In the first century of the Common Era, Jesus of Nazareth lived as a Jew among Jews. He prayed in the synagogue, observed Jewish laws (including the dietary laws), and probably wore the fringes on his clothing (tzitziot in Hebrew) as required for Jewish men. His earliest followers did the same. Yet by the end of the fourth century, Jesus’s followers had left the synagogue and established a new religion known as Christianity. (The word Christianity refers to a religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Christ was not part of Jesus’s name, though his followers soon began using it that way. It is a title that comes from the Greek word meaning “anointed” or “chosen.” The English word messiah comes from a Hebrew word that has the same meaning.)

The separation of Christianity from Judaism did not happen simply or quickly. It was not a single event but rather a sometimes painful process that took generations to complete. And in this separation can be found the roots of hostility between Jews and Christians and the roots of some aspects of modern antisemitism.

JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

Little is known about the early life of Jesus. He was raised in the Jewish town of Nazareth, less than 100 miles north of Jerusalem in the area known as Galilee. By all accounts, Jesus lived as a Jew and, like other Jews, obeyed the laws of the Torah. At about the age of 30, he began his ministry and was often referred to as “rabbi” (meaning “teacher”).

Jesus was also killed as a Jew. Crucifixion was a method of execution commonly used by the Romans. In 4 BCE, the Romans crushed a Jewish revolt and crucified 2,000 Jewish rebels outside the walls of Jerusalem (see Chapter 1). It was the Romans, in fact, who crucified Jesus as a Jewish troublemaker.
For centuries, “the Jews” have been held responsible for Jesus’s death. Did they actually play any part in it? Many scholars point out that only the Romans had the power or authority to put Jesus to death. Furthermore, the very question suggests that Jews were a united people with some influence over Rome in the first century of the Common Era. But in fact, Jews at that time were deeply divided over issues of faith and practice. Jews who held similar views banded together; many of these groups were intolerant of Jews with different views. Only a few had ties to the Romans.

If any Jews were involved in Jesus’s death, they were probably Sadducees—a group associated with the high priests and other leaders of the Temple in Jerusalem. But the Sadducees certainly did not speak or act for the Pharisees, who seem to have been scrupulous in observance of traditional Jewish laws and whose concern for common people put them in opposition to the Sadducees. Nor did they speak for the Essenes, who abandoned Jerusalem in protest against the way the Temple was being run.

Each of these and many other groups had its own idea of what it meant to be faithful to God’s will and its own plan for the future of the Jewish people. Perhaps that is why Jesus’s closest followers did not blame “the Jews” as a group for his death. They were Jews themselves and continued to live as Jews.

Many of Jesus’s closest followers believed that God would intervene in history at the “end of days” by crushing injustice and evil and establishing peace on Earth. Then the dead would rise and the scattered people of Israel would return to their homeland. As the “end of days” neared, righteous Jews, as opposed to those who were sinful, would at first be in danger but would ultimately prevail under the leadership of a messiah. The followers of Jesus often reminded their fellow Jews that after the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE, the prophets had envisioned such a time.

After Jesus’s crucifixion, those followers were more certain than ever before that they were living in the “end of days.” They proclaimed amazing news: they had seen Jesus and he had talked with them and eaten with them. They believed his tomb was empty and he had been resurrected—that is, after God had raised Jesus from the dead, he ascended to heaven. These convictions gave new energy to the movement. Earlier, it had centered on Jesus’s teachings. Now his followers reminded other Jews of the words of the prophets and insisted that Jesus was the “anointed one,” the “son of God” who would return to fulfill those promises.

In the months and years that followed Jesus’s death, small groups of Jews met regularly to pray together and discuss his teachings. Among them...
were James and Peter, two of Jesus’s disciples, or followers. They tried to share their understanding of their messiah with fellow Jews in synagogues and other gathering places. Convinced that the Day of Judgment was near, they urgently sought not only to be faithful to Jesus’s teachings but also to persuade as many people as possible to join in their hope and expectations. In doing so, they reached out to gentiles, or non-Jews, as well as to their fellow Jews. Gradually, the Jesus movement became one that included both Jews and gentiles.

The main leader in the effort to bring Jesus’s teachings to non-Jews was Paul. Originally named Saul, Paul was a devout Jew who had studied with the great Pharisee sages. He described himself as “a Hebrew born of Hebrews.” He had been a fierce opponent of the Jesus movement in its early years and had tried to stamp it out as heresy, until a vision led him to embrace the very faith that he had previously condemned. Eventually Paul brought the message about Jesus to Jews and non-Jews in major cities around the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea.

Some of Paul’s ideas were controversial. For example, he thought that he and other Jewish believers in Jesus, later called Christians, should continue to honor many of the laws of Judaism, but gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism in order to become Christians. Paul did not say that Christianity should replace Judaism, even though others later claimed that he had said this. Instead he spoke of the mystery of God’s working for the salvation of all. And even though he did compare Jews who rejected Jesus to branches cut off from the tree that had nurtured them, Paul cautioned non-Jewish Christians to show respect to Jews as a people who had a covenant, or agreement, with God.

At first many Christian leaders disagreed with Paul’s ideas on conversion, but they eventually agreed that converts to Christianity did not have to come to God through the Torah as Jews did but could reach God directly through Jesus. Paul’s explanation of what it meant to be a Christian opened the new religion to many more people, and Christianity began to grow rapidly in the large cities of the Roman Empire.

A GROWING SEPARATION

When the Romans destroyed the second Temple in 70 CE, about 40 to 45 years after Jesus’s death, some Christians saw the destruction as a sign from God. In their view, it confirmed their belief that as Christians, they were now the “true Israel.” They believed that God had allowed the Temple to be destroyed in order to punish Jews for rejecting Jesus.
Other Jews also saw the destruction of the Temple as a sign from God, but they interpreted that sign differently. They took it to mean that Jews needed to atone for their sins by rededicating themselves to a stricter observance of Jewish law. They believed the destruction was proof that the bitter arguments and divisions among Jews had only served to harm the Jewish people as a whole and strengthen the power of Rome. They called for a return to traditional Jewish rituals and practices, emphasizing moral values and the rule of law.

In the years after the destruction of the second Temple, only two major Jewish groups, or sects, survived—the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus. The Pharisees’ emphasis on traditional Jewish law contributed to the development of rabbinic Judaism—the Judaism practiced in homes and synagogues by many Jews in the world today. Rabbinic Judaism places great importance on what Jews call “the tradition of the fathers”—the non-biblical laws and customs passed down orally and by example from one generation to the next.

As part of his mission to spread and explain the teachings of Jesus, Paul wrote letters, or epistles, to Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Scholars have used those letters, along with other New Testament writings, to trace changes in the relationship between Jews and early Christians. The Gospels, which are the first four books in the New Testament, describe Jesus’ life. Most scholars believe the four books were written between 68 and 100 CE—40 to 70 years after the crucifixion. Paul’s epistles were written somewhat earlier, between 50 and 60 CE.

Paul wrote mainly about the meaning and the effects of Jesus’s teaching, often in response to questions from and crises in the communities to whom his letters were addressed. The Gospels, on the other hand, are compilations of oral material about Jesus’s teachings and about his life, death, and resurrection. It is customary to attribute each of the Gospels to individual early Christians called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but most scholars now believe that none of the Gospels actually had a single author or even a single editor.

Jesus did not write down his teachings. He spoke Aramaic—the everyday language of Jews in Galilee in his day. The authors and editors of the Gospels most likely lived in the large Greek-speaking cities of the Diaspora, and they wrote in Greek. When stories are translated from one language to another, changes inevitably occur, and when those stories are passed on orally, the changes are even more numerous. No original manuscripts of the Gospels survive; the earliest existing versions are small portions of handwritten copies made in the second and third
During the first four centuries of the Common Era, most Jews still lived near the Mediterranean Sea, although some were beginning to move into western Europe.
centuries CE. As a result, the texts that have come down from the early centuries are usually copies of copies of copies, each with different scribes who sometimes produced differing wordings at key places.

Each Gospel tells approximately the same story, emphasizing different ideas and sometimes interpreting the same events in different ways. At one time there were as many as twenty Gospels. The early church chose the four that it believed were the most authentic, along with other writings from its own history, to form the New Testament. Those four Gospels are referred to as the “canonical” Gospels.

The Gospel according to John, the last of the four Gospels, differs significantly from those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the earlier Gospels, Jesus is shown debating questions of Jewish law with the Pharisees. Although these disagreements are depicted as often heated, they take place within Judaism among Jews. Jesus acts as a rabbi; he is not portrayed as separating himself from Jews whose views differ from his. The Gospel of John, however, portrays Jesus as the revelation of God and views those who disagree with him as enemies of God, choosing the darkness over the light.

The earliest Gospels suggest that a number of Jewish groups, or sects, collaborated with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, in calling for the death of Jesus. In John’s Gospel, the story shifts from a description of Jesus’s disputes with individuals and groups—Pharisees, scribes, and high priests—to an angry attack on “the Jews” and their beliefs. Some historians think that change in tone may reflect the experience of the community in which John’s Gospel arose. Jews may have expelled that community from the synagogue because of its beliefs about Jesus.

Other historians think that the change in tone may reflect the times. By the end of the first century, when the Gospel of John was probably written, some Christians no longer saw themselves as Jews; indeed, by this time, many Christians never had been Jews. The churches were becoming more gentile and less Jewish. It is possible, too, that the writers of this Gospel hoped to prevent Roman persecution of Christians and perhaps even to convert Romans to the teachings of Jesus. Thus, they may have thought it would be helpful to place the responsibility for Jesus’s death on someone other than the Roman governor—namely, “the Jews.” Yet many Christians at that time were aware that Jews lacked the power or authority to kill Jesus or any other “troublemaker.” Furthermore, only the Romans used crucifixions to deal with their enemies. Jews saw the practice as contrary to their traditions and beliefs.

Rome allowed Jews to practice their religion, even though many Roman leaders considered Jews barbaric and superstitious. And as long
as Christians were considered a group within Judaism, they had the same rights as other Jews. But as Christians separated from Judaism, many Jews began to insist that Christians could no longer claim to be Jews. As a result, the Romans began persecuting Christians as a threat to the empire. After all, Christians were proclaiming the teachings of Jesus, a man the Romans had crucified as a troublemaker.

Many scholars believe that Jews began to view Christians as outsiders at least partly because they felt betrayed by Jewish believers-in-Jesus who had left Jerusalem for the safer countryside during the rebellion of 66–70 CE that led to the destruction of the second Temple. Most early Christians, influenced by the example of Jesus, believed in nonviolence and therefore refused to fight under any circumstances. Some also believed that fighting would be useless because the terrible events of that time were the inevitable beginning of the “end of days”—the period just before the coming of the messiah.

Another sign of the times is the way the Pharisees are described in the Gospels. They are shown as rigid, overly pious, and often hypocritical. The Pharisees were only one of several Jewish sects in Jesus’s time, yet they are often portrayed as his major opponents, even though some scholars believe they were the group with whom he had the most in common. The high priests who belonged to the Jewish sect known as the Sadducees were Jesus’s more likely opponents, but many of them were killed during the wars with Rome. It was only after the destruction of the Temple in

The menorah indicates that this sarcophagus (stone coffin) belonged to a Jew—in this case, one who lived in Rome in the first century of the Common Era.
70 ce that the Pharisees gained religious supremacy. At the time that the early Gospels were written, the Pharisees and the early Christians were competing for the hearts and minds of their fellow Jews.

In the years after 70 ce, Jewish survivors of the war with Rome tried to unite all Jews under the leadership of rabbis and sages. Terms like *Pharisee* or *Sadducee* tended to divide Jews rather than bring them together, and they were now used much less often. Synagogues and houses of study became more central to Jewish life, as prayer and study replaced the animal sacrifices that had been the focus of worship in the destroyed Temple.

During those years, rabbis and sages began to collect and edit the non-biblical laws and customs that made up the oral traditions of Judaism. The work they created is known as the Mishnah—a vast collection of centuries’ worth of oral laws and customs. It was completed in Palestine in 200 ce. Jewish scholars in Palestine and Babylonia also began to compile commentaries on the Torah and the Mishnah. Those commentaries are known as the Talmud.

Although the rabbis rarely spoke of Christians in their writing and preaching, they, like many Jews, had strong feelings about them, particularly as the number of gentiles associated with the Christian movement increased. The war with Rome in 66–70 ce was one of several critical events that shaped the relationship between Christians and Jews. The process of separation did not happen everywhere in the same way or even at the same time.

A few scholars trace the formal separation to a decision made in Yavne, a town in Palestine, in 80 ce. Rabbis and sages, continuing the earlier work of the Pharisees, had gathered there to compile the Mishnah. They added a new blessing to the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the Eighteen Benedictions (blessings) that observant Jews recite three times a day. This new blessing referred to Jews who still practiced Judaism but believed that Jesus was the messiah as heretics. Some scholars believe that this condemnation may have contributed to the growing separation between the new and old religions.

Other scholars disagree. They argue that the prayer has had many variations in wording over the centuries and it is unlikely that Jews recited it in exactly the same way in every synagogue in Palestine or anywhere else. Many also note that in some places, Christians continued to worship in both synagogues and churches well into the third century of the Common Era.

Nevertheless, gradually, slowly, what had begun as a debate among Jews was becoming a disagreement between members of two separate
Separation: Synagogue and Church, Jew and Christian (29–414 CE)

Religions. Both Christians and Jews began to define themselves and their religion by emphasizing the differences between the two groups. One of the first Christian writers to do so was Melito, a bishop in Sardis, a city in what is now Turkey.

In about 167 CE, Melito gave a sermon entitled “Homily on the Passover.” He argued that by “crucifying Jesus,” “the Jews” had “murdered God,” and therefore the Jewish people as a whole were guilty of the crime. His homily is the first known use of the deicide charge (as the accusation was later known). His goal was not to incite violence against Jews but to strengthen the Christian identity of his parishioners by turning “us” against “them.” At the time, Christians in Sardis and other parts of the Roman Empire were an often-persecuted minority with virtually no power. Only in later centuries, when Christians actually had political power, would Melito’s words be used to justify discrimination, persecution, and murder.

At the end of the second century CE and the beginning of the third, Jews and Christians often lived side by side in the major cities of the Roman Empire. The Romans determined how each group was regarded, and attitudes toward both groups varied greatly. In the early years of the second century, the Roman historian Tacitus had described Jews as “vulgar” and “superstitious.” But by the beginning of the third century, another Roman historian, Dio Cassius, noted that although Jews had “frequently been persecuted,” they had prospered. He also wrote:

*They succeeded in winning the right to observe their laws freely. They are distinguished from the rest of mankind in practically every detail of their way of life, and especially in that they honor none of the other gods, but show extreme reverence for one particular deity. They never had a statue of him even in Jerusalem itself, but believing him to be unnamable and invisible they worship him in the most extravagant way among humans. They built him a large and splendid temple . . . and dedicated to him the day called the day of Saturn [Saturday] on which, among many other most peculiar observances, they undertake no serious occupation.*

The Fourth Century: A Turning Point

In 312 CE, a battle for control of the Roman Empire had a profound impact on relationships among Christians, Jews, and Romans. As one version of the story goes, on the night before the soon-to-be-emperor Constantine planned to attack a rival for the throne, he saw a cross in the sky. Above
that cross were these words: “In this sign, conquer.” Constantine, who was not a Christian, interpreted the vision as a sign that the Christian God would bring him victory in his fight for control of the western part of the empire. The next day his troops won the battle and Constantine ordered his men to continue to fight under the sign of the cross.

Though some scholars think that the story of Constantine’s vision is more legend than fact, it is clear that the new emperor wanted to end Roman persecution of Christians. In 314 ce, Constantine and Licinius Augustus (the two men ruled the empire jointly) proclaimed a new law. Known as the Edict of Milan, it states, in part:

> When I, Constantine Augustus, as well as I, Licinius Augustus, had fortunately met near Mediolanurn (Milan), and were considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought that, among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and to all others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred. . . . [I]t has pleased us to remove all conditions whatsoever . . . concerning the Christians, and now any one of these who wishes to observe the Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without any disturbance or molestation. We thought it fit to commend these things most fully to your care that you may know that we have given to those Christians free and unrestricted opportunity of religious worship. When you see that this has been granted to them by us, [you] will know that we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases; this regulation is made that we may not seem to detract . . . from any dignity or any religion. 2

Constantine’s edict gave Christians the right to openly practice their faith. Until then, they had met in the homes of fellow believers. Within a year of the edict, Constantine ordered the building of churches throughout the empire. With new churches came a more formal organization.

Although some Christians worried about the future of the church if it became too closely identified with the empire, most Christians were pleased with Constantine’s edict. It meant an end to the persecutions they had suffered from time to time and new access to power and influence. Other groups saw reason to worry. The only people the edict mentioned
by name were the Christians, and the laws that came afterward radically limited the rights of Jews as citizens of the Roman Empire. For example, in the year 315, Constantine issued the following edict:

We wish to make it known to the Jews and their elders and their patriarchs that if, after the enactment of this law, any one of them dares to attack with stones or some other manifestation of anger another who has fled their dangerous sect and attached himself to the worship of God [Christianity], he must speedily be given to flames and burn—together with all his accomplices.

Moreover, if any one of the population should join their abominable sect and attend their meetings, he will bear with them the deserved penalties.³

This law had two purposes. One was to prevent Jews from interfering with relatives or friends who converted to Christianity. The other was to discourage Christians from converting to Judaism.

Constantine’s description of Judaism as “dangerous” and “abominable” is very different from the opinions expressed a century earlier by Dio Cassius, who seemed to regard Jews with respect, toleration, and curiosity. Edicts issued by later emperors reflected Constantine’s views. Increasingly, Jews were regarded with disrespect, intolerance, and disgust.

By 325 CE, Constantine had absolute power in Rome; in ancient times this meant both political and religious power. That year he summoned 250 Christian bishops to a council in Nicaea, a city in present-day Turkey. The council began by adopting a creed—a statement of common beliefs. The Nicene Creed expresses a belief in God, in Jesus Christ as the son of God, and in the Holy Spirit. But the bishops of the church went beyond simply defining what Christians believe. At this and later councils, they also moved to distinguish Christianity from Judaism. For example, early Christians, like other Jews, had observed the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week and then celebrated Jesus’s resurrection with special gatherings and meals on the first day of the week (Saturday night or Sunday). Now the council insisted that Christians would observe only Sunday and not the traditional Jewish Sabbath. The bishops also separated Christian commemorations of Easter from Jewish observances of Passover (the Jewish festival during which Jesus was crucified).

Today it seems clear that Christians were creating a separation between the two faiths and that Jews were undoubtedly doing the same.
To Christians, Jews, and other groups in the fourth century, the significance of the separation was probably not so obvious.

In the 300s, the anti-Jewish laws issued by Constantine and his successors were rarely enforced. To confuse matters further, a number of later emperors granted Jews new privileges even as they issued laws that took away older privileges. Constantine himself gave rabbis and other Jewish religious leaders a status equal to that of Christian religious leaders.

Then, in 361 ce, the unthinkable happened. A man who did not consider himself a Christian became emperor of Rome. Julian, who had studied both Christianity and Greek philosophy, declared an end to the Christian empire of Constantine and set out to restore Rome to its traditional gods. It was a move that appealed to many people in the empire. In the fourth century, Christians were by no means in the majority.

As part of his return to traditional ways, Julian tried to undermine the Christian claim that Christianity had replaced Judaism. One way to do this was to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Julian opened Jerusalem to Jews again and allowed them to govern themselves. They had just begun work on the Temple when he died during an invasion of Persia in 363.

Valentian, the new emperor, was a Christian who quickly took away the rights and privileges Julian had granted Jews and restored those of Christians. Nevertheless, Julian’s reign had frightened many Christians. They worried that it might signal the beginning of a new anti-Christian era. As a result of these fears, they renewed their efforts to convert pagans and, at the same time, launched new attacks on Jews.

In 388, for example, a mob of Christians led by their bishop set fire to a synagogue in Callinicum, a town on the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. When Theodosius (who was then emperor) learned of the incident, he ordered the bishop of Callinicum to rebuild the synagogue and to punish those who had participated in the incident. When Ambrose (later St. Ambrose), the powerful bishop of Milan, learned of the emperor’s stand, he sent a letter scolding Theodosius for favoring the synagogue, a “home of unbelief, a house of impiety, a receptacle of folly.” Laws that protected synagogues were wrong, he thundered, and should be annulled or disobeyed. Ambrose announced that he would not give the sacraments to Theodosius unless the emperor canceled his order. Reluctant to challenge the bishop, Theodosius did as Ambrose wished.

Historians sometimes use this incident to show how the status of Jews in the fourth century deteriorated. However, the truth is more complicated. Five years later, in 393, Theodosius issued a rescript—a legally binding command that corrects an earlier decision. In it, he said that
“the sect of the Jews is forbidden by no law.” Explaining this decision, he said that it was prompted by the efforts of some Christians in the east to “destroy and despoil the synagogues.” This new ruling not only affirmed the right of Jews to assemble and to build synagogues but also prescribed punishments for those who attacked synagogues.

JEWS CHRISTIANS AND JUDAIZING CHRISTIANS

The fourth century was a confusing time for other reasons as well. Not everyone participated in the mutual hostility between Jews and Christians. A number of Christians believed that a commitment to Christianity did not mean turning away from Jewish customs and traditions; they thought of such traditions as a connection to Jesus and his life. Among these people were both Jewish Christians—that is, Jews who believed in Jesus but continued to observe Jewish law—and Judaizing Christians, gentiles who adopted some Jewish practices.

Many leaders in the church, however, believed it was essential to widen the gap between followers of the two religions. They did not want Jewish Christians or Judaizing Christians to see value in Jewish customs and traditions. No Christian attacked the “Judaizing tendencies” within the church more vigorously than John Chrysostom (later St. John Chrysostom).

Chrysostom was born about 347 CE and lived in Antioch, a city founded by the Greeks in Syria in 300 BCE. He was considered the most persuasive preacher of his time; in fact, his title Chrysostomos is Greek for “golden-mouthed.” He is remembered by many Christians for his courage in criticizing the rich and powerful and his compassion for the poor. In many of his sermons, he challenged injustice and denounced the comfortable arrogance of the wealthy.

Chrysostom also used his skill as an orator to attack, with vigor, the openness of many Christians to Jewish practices and faith—an openness that in Chrysostom’s eyes meant a weakening of their specifically Christian identity. By the fourth century, Jews had been living in Antioch for more than 600 years and Christians for more than 200 years. Both groups were well established, with strong ties to one another. In fiery speeches, Chrysostom set out to cut those ties. He viciously attacked members of his own congregation—Christians who attended synagogues and observed Jewish festivals. He wanted to arouse in them a fear and disgust that would discourage any desire to Judaize.

How, Chrysostom asked, can Christians “have the slightest converse” with Jews, “the most miserable of all men”? He went on to describe Jews
as “inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil.” To him, the synagogue was “a place of shame and ridicule,” “the domicile of the devil.” Indeed, he told his congregation that Jews worshipped the devil with rites that are “criminal and impure” and that the synagogue was “an assembly of criminals,” “a den of thieves,” and “a cavern of devils.”

Why did Chrysostom believe Jews were degenerate? Because of their “odious assassination of Christ.” And for this crime, Chrysostom declared, there was “no expiation possible, no indulgence, no pardon.” In his view, the rejection and dispersal of the Jews was the work of God, not of emperors. He insisted that God had always hated the Jews, and therefore, on Judgment Day, God would say to Judaizers, “Depart from Me, for you have had dealings with murderers.”

Chrysostom’s attacks had little to do with Jewish practice or belief. He was not interested in real Jews; it was the “Judaizing” Christians he was attacking. In opposing them, however, he demonized “the Jews.” And he was not alone. Other Christian leaders in Chrysostom’s day wrote in similar ways about Jews. Sophronius Eusebius Heironymus (later St. Jerome) was a monk who translated the Old Testament (the Christian name for
the Hebrew scriptures) and the New Testament from Greek to Latin. His rhetoric was more subdued than Chrysostom’s, but his message was similar: “The Jews . . . seek nothing but to have children, possess riches, and be healthy. They seek all earthly things but think nothing of heavenly things; for this reason they are mercenaries.”

Aurelius Augustinus (later St. Augustine), a leading theologian of the early church who lived about 50 years after Chrysostom, took a more complex view of Jews—a view that would have major consequences for the Jews of Europe. Augustine wrote that God had dispersed the Jews but had not destroyed them. In his view, God had kept Jews alive as a permanent reminder that Christianity had replaced Judaism as the true faith. He argued that the humiliated, defeated Jews showed what happens to those who reject God’s truth.

Although Augustine did not want the Jews to be murdered, he did want them to suffer for what he claimed they had done to Jesus. And he wanted them to be present at the “end of days,” when Jesus returned, so that they could see that they had been wrong. Like Chrysostom, Augustine described and defined Jews in terms of the purpose he thought they served for Christians—examples of the punishment inflicted by God on non-Christian believers. Such a view of Jews tended to deny their humanity and their existence as people with their own beliefs and purposes.

The language used by Chrysostom, Augustine, and other church leaders was designed to persuade Christians to cut all ties between themselves and Judaism. It had the desired effect. That language shaped attitudes and supported opinions long after the fourth century ended. It was also reflected in numerous acts of violence against Jews. As early as 414, church leaders in Alexandria led an assault on synagogues that destroyed the city’s Jewish community for a time. Similar events occurred in other parts of the empire. The perpetrators were rarely punished. Increasingly, the tightening links between the political power of the Roman emperors and the religious power of church leaders left Jews isolated and vulnerable. More and more, they were viewed as outsiders—a status that would have a profound effect on Jewish life at other times and in other places.


4 John Chrysostom, “Chrysostom’s Homilies Against the Jews.”