

# **DISCOURSES**

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Discourses by Emil G. Hirsch

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# **The Jews and Jesus**

**A DISCOURSE  
BY  
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## THE JEWS AND JESUS.

One might suppose that the Jew had been long enough before the world at large to be fully understood and to be justly estimated. But it seems that for many circling decades to come, the Jew will have to be resigned to the fate not to be known, to figure as an archaeological specimen for some kindly disposed persons, to serve as a target for poisoned arrows, drawn from the quiver of malevolent minds: in one word, forever to be misrepresented—not merely by such as close their eyes willingly to the brighter truth—but alas! even by others whose heart beats with rare loyalty to whatever is good, noble and uplifting. The books of all ages are witnesses to this sad lot, which has befallen the Jew. We cannot complain, therefore, that only in modern days this bitter tide has visited the son of Israel. What makes this experience in recent months more galling, is the contrast presented by the treatment accorded to the Jew, and the general drift of modern thought: is the disappointment keenly edged by the reflection that our hopes and expectations soar so high, while actual conduct still stilt in low planes. Whatever else may be said about the Jew and his religion, this one thing seems to be taken for granted, needing no further inspection or proof, that the Jew by his very religion, is led to be hostile to Christianity; that the Jewish heart bulges with hatred for all that is not labeled Jewish, and that especially he whose name for millions of

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human beings tokens the very highest, is spurned and scorned with bitter contempt by the devoted descendants of Abraham, now as ever before. Nothing, however, can be further from the truth than this. Certainly the literature of Judaism ought to be taken into account before this sweeping verdict of condemnation is apodictically pronounced; and if there be those to whom the literature of Judaism is a sealed book, they should remember the canon of honesty that no one may speak of things of which, by the nature of their proclamation, he must be ignorant. It is a very comfortable but very cheap method with unperturbed self-assurance to repeat old errors, to voice old prejudices; but will an honest man indulge in these tactics? He will spurn to huckster in never so venerable prejudices unless convinced that their basis is the granite of fact, as revealed by an honest endeavor to probe things to the hard pan at the bottom. Those who have studied, or are competent to do so, the old Jewish literature, cannot with good conscience repeat the charge, that the Jew, by his very religion is prompted to cherish the spirit of hostility to all other religions. They cannot again lend word to the unjust though old indictment, that the Jew, rejecting the prophet of Nazareth, heaps upon this name, which is symbol of truth and emblem of love for millions, contempt and scorn.

Toward Christianity Judaism as a religion, even orthodox Judaism, has always preserved an attitude of kindest fairness. Whatever laws may be found in the old rabbinical codes bearing upon idolatry, atheism, blasphemy, and the whole ilk and brood of breaches of religious rectitude of this black order, Christianity was always officially and most emphatically declared not



to be one of the company of religious or rather irreligious systems to which the laws and regulations in question, enacted to stem the tide of idolatry and blasphemy, could apply. R. Joseph Caro is certainly a trustworthy exponent of Jewish orthodoxy of the most uncompromising stamp. In his "Beth-Joseph," a ritual code of high authority ('Hoshen Mishpat, 266), he says: "The non-Jews נכריים of our days do not belong to the category denoted in the Talmud as 'Akkum' and none of the laws enacted against these is applicable to them." And his view and express statement has passed into the preface of well nigh all editions of the Shul'han-Arukh. Christianity is by Jewish orthodoxy, even, recognized to be a monotheistic religion. It is accorded willingly the function of having been among God's appointed agents to carry the light of monotheism out into the darkened world. Men who are at home in medieval Jewish literature need no longer assurance to quiet whatever apprehensions they might offhandedly have entertained on this score. Time will not allow us to give ear to more than a few voices composing the chorus, sounding in all centuries and countries the same glad song of tolerant recognition. Rabbi Jacob Emden, of Altona (1698-1776), puts the conception of the rabbis most pithily when he says: "Christianity was founded for the heathen, not as a new religion, but as the old, which commanded the keeping of the seven Noa'hic (fundamental moral) laws, that had fallen into oblivion among the nations, and therefore were proclaimed anew by the Christian apostles." "The Christians," says another, R. Isaac ben Sheshet (1400-1440), "are to be considered as נרי תישיב proselytes." These sentiments

and similar expressions abound in the writings of the old Jewish teachers. Every tyro in that field of learning is acquainted with this glorious abundance of testimony to similar purport.\*

The Jews had no reason to love or to hate the founder of Christianity. They might have had provocation to hate those who pretended to be his followers; for the history of the Jews beginning with the Christian era clear down to this latest day, is but a succession of persecutions, such as no other set of human beings has been called upon to endure. No other religion was tried so sorely by another faith, her own daughter, officially at least professed by men in power. Talk of Asiatic brutality; of African barbarism! Why, what the savage tribes commit in their rude ignorance is kindness compared to what was practiced upon the Jews! Need I go into details? Scarce a year passed from the third Christian century to the French Revolution, but somewhere in Europe, in the very name of Christianity, Jews were slaughtered by the thousands. Innocence is no protection; weakness is no armor; wisdom affords no escape; old age does not stay the hand that would strike! With fire and dungeon; with rack and torture, they come,—the pretended apostles of a religion of love! Alas, the provocation to hate was ample; but nevertheless Christianity was not hated! Hatred must be made of sterner stuff than the estimate of Christianity's providential mission which again and again finds place in the books of rabbinical writers! Is it hatred that prompted one, *f. i.*, to say: "The founder of Chris-

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\*Hamburger's Encyclopedia, Suppl. II, under the caption, "Christen," has collected most of the passages in this roll of honor.

tianity has conferred a twofold benefaction upon the world; on the one hand, he emphasized the eternal obligation of the law of Moses, on the other he led the heathen from idolatry to the knowledge of the (seven) laws of morality"? The Jews in the middle ages would gladly have refrained from discussing Christianity, had they been permitted so to do. The silence about Jesus in the Talmud is significant. Few are the personal references to him, though in an indirect manner the doctors of the Talmud show that they are, to a certain extent, acquainted with his labors, as related in the traditions, probably not yet rigidly crystalized, of his followers. Under the cover of Balaam's name, they assign to him a prophetic mission. Controversies, indeed, are recorded with the adherents of the rising new sect. But these run not along the line of Jesus's personality but of dogmatic differences or of the correct interpretation of Biblical passages. A broad tolerance marks even Talmudical polemics. In post-Talmudic centuries, the Jews enter the lists only as forced combatants. Bishops and prelates, kings and counts cited the Jewish scholars to dangerous disputations. In defense, not in defiance, do the rabbis take part in the combat. They are not the assailants, but always the assailed! That they should take advantage of all resources of logic or learning, none will reckon to their blame. The controversies turn largely on so-called Messianic prophecies. No wonder, then, that also the commentators on the passages where Jewish interpreters took their own counsel and differed radically from the constructions of the Christian, should have embraced the opportunity to speak somewhat at length on the points in issue. Nor is it surprising that Jew-