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Christian-Jewish Relations: The Crusades (1095 - 1291)

The Crusades were a series of military expeditions conducted by European Christians in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries to conquer the land of Israel from the Muslims or to repel their counterattacks.

The explicit cause was the reports received from Jerusalem concerning the maltreatment of Christian pilgrims and the manner in which their access to the Holy Places was obstructed. In many of these reports, the malevolence of the Jews was also stressed, so that from the beginning the ground was prepared for including the Jews in the freshly stimulated animosity against the unbelievers: indeed, at the period of the analogous expeditions of French knights to assist the Spanish Christians against the Moors (c. 1065), the Jews of Narbonne and elsewhere had been attacked notwithstanding the admonitions of Pope Alexander II. It was originally intended that the crusaders should concern themselves solely with the success of their expedition overseas, without intervening in the affairs of the Christian countries of Europe. However, precisely because the crusaders ignored this stipulation, the Crusade was partially deflected from its initial course, with tragic consequences for the Jews of Europe.

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The First Crusade

The Crusade was preached by Pope Urban II at Clermont-Ferrand (subsequently referred to as Har Afel, "the mount of gloom," by Jewish chroniclers of the Crusades) on Nov. 27, 1095, at the close of a council which had convened there. Those who obeyed the call affixed crosses to their outer garments, thus the name *croisés*, *crociati*, or *crusaders*. The Jews termed them *to'im* ("[misguided] wanderers"). At the outset, nothing in the proclamation of Urban II seemed to threaten the Jews, but it would appear that the Jews in France sensed danger, since they sent emissaries to the Rhine communities to warn them of the possible threat. The first group of crusaders gathered in France on their way to Germany. They may already have attacked some Jewish communities on their way, possibly in Rouen, and more certainly in Lorraine. It was already clear that the crusaders, or at least some of them, were gathering in the Rhine valley in order to follow the traditional route to the Orient along the Rhine and Danube rivers. The community of Mainz was more troubled about the French communities and thought that those in the Rhineland had no reason for concern on their own account.

However, their sense of security was soon to be brutally shaken shortly after the first muster of the crusaders and before the Jewish communities of Germany could take whatever precautions were open to them. The sight of the wealthy Rhenish communities acted as an incentive to the crusaders, who decided to punish "the murderers of Christ" wherever they passed, before their encounter with their official enemies, the Muslims. Soon it was rumoured that Godfrey of Bouillon himself had vowed that he would not set out for the Crusade until he had avenged the crucifixion by spilling the blood of the Jews, declaring that he could not tolerate that even one man calling himself a Jew should continue to live.

The first bands of crusaders arrived outside Cologne on April 12, 1096. For a month they left the Jews in peace, perhaps because the Jews of France had given Peter the Hermit a letter asking the Jewish communities he passed through on his journey to supply him and his followers with all the food they required, in exchange for Peter's undertaking to use his influence in their favour. However, the swelling throng of crusaders, which surpassed all expectations, and the religious frenzy preceding the departure of the army rapidly induced a change of mood which rendered the influence of Peter the Hermit ineffectual. Aware of the inherent danger in the situation, the leaders of the Mainz community hastily dispatched a delegation to Emperor Henry IV, who wrote immediately to the princes, bishops, and counts of the empire to forbid them to harm the Jews. Godfrey himself replied that he had never had any such intention. For their greater security, the communities of Cologne and Mainz each presented him with a gift of 500 pieces of silver, and he promised to leave them in peace, which he did.

Meanwhile, the Crusade had evolved into a ponderous machine made up of various elements: the greater nobility, the lesser nobles such as Count Emicho of Leiningen, and the people. It was the last element which proved particularly receptive to the anti-Jewish slogans spreading rapidly among its ranks and it was less amenable to discipline. Although the bishops and prominent nobles were generally opposed to such ideas, they had no wish to see Christians fight Christians over the Jews. Frequently their assistance to the attacked Jews was passive at the most. It was in the region where the crusaders assembled that violence broke out, in the weeks between Passover and Shavuot. The rioting continued until Tammuz (June–July). On the eighth of Iyyar (May 3, 1096), the crusaders surrounded the synagogue of Speyer; unable to break into it, they attacked any Jews they could find outside the synagogue, killing eleven of them. One of the victims, a woman, preferring death to conversion, the only choice left open by the crusaders, inaugurated the tradition of freely accepted martyrdom. Kiddush ha-Shem, martyrdom for the glory of God, thus became the exemplary answer of Jews threatened in their life and faith by the crusaders. On the 23rd of Iyyar (May 18, 1096) Worms suffered a similar fate. The crusaders first massacred the Jews who had remained in their houses, then, eight days later, those who had sought an illusory refuge in the bishop's castle. The victims numbered about 800; only a few accepted conversion and survived, the great majority choosing to be killed or suicide rather than apostasy. Hearing of the massacre, the Jews of Mainz asked for the bishop's protection, paying him 400 pieces of silver to this end. When the crusaders, led by Emicho, arrived outside the town on the third of Sivan (May 27, 1096), the burghers hastened to open the gates. The Jews took up arms under the leadership of Kalonymus b. Meshullam. Weakened through fasting, for they had hoped to avert the disaster through exemplary piety, the Jews had to retreat to the bishop's castle; however the latter could do nothing for them, as he himself had to flee before the combined assault of crusaders and burghers.

After a brief struggle, a wholesale massacre ensued. More than 1,000 Jews met their deaths, either at the enemy's hands or their own. Those who managed to escape were overtaken; almost no one survived. A comparable disaster occurred in Cologne, where the community was attacked on the sixth of Sivan (May 30, 1096). The bishop dispersed the town's Jews in order to hide them in nearby localities: at Neuss, Wevelinghofen, Eller, Xanten, Mehr, Kerpen, Geldern, and Ellen. The crusaders located them and a bloodbath followed. At Trier the bishop could not protect his Jews, as he himself had to go into hiding, and he consequently advised them to become Christians. The great majority refused, preferring suicide. At Regensburg, all the Jews were dragged to the Danube where they were flung into the water and forced to accept baptism. At Metz, Prague, and throughout Bohemia, one massacre followed another. These came to an end when Emicho's crusaders were decisively halted and crushed by the Hungarians, who, incensed by their excesses when they poured through the country, had risen against them. Seeing in this the hand of God, the Jews promptly set about reconstructing their ruined communities. There had been more than 5,000 victims.

The Jews who had been baptized under duress generally continued to practice Judaism in secret. As early as 1097, Emperor Henry IV allowed them openly to return to their former faith, an action which was strongly condemned by the antipope Clement III. Henry also ordered in May 1098 an inquiry into the manner of disposal of the property of massacred Jews in Mainz thus provoking the displeasure of the local bishop. In about 1100, Jews returned to Mainz, but their position was not yet quite secure, and the Jews of the upper town could scarcely communicate with those in the lower. In 1103, Henry IV and the imperial lords finally proclaimed a truce which, among other things, guaranteed the peace of the Jews.

Meanwhile, the crusaders had reached Jerusalem (June 7, 1099), and the siege had begun. The city was captured on July 15, with Godfrey entering it through the Jewish quarter, where inhabitants defended themselves alongside their Muslim neighbours, finally seeking refuge in the synagogues, which were set on fire by the attackers. A terrible massacre ensued; the survivors were sold as slaves, some being later redeemed by Jewish communities in Italy. The Jewish community of Jerusalem came to an end and was not reconstituted for many years, but the Jewish centres in Galilee went unscathed. However, the great community of Ramleh dispersed, as did that of Jaffa, so that overall the Jewish community in the Holy Land was greatly diminished.

The Second Crusade

On the loss of Edessa by the crusaders (1144) the West became troubled over the fate of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, and a new Crusade to save it was preached by Pope Eugene III. The popes attempted to encourage the crusaders at the Jews' expense. Innocent III in 1198 ordered that no interest should be chargeable during the absence of crusaders on debts they incurred to the Jews and that anything already received should be returned. Since the return of a crusader was problematical, this restriction when it was observed implied at best the immobility of Jewish capital over prolonged periods, at worst the possibility of total confiscation (which was to become more widespread with the extension from the 13th century of the term "Crusade" to any campaign in any part of the world in which the popes might be politically interested). Naturally, this caused great difficulties to their Jewish creditors. In one way or another, as soon as the Second Crusade was announced, the clouds began to gather once more over the Jews of Europe.

As early as the summer of 1146, a Cistercian monk, Radulph, while preaching the Crusade, violently attacked the Jewish communities of the Rhineland, exhorting the crusaders to avenge themselves on "those who had crucified Jesus" before setting out to fight the Muslims. The spiritual leader of the Crusade, Bernard of Clairvaux, pointed out the theological error in his arguments, strictly forbidding any excess against the Jews, who were to be neither killed nor expelled. Although the anti-Jewish riots had begun before his intervention, he succeeded in preventing them from spreading so that, in the final count, they were far less extensive than those in the First Crusade. The persecution began in Elul (August–September). A few isolated Jews were put to death. At Cologne, the Jews bought the protection of the bishop and managed to find refuge in the fortress of Walkenburg. The bishop even went as far as having the leader of a mob blinded for killing a number of Jews. There were few victims at Worms and at Mainz, but more than 20 at Wuerzburg. Scores of Jews sought refuge in the castles and the mountains. In Bohemia, about 150 lost their lives, and victims were equally numerous in Halle and Carinthia. As in the First Crusade, the community of France suffered less than the Rhineland communities. Jacob b. Meir Tam was set upon a group of crusaders, who stabbed him in five places in memory of the wounds suffered by Jesus, but he succeeded in escaping with the help of a knight with whom he was acquainted. In England, the Jews were left in peace. Everywhere, Jews who had been converted by force were allowed to return to Judaism undisturbed. By the next summer, order had been restored, and the Jewish communities had everywhere recovered.

In the Holy Land, the Second Crusade had concluded with the conquest of Ashkelon by the crusaders. Benjamin of Tudela and Pethahiah of Regensburg, who visited the crusading kingdom around 1160 and 1180 respectively, found well-established Jewish communities in Ashkelon, Ramleh, Caesarea, Tiberias, Acre, among other localities, with scattered individuals living elsewhere: it seems that the Jewish settlement of Jerusalem was restricted to a handful of individuals, though a few years later Judah Alharizi (1216) found a prosperous community there. The Samaritans seem to have remained undisturbed in Nablus as well as Ashkelon and Caesarea. It would therefore appear that the warriors of the Second Crusade left the Jewish communities relatively undisturbed.

Meanwhile the Latin Kingdom had begun to crumble under the blows of its enemies. When Jerusalem fell to Saladin in 1187, the Jews of Europe suffered the consequences of this defeat. It had already become habitual to harass the Jews whenever a Crusade was in the offing. In 1182, Emperor Frederick I took the Jews of the empire under his protection, receiving, as was customary, substantial payment for his pains. As soon as the news of the fall of Jerusalem reached Europe, he forbade all anti-Jewish sermons and renewed his promise of protection. At the beginning of 1188, a tragedy was narrowly averted in Mainz. Drawing a lesson from past experience, the Jews of Mainz, Speyer, Strasbourg, Worms, Wuerzburg, and elsewhere left their towns to seek refuge in the nearby fortified castles. The few Jews who remained at Mainz owed their lives to the Diet which had convened there; and in the course of the proceedings the emperor and his son forbade on direst penalties any interference with the Jews, threatening death to anyone who killed a Jew. These warnings were echoed by the bishops, who threatened excommunication for those who persecuted Jews. All this had cost the Jews of the empire huge sums, and, more than ever before, they became dependent on the favors and the passing whims of their masters.

The Third Crusade and After

In England, the Third Crusade had the most savage repercussions. England had taken little interest and no part in the first two Crusades, but her zeal was none the less intense when Richard the Lion-hearted decided to take part in person in the third. In January the first abuses struck the port of Lynn, where the bulk of the Jewish community was massacred. The same occurred in Norwich and Stamford. At Lincoln, the Jews were saved through the intervention of royal agents. The worst outrage took place in York, where a number of local nobles, in heavy debt to the Jews, seized the opportunity to rid themselves of their burden. When attacked, the Jews took refuge in the Castle Keep, which the guard had opened for them; those who remained in the town were slaughtered. On their refusal to allow access to the keep, the Jews were besieged. On March 16, on the eve of Passover, the rabbi, Yom Tov b. Isaac of Joigny, realizing that all hope was lost, asked his brethren to choose suicide rather than submit to baptism. First setting fire to their possessions, one after the other killed himself. More than 150 died in this way, and the few survivors were murdered by the mob, who also destroyed the register of debts to the Jews. In Bury St. Edmunds 57 Jews were put to death. As the king was out of the country, where he neither could nor cared to intervene too vigorously, the perpetrators of the massacres also left England for the Crusade. There is little doubt that the Jews in England lost faith in the prospect of their continued survival in the West. The emigration in 1211 of 300 rabbis from Western Europe to the Holy Land may be connected with this general disillusionment. As the enthusiasm of the masses waned, the Jews in Western Europe were little troubled during the 13th-century Crusades. However, it appears that there was a massacre in central France around 1236 during the preparations for a Crusade; in fact, Pope Gregory IX accused the crusaders of having slaughtered over 2,500 Jews.

Yet, at the very moment when the great wave of Crusades was ebbing, the Jewish community in France suffered most acutely from a popular Crusade, that of the Pastoureaux (1320). Forty thousand of these "shepherds," aged on an average around 16 and without any clearly designated leader, marched through France from north to south. Although Pope John XXII excommunicated all who set forth on this unauthorized march, this did not hinder the new crusaders from hurling themselves at the Jews in the manner of their predecessors. Their savagery was especially marked south of the River Loire, where they destroyed some 120 communities. Hoping to be protected there by the authorities, numbers of isolated Jews and small communities took refuge in the larger towns. Five hundred who had sought safety in the town of Verdun sur-Garonne found death there. At Toulouse there were 115 victims. In the Comtat Venaissin, a direct papal dependency, there were many cases of forced conversion; the subsequent attempt to return to Judaism provoked the prompt intervention of the Inquisition. Meanwhile, the very abuses of the Pastoureaux aroused a violent reaction on the part of the Christian authorities: the governor of Carcassonne even had some of the ringleaders executed. Those who had crossed the Pyrenees into Spain were routed by James II of Aragon and forced to disperse. Nevertheless, this uprising had struck a savage blow at the Jewish communities in the Midi and northern Spain.

The long era of the Crusades undoubtedly marked a turning point in the history of the Jews in medieval Western Europe. The Church herself was forced to re-examine and define her position of the problem posed by the large-scale persecution of the Jews. Clearly the situation of the Jews prior to the Crusades was not always free from danger: the animosity of the Christians toward the Jews was nothing new and the Crusades did not lead to any reappraisal of Christian doctrine.

However, it was probably in the wake of the First Crusade that Pope Calixtus II (1119–24) promulgated the bull *Sicut Judaeis*, which was renewed after the Second and Third Crusades and on at least five other occasions between 1199 and 1250. It stipulated that although no new privileges should be granted to the Jews, they should not be deprived of a single one of the rights secured to them. Christians should take special care not to endanger the lives of Jews, not to baptize them by force, and not to desecrate their cemeteries. Naturally papal protection was not extended to Jews who plotted against the Christian faith. It was sufficient for the Church to protect them from the excesses of the crusaders, especially since the latter, from the moment they took up the standard of the cross, were themselves placed under the jurisdiction of the Church. The Jews therefore requested the popes to intervene on their behalf: thus Innocent III ordered the French bishops to take particular care that the crusaders did not harm the Jews. As mentioned, Gregory IX later (1236) accused the crusaders of conspiring to murder the Jews: such a crime committed in the name of sanctity could not be allowed to go unpunished. However, it would appear that these directives were in vain, although it is difficult to assess with any precision the measures relating to the Jews.

The Significance of the Crusades

In the memory of the Jews, the Crusades became the symbol of the opposition between Christianity and Judaism, and the tension aroused by the persecutions was far more severe than that which had existed since the origins of Christianity. The debate ceased to be a theological one, to the extent that this had ever been the case. The Christians saw the Jews as the implacable enemies of their faith and in this climate the blood libel became widespread. From the 12th century comes the first expression of the idea of a Jewish plot against the Christian world: it was alleged that the Jews had to sacrifice one Christian each year, and held an annual council to decide the site of the sacrifice and the name of the victim. At Blois in 1171, all members of the Jewish community were burned at the stake following such an accusation, and from the 13th century similar charges were raised in Germany.

The Jewish community found a source of inspiration in the memory of the martyrs. There being no hope of immediate vengeance, the massacre of the innocents was glorified and compared to the sacrifice of Isaac. The suicide of the martyrs was seen as a collective act for the sanctification of the Divine Name. Rather than a bitter memory of cruel affliction, it became an example of true piety and submission to the will of God. For the succeeding generations the martyrs were an object of admiration and even of envy, for they had been the generation whom God had put to the test and they had proved themselves worthy. A man of true faith could achieve no more than to be their equal. It therefore became important for the Jews to cherish the memory of their sacrifice, to retell it, and to be inspired by it. A number of piyyutim on the subject were incorporated in the liturgy, especially for the Ninth of Av. It became customary in Western communities which had been closest to the massacres to recite the prayer of the martyrs, *Av ha-Raḥamim*, on the Sabbath before Shavuot and especially to remember their sacrifice in the fast of the Ninth of Av, which had fallen during the time of the massacres. The period of the counting of the omer acquired an especially sorrowful significance.

It was probably this era that gave rise to the custom, originating in Mainz, of reciting in public the deeds of the martyrs on the anniversary of their sacrifice, and recording their names and dates in a *Memorbuch*, which was kept in the synagogue.

The most widely known martyrs and the most severely affected communities and regions figured in the Memorbuecher of all communities and not only locally. The martyrs became a symbol for the whole people, not just for their own communities; more than simply an object of pride, they became a common ideal in which the whole Jewish community, despite all its humiliations, could find inspiration. Their martyrdom was transformed into victory, for they had defied torture, finding in their faith the necessary strength for preferring death to apostasy. They had chosen death rather than conversion, even though the latter need probably have been only temporary. In their martyrdom lay the very justification of the sufferings of the Jewish people. Spiritual power proved the strongest force of all and the martyrs were seen as a demonstration of the absolute truth of Judaism.

Yet in fact the massacres attendant on the Crusades were far from being the worst persecutions which befell the Jews. The communities destroyed in the Rhine valley were quickly re-established: Worms, Speyer, Mainz, Cologne, and Treves rapidly regained their former importance. The Jewish community in the kingdom of France proper, or at least in the north, hardly suffered throughout the course of the era. Italy and Spain were almost untouched. In England the royal authorities speedily put an end to local disorders. There is nothing to suggest that during this period the Jews in Western Europe lost their sense of security in the localities where they were living: no great exodus took place in 1096 or in 1146. The majority of those converted by force, at least until the Crusade of the Pastoureaux, were able easily to return to Judaism. It would seem that the actual number of Jews in Western Europe increased in this era and several communities became larger and more populous. For Jewish scholarship the 12th century was one of the most glorious in the West: it was the age of the Tosafists, renowned throughout France and Germany. Personal relationships between Jews and Christians apparently changed little; it was only at the beginning of the 13th century that they took a new turn. It would appear that the Crusades themselves did not play a decisive role in the evolution of the condition of the Jews in Europe. Placed in a larger context, they are only an element in the whole, though a far from negligible one.

At all events, the Crusades revealed the physical danger in which the Jewish communities stood and the impotence of their ecclesiastical protectors to defend them. On the outbreak of an actual attack, they pushed the Jews into the arms of the only powers capable of protecting them: duke, king, or emperor, and these secular protectors considered that they had a duty to protect the Jews only to the extent that they derived some benefit from them. The Crusades also encouraged the Jews to move to the fortified cities, where they would be less vulnerable in the event of an attack. The reactions on Jewish economic life were in their way disastrous. The former unique position of the Jews as intermediaries between East and West was undermined; henceforth, it was commonplace for western merchants to travel backward and forward between the two worlds, while at the same time the stimulation of religious fanaticism made the path of the Jewish merchant more dangerous. Hence it was the Crusades which marked the end of the heyday – at one time quasi-monopoly – of the international Jewish merchant. At the same time, they gave a stimulus ipso facto to the economic degradation of the Jew and his transformation, so far as Western Europe was concerned, into the recognized moneylender of the Christian world (see moneylending). Partly this was due to the imperative necessity of finding a new outlet for their capital; partly to the increased demands on the part of the crusaders for ready cash to equip themselves and to carry with them on their travels. From now on therefore the Jewish moneylender became the typical Jewish figure of the Western European scene.

The Crusades and their attendant degradation were firmly imprinted on the historic consciousness of the Jews. This period became singled out in the popular mind as the start of and explanation for the misfortunes of the Jews, although in fact the excesses were only symptomatic of a process which had already been set in motion earlier. The Crusades marked in various ways a turning point in the history of the Western world, and this was reflected also in Jewish history. Indeed, it is from this point only that the history of the Jews in the Rhineland and Central Europe may be said to acquire continuity: whereas before the general picture has had to be constructed from scattered fragments and documents, henceforth the record is more or less sustained and complete. As in the case to some extent with general historiography, it is only at this period, with the remarkably graphic and moving records of the Rhineland massacres in 1096, that consistent Jewish historiography, or at least chronography, begins to be preserved, even though there are fragmentary records written earlier. The history that now unfolded was predominantly a tragic one. Whereas in European Jewish history before this date episodes of violence and persecution are occasionally known, there now began a period of intermittently recurring massacre and persecution which coloured European Jewish experience for centuries to come. The heightened religiosity of the age resulted in the sharpening of the system of anti-Jewish discrimination and of Jewish humiliation, culminating in the legislation of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The chronicles of Solomon b. Samson, Eliezer b. Nathan of Mainz, Ephraim b. Jacob of Bonn, Eleazar b. Judah of Worms, and many other whose names are not known, described the events of the Crusades, the scenes of the massacres, and the martyrs. They are also to be regarded as basic sources from which statistical accounts of the Crusades must start. Through capturing these events they magnified their significance, but thereby furnished an ideal of conduct which was constantly recalled to mind whenever severe persecutions befell the Jews.