,” ZME Science, August 24, 2018, [www.zmescience.com/science/history-science/rome-political-discourse-insults-24082018/](http://www.zmescience.com/science/history-science/rome-political-discourse-insults-24082018/).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Jews & Their Lies*. (Gottfried & Fritz, Trans.) eBook, Part IV Para. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Forbidden Peace*, directed by Beth Freeman Kenison (Jews for Jesus, 2004).

Many historians believe that the foundation of the worst atrocity the Jewish people ever endured—the Holocaust—was fomented during the 1,500 years of anti-Jewish sentiment that preceded it. Sadly, there is no denying the existence of anti-Semitism. And as we'll see in the coming chapters, this sort of hatred and persecution of the Jewish people is unbiblical. It is contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament authors.

However, to apply the modern concept of “racism” to ancient cultures—in particular, the Christian view of Jews—is an anachronistic error. The economic and social tensions that shape the modern understanding of anti-Semitism were not present in the ancient Near East. Jewish scholar Shaye Cohen explains:

Anti-Semitism did not exist in antiquity. This term was coined in 1879 by a German writer who wished to bestow “scientific” respectability on the hatred of Jews by arguing that Jews and Germans belong to different species of humanity (“races”). But the ancients did not have anything resembling a racial theory . . . They observed that different nations had different moral characteristics . . . But did not explain these differences by appeal to what we would call a racial theory. Instead, they argued that climate, soil, and water determined both the physical and moral characteristics of nations. Therefore, the notion of anti-Semitism is inappropriate to antiquity.<sup>11</sup>

While anti-Semitism as a racial issue did not exist in antiquity, anti-Jewish sentiment certainly did. The anti-Jewishness of the non-Christian world was chiefly political rather than racial or religious. Cohen notes,

<sup>11</sup> Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 39.

The persecution of Jews by Epiphanes, the attack on Alexandrian Jewry by the mob, and the destruction of the temple by Titus were each caused by local factors and not by some deep-rooted “anti-Judaism.” Nevertheless, the literary propaganda spawned by these conflicts helped shape the “anti-Semitic” image of the Jew of later generations.<sup>12</sup>

What, then, is to be made of the “racial tension” found in the New Testament between Jews and Samaritans? This, too, is an anachronism of the modern racial mindset. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans did not emerge as an issue of race but of theology. The Samaritans traced their lineage to the time of Eli. They considered themselves of Jewish ethnicity, descending through the Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.<sup>13</sup> The difference is that the Samaritans followed the Israelite Samaritan Version of the Torah and believed theirs was the true and proper faith held by the ancient Israelites. They considered Judaism a corrupted religion brought back by the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon. A principal difference was that Samaritans believed God was to be worshiped at Shechem (Mount Gerizim) rather than Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, at the risk of oversimplification, we might compare the hostility between Jews and Samaritans to that of the Hatfields and the McCoys—a feud based on historical grievances rather than racial differences.

Similarly, while anti-Jewish sentiment existed in the early Church, it was not an issue of ethnicity but rather a clash of religious convictions. And the conflict went both ways. Christians argued vehemently against unbelieving Jews on the basis that Judaism denied

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> B. C. Babcock et al., eds., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Samaritans.

<sup>14</sup> Lisbeth S Fried, *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition* (Columbia, South Carolina: University Of South Carolina, 2014), p. 198. (See John 4:19.)

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jesus. Jews argued vigorously against the Christians because they were breaking with centuries of Jewish tradition and teaching heresy.

As this book unfolds and we dig into some of the early Christian writings—including those of the New Testament authors—the reader is encouraged to enter into the mind frame of the ancient Near East. If we hope to accurately understand the nature of the relationship between Jews and Christians in the first few centuries after Christ, we need to divest ourselves of our modern Western notions of issues like racial theory, freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state.

# New Testament Writings

A COMPLETE AND EXHAUSTIVE SURVEY of the New Testament writings on this issue is well beyond the scope of this book. But we can build an accurate picture by focusing on the passages that contain the most direct and explicit teachings regarding Judaism and the Jewish people.

The writings of the New Testament are dated between roughly AD 50-100. The earliest books are believed to have been written within thirty years of the Crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> This puts them well within the lifetimes of those who knew and followed Jesus and those who witnessed the events recorded by the New Testament writers. Conservative scholars believe that the overwhelming majority of the New Testament writings were completed before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In other words, these writings arose early in Christianity. And they were circulated widely. Moreover, with the possible exception of Luke, the New Testament writers were all Jewish. Indeed, Jewish scholars Landman and Cohen tell us:

Most of the writers of the various parts were Jews, and the writings were designed for Jewish readers who had embraced the Christian faith. The authors drew more or

<sup>1</sup> While we cannot date these ancient writings with absolute confidence, the following books are generally accepted to have been written before AD 60: Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians.

less from contemporary Jewish ideas, ethics, legends, parables, and sayings.<sup>2</sup>

We know that the modern concepts of racism and racial theory were foreign to the minds of the ancients. And there is further evidence that the conflicts documented in the New Testament are not properly viewed as racial issues. Jesus and His earliest followers were all Jewish, and so were their persecutors. These disputes were not fueled by anti-Semitism but, as we will see, by theological differences. The New Testament offers a remarkably clear view of the nature of early Jewish-Christian relations, a view that predates even the label of “Christians.” From the book of Acts, we know that early Christian preaching began in the Jewish synagogues of the diaspora and amassed a following from both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus, the apostles, and the early Christian church relied on the Hebrew Scriptures as its Bible. As historian Everett Ferguson points out, Judaism provided the religious context for the early Christian church.<sup>3</sup>

By concentrating on the teachings of two Jewish men—the apostle Paul and Jesus Himself—we can develop a well-rounded perspective on the New Testament’s teachings about how Christians are to regard Judaism and the Jewish people.

## THE APOSTLE PAUL

The apostle Paul is uniquely qualified to give us a biblical perspective on this issue. When we first meet him in the pages of Scripture, he is a proudly Jewish man who considers himself a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5). He was on a mission to wipe out this new Jewish sect that

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Landman and Simon Cohen, *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia: The Seven-Branched Light; a Reading Guide and Index to the Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*. (New York, Ktav Pub. House, 1969), p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), p. 31.

would not stop teaching and preaching about *Yeshua HaMashiach* (Jesus the Messiah). Of his time as a Jewish persecutor of Christians, he wrote:

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. (Galatians 1:13–14, ESV)

Luke reports that Paul ravaged the church, and “entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3). Moreover,

breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, [Paul] went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)<sup>4</sup>

As a Jew, Paul was so convinced he should oppose these new Nazarenes that he imprisoned many of them and even cast his vote to put some to death. He confesses he “punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:9-11).

And then Paul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). Following this supernatural experience, he became a fervent follower of Christ. Paul was converted to “the Way,” the same Jewish sect he had been persecuting. Scholars typically date Paul’s conversion to AD 34–37,<sup>5</sup> which means his persecution of the early Christians may have even begun during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Moreover, Paul’s

<sup>4</sup> See also: Acts 22:4-5; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13, 23; Philippians 3:6.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), p. 21.

conversion is dated to as little as a year after the Resurrection, perhaps occurring within months of his attendance at (and approval of) the execution of Christianity's first-known martyr, Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1, 22:20). Noted Jewish scholar Alan Segal admits:

However much I may disagree with Paul, my reading accedes to the authenticity of Paul's conversion experience. Paul considered himself part of a new Jewish sect and hoped to convince both fellow Christians and Jews of his vision of redemption.<sup>6</sup>

Paul had transformed from a Jew zealously persecuting Christians to a Christian being persecuted by Jews. And God used him to write nearly one-third of the New Testament. Who better to provide us with a biblical perspective on this issue? And we don't want to miss this crucial fact: Paul's conversion to Christianity did not require him to leave his Jewishness behind. On the contrary, he continued to celebrate his Hebrew heritage, even after his conversion. As a Christian, Paul wrote to his fellow Jews:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:4b-6)

And during his arrest at the temple in Jerusalem, Paul began his speech to the unruly crowd with a declaration of his Jewish bona fides:

<sup>6</sup> Alan F Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. xiv.

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel<sup>7</sup> according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. (Acts 22:3)

### Paul's Letter to the Romans

In Romans 9-11, Paul provides one of the New Testament's most comprehensive teachings regarding the relationship between Jews and Christians. These three chapters specifically address the unique role of the Jews in God's redemptive story and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. We will use this text as our foundation as we begin to establish a biblical perspective on how Christians ought to regard Judaism and the Jewish people.

The opening verses of each of these three chapters give us a glimpse into Paul's heart on this issue. As a Christian, Paul writes of the "great sorrow and anguish" (9:2) he feels for his fellow Jews, of his "desire and prayer" for their salvation (10:1), and of his confidence that God has not rejected them (11:1). In fact, he expresses such deep love for his fellow Jews he would be willing to give up his own salvation if they could all be saved: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom 9:3).<sup>8</sup> Paul's sorrow over Israel's unbelief is even more heart-rending to him because of her unique privileges. Paul lists eight specific blessings given by God to Israel:

<sup>7</sup> Gamaliel was a chief elder in the Sanhedrin and the grandson of famed Jewish sage Hillel. According to the Jewish Mishnah, Gamaliel was one of the greatest teachers in all of Judaism: "Since Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, there has been no more reverence for the law, and purity and piety died out at the same time" (Tractate Sotah, 9:15).

<sup>8</sup> In 1515, Martin Luther wrote, "It seems incredible that a man would desire to be damned, in order that the damned might be saved."

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ,<sup>9</sup> who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 9:4-5)

With his affection for his fellow Jews firmly established, Paul proceeds to lay out a sophisticated theological presentation. He begins by considering how it is possible that Israel, favored with such privileges and having been educated and spent centuries watching for the promised Messiah, did not recognize Him when He came. Did God's promise to Israel fail? "By no means!" Paul answers. Israel did not miss the Messiah due to a failure of God's word (9:6a), but rather, as Paul will demonstrate, because of a hardening of her heart (11:25). Israel had neglected God's blessing through her unbelief.

"For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (9:6b). Here the apostle picks up on a distinction he had introduced earlier. In Romans 2:28-29, Paul taught that there have always been two Israels—those physically descended from Jacob and those who were his spiritual offspring. God gave His promise to the latter: "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named" (9:7, quoting Gen 21:12). Moreover, "It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring" (9:8). As an illustration, Paul points to God's choosing of Abraham's younger son Isaac, rather than his first-born son Ishmael, as the beneficiary of His promise. In His sovereignty, God overruled the traditional cultural norm of the father's inheritance flowing to the first-born son. Isaac was the son of the promise. Likewise, God chose Jacob over Esau "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad"

<sup>9</sup> On this passage, John Calvin notes, "If he honored the whole human race when he connected himself with it by sharing our nature, much more did he honor the Jews, with whom he desired to have a close bond of affinity."

[ End Free Sample ]

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