

## **The Christianity Seminar**

### **A Report on the 2021 Fall Meeting: Anti-Judaic Rhetoric in Early Christian Discourse**

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The Christianity Seminar is all about questioning our assumptions regarding Christian history. For eight years, the seminar dealt primarily with the first two centuries of the Common Era, synthesizing its findings in *After Jesus before Christianity* by Erin Vearncombe, Brandon Scott, and Hal Taussig (HarperOne, 2021).<sup>1</sup> The seminar's focus in its second phase has been on the way that the early Jesus movements developed in the third and fourth centuries, though with the understanding that the way the history of this period is told shapes our understandings all the way back to the time of Jesus himself.

The fall 2021 meeting of the seminar wrestled with the serious issues of anti-Judaic rhetoric that have plagued Christian discourse through the centuries, spilling out alongside and playing a role in motivating terrible acts of violence. Such rhetoric can be found in the New Testament and has periodically erupted in violence, culminating most horrifically in the atrocities of the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> The two papers presented and discussed at the meeting dealt with the relationships between Christians and Jews in the fourth-century Roman Empire.

## **SUPERSESSSIONISM**

Andrew Jacobs, senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School and author of two books on these issues,<sup>3</sup> gave the first paper, "Remembrance of Jews

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<sup>1</sup> For extensive excerpts from this book and an interview with its authors, see *The Fourth R* 35-3 (May-June 2022).

<sup>2</sup> An excellent overview of such language in the New Testament is provided in Westar Fellow Robert Miller's book, *Helping Jesus Fulfill Prophecy* (Cascade, 2016), while a thorough and compelling overview of these issues throughout the centuries can be found in James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002). The books of A. J. Levine including *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (HarperOne, 2006) are also helpful.

<sup>3</sup> *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford University Press, 2003) and *Epiphanius of Cyprus: A Cultural Biography of Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2016).

Past: Supersession and/as History in Eusebius of Caesarea.” It laid out details of the way that Eusebius describes and portrays Jews and their history in his *Ecclesiastical History*, a ten-volume work that he probably started in the early part of the fourth century just before Constantine gained control of the entire Roman Empire and then finished just after Constantine did so around 324 CE just before the Council of Nicaea. Eusebius was a prolific writer,<sup>4</sup> but his *Ecclesiastical History* has been particularly influential.<sup>5</sup> For centuries, historians have relied on Eusebius’ history, assuming it to be a thorough, objective, and authoritative account of the early centuries of Christianity—the church history if you will. In the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius provides extensive quotations from documents of the second and third centuries. In fact, Eusebius’ citations are our sole remaining source for many of these texts. However, in recent decades, scholars have begun to question the accuracy and objectivity of the *Ecclesiastical History* and to examine the ways in which Eusebius slants certain issues as, indeed, all historians are wont to do whether consciously or not.

Jacobs began his presentation with a National Geographic map of the Mediterranean from 800 BCE to 1500 CE and discussing how such a map makes us think that a particular view of history seems natural. In this case, the manner in which each empire replaced another is delineated in a particular way, and that view of history came to be accepted and seldom questioned. Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* also functioned to map out the various eras of history and successive empires with the goal of showing how the world ended up being Christian. The matter of who gets to write the definitive history plays a prime role in determining how later generations perceive the way things were. What we come to think of as simply how

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<sup>4</sup> Among his writings are a biography of Constantine, a comparison of the Synoptic gospels that was included in Bibles through the centuries, a table of place names in the Bible, and a general history of the world.

<sup>5</sup> For a full discussion of Eusebius and his influential work, see Nina Livesey, “Constructing the History of the Church: Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*,” *The Fourth R* 35-2 (Feb-Mar, 2022).

things were or how they happened reflects the way that the history has been constructed and told to us. It is often difficult for us to think in any other terms, and as the centuries have passed, Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* has served to naturalize the triumph of Christianity.

One of the most striking features of Eusebius' work and indeed of most works of Christian history is its *supersessionism*. Supersessionist theology (sometimes called “replacement theology”) claims that while the Jews were once God's chosen people, Christians have superseded them in that role. In the past decades, scholars have spent a great deal of time and energy acknowledging the disturbing pervasiveness of such claims, and Jacobs' paper provided a clear analysis of just how deeply supersessionism pervades the work of Eusebius. He basically tells history as that in which successive empires rise and fall until finally there are only two left—that of the Jews and that of the Romans. He then describes the fall of the Jews to the Romans, who in turn become Christians.

Jacobs argued that Eusebius does not erase Jews (or pagans or heretics) from history completely. Rather, he casts them as “the other,” an “other” that belongs to a now subdued past and serves as a foil against which the correct position—that of the Christians who have come to prevail—can be seen. As Jacobs put it,

The memories of the peoples that have risen and fallen within Eusebius' totalizing history, matter; indeed, the very logic of the *Chronicle*<sup>6</sup> is to make everyone else's past a part of Eusebius' ongoing story. Richard Burgess, locating Eusebius within the previous tradition of chronicles, remarks that in this *Chronicle*, “we see the origin of providentialist history (that in the tracing of the history of mankind one

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<sup>6</sup> This is a reference work created by Eusebius containing chronological tables of world history.

can see the fulfillment of God's plan for mankind), that history is linear and teleological (that is headed toward a single, preordained conclusion), and that all men are part of God's plan whether they are (or were) Christian or not."<sup>7</sup>

As Jacobs concludes,

These Jews are bygone, but they are not gone; like the "extinct" kingdoms preserved in the amber of Eusebius' *Chronicle* they are always slipping away from the present moment for the reader of the *History*, but can easily be conjured up as hero, villain, victim, or witness with the turn of a page. That Jews are always fading into Christian memory is central to Eusebius' distinctive supersessionist logic, as is the ability of the erudite Christian reader to summon them once more to tell their stories of the past.

Jacobs also discussed the idea that how non-Jewish Christians think and write about Jews is crucial to broader thinking about Christianity, religion, and difference and that studying the history of this period has broader implications for how religious difference gets constructed and comprehended during the period of the Christian Roman Empire but also in other times and places. In fact, some of the insights can be applied to groups other than Christians and Jews. In effect, Eusebius "represents a hinge point in the way Christians would come to construct and comprehend religious "others" through the lens of their own history."

Jacobs went on to show the way in which a similar kind of thinking—in which native Americans are seen as primarily part of a disappearing past—was used in portrayals of the early

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<sup>7</sup> Richard W. Burgess, *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography, Historia Einzelschriften* 135 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1999), 81.

1900s. For example, a photograph taken by Edward Curtis in 1907 shows native Americans riding away on horses. The caption reads, “Indians, as a race, already shorn in their tribal strength and stripped of their primitive dress, are passing into the darkness of an unknown future.”

However, in fact, native Americans had not totally disappeared in the early 1900s. Jacobs pointed out that they may have even made use of Curtis’ photos in their arguments for certain kinds of rights. Similarly, Jacobs pointed out that Jews may have done likewise. In fact, Jacobs pointed out certain practices to which Eusebius alludes: Jews convincing Christians that the scrolls in the synagogues are more efficacious than Christian codices, Jews making effigies of Haman<sup>8</sup> when celebrating Purim that looked a bit like a person being sacrificed, and Jews convincing gullible Christian tourists to Nazareth that the childhood bench of Jesus had resisted their efforts to remove it from their synagogue. Jacobs pointed out that while the idea of supersession could not be totally overturned, there were ways of subverting it and that supersessionist logic could never totally will Jews out of existence.

Jacobs ended his paper with these four conclusions:

(1) Eusebius inaugurates a new mode of supersession in his historical works by making the Jewish past a bygone, but also retrievable, part of Christian history.

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<sup>8</sup> In the book of Esther, Haman, second-in-command to the Persian king, wanted to kill the Jews. Queen Esther appealed directly to the king and foiled his plan. In fact, the king ordered Haman's execution instead. Purim is the holiday celebrated to remember this story, and apparently, it was being reenacted with effigies of Haman that looked a bit like a person being sacrificed as Jesus had been.

(2) Eusebius' method for constructing his historical works was novel (the seemingly neutral synchronisms of the *Chronicle* and the in-narrative citations of other documents in the *History*) but replicated Roman imperial strategies for demonstrating mastery of “other” populations.

(3) While Jews occupy many roles in the *History* (ancestors, antagonists, victims, sources, and even models for historical writing), their ideological role is consistent: “That Jews are always fading into Christian memory is central to Eusebius' distinctive supersessionist logic, as is the ability of the erudite Christian reader to summon them once more to tell their stories of the past.”

(4) Christian supersession in Eusebius becomes a model for understanding the diversity of religious “others” in his Christian Roman world: “This supersessionist historical thinking projected a Christian world filled with religious ‘others’ always existing slightly out of phase, relics of a past—sometimes distant, sometimes all too recent—always giving way to a triumphant Christian present.”

### JUDAIZERS<sup>9</sup>

The other paper at the fall 2021 meeting was “Synagogues, Churches and Heretics: De-Ciphering Judaizers in Antioch and Edessa” by Tina Shepardson, Lindsay Young Professor and Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee, director of the Faculty Seminar on Late Antiquity. It is important to keep in mind that one of the large issues that the Christianity Seminar has attempted to understand is exactly how “Christianity” has been

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<sup>9</sup> This term describes Christians who were accused of what other Christians considered inappropriately Jewish behavior, or “Judaizing.”

characterized as it evolved through the centuries. Shepardson pointed to the fact that defining the “development of Christianity” in terms of separate categories that served as contrasts to each other was a hallmark of scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of their major themes was how they characterized the kind of Christianity practiced in places where Syriac was spoken (such as Edessa, a city that existed in what would be a part of modern-day Turkey) as “Jewish Christianity” versus that which was practiced in places where Greek was spoken (such as the city of Antioch, which was also located in what today is Turkey) as “Greek Christianity.” These scholars represented “Jewish Christianity” as less orthodox and pure, supposedly tainted by ongoing engagement with Jewish thought and practices, while “Greek Christianity” supposedly reflected the character of “true Christianity.”

These sharp oppositions belie the nuance and more complicated relationships that one finds when digging more deeply, according to Shepardson. She focused on the virulent anti-Judaic rhetoric found in several texts, particularly in the sermons of John Chrysostom, an influential Greek-speaking preacher and leader Antioch and the hymns of Ephrem in Edessa. Both of them vehemently criticized Christians who participated in services or practices in synagogues, joined in Jewish festivals and celebrations, or visited a nearby healing shrine. Churchgoers were also excoriated for participating in specific practices focusing on veneration of Torah scrolls or eating the unleavened bread used in Jewish festivals (rather than eating of the Eucharist alone). These practices have been labeled “Judaizing”: “Scholars and early Christian authors alike have used the term ‘Judaizing’ to refer to ‘Christian’ behavior that they considered inappropriately ‘Jewish.’ . . . ‘Judaizing’ thus became a cipher that covered a wide range of accusations.”

Shepardson went on to point out that in examining passages such as these,

Scholars often, for example, interpreted “Christians” who visited the synagogue in Ephrem’s fourth-century Edessa as vestiges of a regionally widespread non-Pauline “Jewish Christianity,” but “Christians” who visited the synagogue in John Chrysostom’s fourth-century Antioch as otherwise orthodox Gentiles who had been naively lured into the synagogue. Such interpretative choices have perpetuated a distinction between the religious landscapes of fourth century Antioch and Edessa that is misleadingly stark.

Shepardson argued that this distinction is inaccurate and leads to caricatures of the kinds of Christianity found in these regions, as similar types of behavior among Christians were actually found both in Greek-speaking and Syriac-speaking parts of the Roman Empire. Such vehemence by Chrysostom, for instance, indicates that most probably some Christians there were indeed engaging in the practices he railed against, for if they were not, there would be nothing for him to protest against.

Shepardson continued:

Untangling the evidence not only allows us to see that Syriac Christianity was not singularly “Jewish-Christian” compared to its non-Syriac regional Christian contemporaries, but also allows us to see comparisons between Greek and Syriac traditions, and Antioch and Edessa, that had been obscured. Both cities include Greek- and Aramaic-speaking Christians, although Antioch’s urban majority is Greek, and Edessa’s is Syriac. Both regions have significant Jewish communities up through the fourth century and pro-Nicene preachers who criticized local church-goers for participating in Jewish holiday celebrations. Antioch’s earliest



Christian history is associated with the apostle Peter as well as Paul, and the earliest evidence from both cities shows evidence of a wide variety of Christian teachings that struggled for authority against each other. By the fourth century, John Chrysostom and Ephrem were both also using Jews to “think with” in their broader fights against Christian opponents in their city, revealing that accusations of “Judaizing” are much more complex than simply taking them as evidence of Christians’ “Jewish” behaviors.

Shepardson ended with the following conclusions: (1) Scholars have read early evidence of “Jewish-Christian” and “Judaizing” Christianity differently for different times and places. (2) Anti-Judaizing rhetoric was used for a variety of purposes to condemn a wide variety of early Christian beliefs and practices, so it should be interpreted carefully. (3) Reading anti-Judaizing texts with greater nuance will break down the sharpness of past distinctions between Greek and Syriac Christianity, between Antioch and Edessa, and allow us to reimagine the early history of Jews, Christians, and those whose leaders considered their behavior “too Jewish” to be “Christian” in these consequential regions of the world.

The ensuing discussion brought out the importance of these points. In recent decades, scholars such as Daniel Boyarin have been helping us to see that there was no clear parting of the ways between Jews and Jesus followers in the early centuries, and Shepardson’s meticulous research involving the examination of original sources such as Chrysostom’s sermons helps us to pinpoint and focus in on the details that further establish the case for ongoing interaction and identification between those in Jewish and Christian communities.

Furthermore, the way that anti-Judaic rhetoric has motivated violence by Christians against Jews all through the centuries must be acknowledged because its effects have been lethal

and toxic. While it is impossible to know to what extent those who used such rhetoric actually engaged in violence, both Shepardson and Jacobs affirmed that such language served to inspire it. Moreover, the disturbing and problematic nature of trying to force the characterization of Christianity into distinct categories such as “Jewish” and Greek Christianity cannot be overemphasized. The claims of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars need to be re-examined. Indeed, it was not only inaccurate and misleading to characterize some forms of Christian thought and practice as more orthodox while characterizing others as tainted by a pervading Jewishness; it has been downright dangerous. Eventually, such distinctions played a role in laying the basis for attempts to disassociate Jesus and Christianity from their Jewish roots in a variety of more modern contexts, most notably that of Nazi Germany.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, both presentations and the discussions they sparked stimulated further understanding not only of disturbing aspects of Christian history but of the problematic ways in which it has been told and the need to acknowledge these issues and find better ways of conceptualizing and telling history. This is a theme to which the seminar returned in its spring 2022 meeting. That meeting featured presentations that surveyed art created by early Jesus followers prior to Constantine and that dealt with the ongoing controversy preceding and going far beyond that of Nicaea regarding the relationship between Jesus and God.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this, see Susannah Heschel’s *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2010).