

## **Chapter 16** **Rabbinic and Other Judaisms**

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### **Chapter Summary**

During the First Crusade (1095), proclaimed by Pope Urban II to defend Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land and relieve the Byzantine Empire from Muslim invaders, military leaders such as Godfrey of Bouillon, Emich, Volkmar, and Gottschalk effected the massacre of scores of Jews. The work of these renegades set a pattern repeated during the Second and subsequent Crusades. During the Third Crusade, this bloodlust spread to England where the Jewish community in York was massacred. A final wave of such persecution occurred in the mid-fourteenth century following the Black Death (bubonic plague).

It must be noted that despite the treachery of these renegades, many bishops, popes, and preachers such as Bernard of Clairvaux did all they could to protect Jews. We know little about the fate of Jews in Muslim countries although the great Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, had to flee Muslim oppression numerous times. The Christian reconquest of Spain brought little relief to Jews there. Thus, thousands of Jews converted to Christianity during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Spain during which a general dislike for such converts prevailed, many of whom were tax collectors.

Fleeing Spain, many of these Jews went to Portugal and northern Europe with the majority going to North Africa and Turkey. Various messianic movements arose among this dispersed and threatened population with a significant number of Jews in Turkey converting to Islam.

From the early Middle Ages, Jews migrated through Germany and areas of the Byzantine Empire into Russia and Poland where they obtained legal rights and protection. Although good for Jewish immigrants, these developments had a dark side which affected the fate of Jews in modern times: being an educated people, the Jews became good recruits for government service, with many becoming tax collectors, estate managers, and government agents, feared by the common people who saw them as oppressors. These developments laid a foundation for later anti-Semitism.

The Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation created uncertainty and numerous problems for Jews. Martin Luther initially took a favorable stance toward them only to turn against them toward the end of his life. Pope Paul IV ordered the burning of the Talmud and the segregation of Jews into ghettos.

The Thirty Years' War enabled European Jewish moneylenders and merchants to make themselves indispensable to all sides. Their prosperity continued following the war, which evoked resentment from those who viewed Jews as middlemen with special trading privileges. Again, this resentment laid the foundation for later anti-Semitism.

Expelled from England in 1290, Jews were not welcomed back until 1656 by Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans. In the Calvinist Netherlands they had been welcome since the sixteenth century, but in central Europe were forced to wear distinctive clothing and required to live in their own communities until the late eighteenth century.

The history of modern Judaism begins in the mid-to-late eighteenth century when, as the result of various social and intellectual trends, Jews were slowly integrated into continental life. A wave of emancipation swept across Europe in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries. The French Revolution of 1789 brought sweeping changes as the National Assembly declared all people free and equal. Napoleon Bonaparte granted Jews full citizenship rights. After this, however, nationalism swept Europe and anti-Jewish sentiments reappeared.

Jews in eastern Europe faced far more legal challenges and open hostility than did Jews in the west. Catherine the Great tolerated Jews in eighteenth-century Russia but imposed numerous restrictions. Alexander I and Nicholas I encouraged Jewish conversion to Christianity. Jews slowly gained acceptance in Russian society in the late 1800s.

The emancipation of Jews in northern Europe had its inspiration in the works of authors like Spinoza (Dutch Republic), Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Goethe (Germany). Reform Judaism spread to other parts of Europe and by 1824 had appeared in North America (South Carolina). Other Jewish reformers were Zacharias Frankel (Germany) and Solomon Schechter (New York); the latter is regarded by many as the architect of American Conservative Judaism. During this time, many Jews converted to Christianity, including the famous composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Friedrich Stahl (who would influence the Dutch politician/theologian Abraham Kuyper), Karl Marx, and Alfred Edersheim.

A new threat against Jews emerged with the development of “scientific racism,” an idea launched by Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau in *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–55) whose ideas were affirmed by Charles Darwin. As a result, Jews were now scorned not because of their religion but because they were an “Asiatic race” incapable of assimilation into the population of Europe. In fact, the very success Jews encountered in late-eighteenth-century Europe and North America fuelled anti-Semitism. In both Germany and Austria, anti-Semitic political parties evolved that were closely associated with working class movements.

The prevailing anti-Semitism of the times was given a sinister twist by the publication of *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903) outlining a Jewish plot to take over the world and purportedly obtained from Jews by Czarist secret police. Even more insidious was the publication of Huston Chamberlain’s *The Foundation of the Nineteenth Century* (1911), a best seller presenting a theory of history that supported the findings of scientific racism.

Plans for a Jewish homeland were fuelled in the early 1900s, but the biggest obstacle to settlement of Jews in Palestine was that the territory was part of the Turkish Empire and already populated by Arabs. The British issued the Balfour Declaration during World War I, which on the surface appeared to support Zionist plans for a homeland for Jews. In reality, the declaration said very little and promised even less, but accomplished the desired psychological effect by prompting many Jews living in eastern Europe to change their loyalties from the Germans to the Allies. This provided the background to what came to be known as the Holocaust, perpetrated against the Jews by the Nazis during World War II. Its horrific impact directly led to the formation of the state of Israel in 1948.