

**Ajudication: Apocalypticism and Pope Gregory I’s Policy on the Jews**

In a letter to Callinicus, Exarch of Italy, Pope Gregory I explains that “at this unsettled time,” the Exarch is appointed to ensure that no one compels those “who are unwilling to come” to the unity of the Church, namely, the Jews.\(^1\) What is evident from Gregory's letter to Callinicus is that he opposed the active persecution of Jews and forced conversions of Jews to Christianity. In *The Jew in the Medieval World*, Jacob Marcus states that “The reason for this attitude of Gregory was a desire to adhere closely to the principles of the Roman law which already defined the privileges and disabilities of the Jews.”\(^2\) Bernard Bachrach, in his book *Early Medieval Jewish Policy in Western Europe*, also ascribes to this viewpoint, however he notes the influence of Jewish power or perceived Jewish power on Gregory's decision to relax such Roman laws as that prohibiting Jews from owning Christian slaves (he allowed Jews to utilize the work of Christian slaves so long as they did not live in a Jewish home).\(^3\) To Bachrach, Gregory's Jewish policy was conceived within the nexus of Roman law and the reality of Jewish society, and he ultimately dismisses what he labels the “theological argument,” that is, that Gregory viewed Paul the Apostle's prophesy that the Jews shall willfully convert

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when “the full number of the Gentiles has come” to the Christian faith (Romans XI:25), as a theological basis for his Jewish policy.

While it may be true that Gregory's intimation of Jewish power or even intimidation of perceived Jewish power caused him to relax the enforcement of certain laws at certain times, his apocalyptic belief that the Second Advent of Christ would appear with the willful conversion of the Jews, and thus that all of Christendom is implicated in Jewish policy, should by no means be overlooked. Influenced by the apocalyptic literature of Christian scripture, Gregory believed the catastrophic state of Sixth-Century Italy signaled that “the end of the world is at hand” and believed that the actualization of proper Jewish-Christian relations would end this miserable state of affairs and usher the Second Coming, an era in which the Christian elect would be unified under “a new heaven and [in] a new earth” (Revelation XXI:1) His enforcement of a prescribed relationship between Christians and Jews was part of a larger agenda of establishing a Christian orthodoxy, centralizing Papal authority, and unifying Christians into a collectivity known as Christendom. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that apocalyptic anticipation of a new world order and a unified Christian collectivity largely dictated Gregory's Jewish policy, and was used to legitimize Roman law concerning the Jews. Furthermore, this thesis attempts to show that one of the means through which Pope Gregory asserted his power to unify Christians under a common law was through the example of Christian-Jewish relations.

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To Gregory, Christian-Jewish relations may have appeared symbolic of larger ideological differences across Christendom. The issue of whether or not Jews ought to be free and equal, tolerated yet degraded, or forcibly converted was a point of contention throughout the many Christian kingdoms of the Sixth Century and represented the plethora of often contradictory theologies concocted from the patristic tradition. For example, while Gregory ascribed to a tradition that opposed forced conversion, some traditions, such as the Sixth-Century Ethiopic *Teachings of Jacob*, endorsed forced conversions of Jews with the assumption that it would eventually assist them in seeing the error of their ways. The latter tradition ultimately was prohibited under the Fifth-Century Theodosian Code, which condemned persecution of Jews throughout the Roman Empire, but which simultaneously banned Jews from spreading their faith, holding public office, and owning Christian slaves. Diabolical representations of Jews in Christian scripture contended with sentiments of tolerance, which are necessary for the upholding of Roman Jewish policy. These representations include the accusation that Jews bear responsibility for Christ's death (Matthew XXVII:25), that they deny Christians the true exercise of the faith (Acts XV:5), that they are filled with jealousy rather than love (Acts XIII:45), and often were the starting point for conflict between Jews and Christians and even Christians and Christians in Gregory's time.

Many Christian leaders utilized the anti-Semitism embedded in Christian scripture as a pretext for harassing their Jewish neighbors, and Jewish policy became an object in the power struggles between religious and secular authorities. For example, after a synagogue had been destroyed in Callinicum in 388, Emperor Theodosian commanded

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the local bishop to compensate the Jews by having the Church subsidize the reconstruction of a new synagogue. Upon hearing this, Bishop Ambrose of Milan responded by threatening the emperor with loss of salvation, and Theodosian consequently rescinded the order.  

The different ideological approaches to Christian-Jewish relations also existed between empires and kingdoms. While all of these attitudes revolved around a conception of Jewish 'otherness,' they each differed in their methods of interacting with and the degree to which they enacted discrimination toward that 'otherness.' For example, after the Byzantine Emperor Justinian conquered the Vandals (534 CE) in North Africa and Goths in Italy (554 CE), he found it much more difficult in the latter than the former to enforce his laws banning post-biblical Jewish commentaries and mandating vernacular translations of Jewish holy writings. After Reccared, Visigothic king of Spain, converted his Iberian kingdom from Arianism to Orthodox Christianity in 589, he ultimately ignored the Roman laws prohibiting Jews to own Christian slaves, and even lifted the death penalty for Jewish proselytizing. In Gaul, bishops would be commissioned to write works for the purpose of converting Jews, albeit conversion by force rather than words was not uncommon.  

Gregory is often noted for his tolerance of Jews and his castigation of Jewish persecution, evident in some of his twenty-eight letters to secular leaders concerning Jews. In a letter to Januarius, Bishop of Cagliari, Gregory suggests that rather than permitting Christians to seize and consecrate Jewish synagogues, he should “try to induce

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9 Bachrach, 33-4.
10 Ibid, 5-6.
good feeling among the inhabitants of your city, since at this time especially, when there is alarm from the enemy, you ought not to have a divided people”12 As explained above, scholars such as Bachrach attribute this to Gregory's training as a legalist upholding Roman law, and ascribe his transgressions of this law as his reconciliation between legality and social reality. Beside the instances in which he relaxed Roman law for Jewish slaveholders, Bachrach cites Gregory's offers of money to Jews who converted, which would likely lead to inauthentic Jewish conversion.

However, while these individualized instances demonstrate that religious history does not always neatly fit theological teachings, even some of the instances in which Gregory transgressed Roman law may be understood theologically. For example, after the Bishop Victor of Palermo seized and consecrated the Jews’ synagogue, thereby presenting a fait accompli, Gregory ordered Victor to compensate the Jews for the full price of their place of prayer, books and ornaments included.13 Because Roman law compensated the Jews only for their land,14 Gregory's expansion of this Roman law is apparent. He does this in order to emphasize that, unless they come to the Christian faith by their own will, the Jews and their way of life ought to be preserved, thus their place of prayer, their books, and their ornaments were included.

Gregory could demonstrate how Jewish status under Roman law was modeled in a true Christian fashion and how actions contradicting that law transgress Christian scripture. After Christians in Gaul had forcibly converted a group of Jews, Gregory sent a letter to Virgilius, Bishop of Arles, and Theodorus, Bishop of Marseille concerning the matter. In response to the forced conversions in Gaul, Gregory wrote to the Bishop:

13 Katz, 123.
14 Grayzel, 99.
I consider the intention [of forced conversion of Jews] in such cases to be worthy of praise, and allow that it proceeds from the love of our Lord. But I fear lest this same intention, unless adequate justification from [a verse of] Holy scripture accompany it, should...have no profitable effect;¹⁵

Gregory utilizes an issue of conflict between Christians and Jews in Gaul to make a statement about the true and proper way in which Christians are to interact with Jews, wherein what is proper is defined by scripture, the religious works describing the “causes of God.” No verses explicitly permit conversion by force. Thus, while their intentions are praiseworthy, their actions are illicit.

While Gregory admonished persecution of Jews, those who so clearly opposed Christianity, the Church sanctioned persecution and harassment of Christian heretics. Accordingly, how might a Jew, clearly marked as standing outside of the Church, receive protection from the state? The punishment of a Christian heretic was the confiscation of his property, invalidation of his will, and the withdrawal of his right to protection by the State.¹⁶ Gregory agreed with this because he believed that heretics are those who separate themselves from the Church, and make a mockery of the bond of Christendom, a living representation of the body of Christ.¹⁷ Jews, who were neither Christians nor heretics, would have to be viewed as having another kind of status. According to Romans XI:2 and 7-11, “God has not rejected his people,” the Jews, He only waits for the time at which

¹⁶ G. R. Evans, Thought of Gregory the Great. (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge UP, 1986.) 135
¹⁷ Ibid, 130.
they shall obtain the faculty necessary for realizing the messiahship of Jesus Christ. Gregory interpreted from Romans the general idea that Jews have a “providential role as guardians of scripture and [are] destined for salvation at the last, so that they both help the gentiles to reach the kingdom of heaven and themselves fulfill the purpose God has in mind...when he chose them to be his people.”

Following the Christian tradition, Gregory utilized Jewish status as a point of reference for Christians. Jews were used to designate what one ought not to be if he desired election. This is because, in its formative years, the Christian Church understood its Christian self-identity in relation to Judaism. The scripture of the Christian Bible, filled with frequent references to gentiles succeeding Jews as God's chosen people for a new covenant, as well as Gospel debates between Jesus’ "Christian" biblical interpretation and Pharisee "normative Jewish" biblical interpretation, stands as a testament to the developing Christian conception of Christian identity in reference to “Jewishness.” While Christianity was prized as being flawless, ethical, and truthful, Judaism was looked down upon derisively as being blemished, immoral, and blind to the truth of Christ’s messiahship and the new law under Christianity. Referring to Matthew XII:46-50, which states, “While [Jesus] was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and brothers were standing outside...And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother[,]” Gregory explains that Jesus' mother must be understood allegorically as both his Jewish people and the synagogue serviced by that people. He explains that the author of the Gospel “does not acknowledge the synagogue because

18 Ibid, 137.
20 Reuther, 30.
when it clung to the observance of the Law it did away with its spiritual understanding
and established itself outside, guarding the letter.”\(^\text{21}\) Gregory thus creates an ‘in-crowd,’
the Christians, as well as an ‘out-crowd,’ those who do not understand spiritual things.

Gregory proceeds to demonstrates that Jewish ancestry is more of a spiritual
burden than an asset, and thus that not being a Jew is actually beneficial to one’s
salvation. In one homily he writes, “The Jews prided themselves on the nobility of their
race; they were unwilling to recognize that they were sinners since they had descended
from the stock of Abraham.” One thus does not have to be a member of the Jewish race
in order to be a fearer of God, for, after invoking John the Baptist, “And do not begin to
say, We have Abraham as our father! I tell you, God is able to raise up children to
Abraham from these stones!” (Matthew III:9), Gregory asks rhetorically, “What were
these stones if not the hearts of the Gentiles, unaware of the knowledge of almighty
God?”\(^\text{22}\) Such ancestry may actually prove to be a disadvantage to aspiring Christians.

Drawing on the Gospel of Matthew, Gregory explains that “the heavens knew that [Jesus]
was God because they immediately sent forth a star, the sea knew him because it allowed
him to walk upon it, [and] the earth knew him because it trembled when he died...”
However, the Jews “were unwilling to be broken for repentance and they refused to
acknowledge him...” The Jews’ “knowledge [of the divinity and messiahship of Jesus]
was for them a witness for their condemnation.”\(^\text{23}\) As Gregory explains in one homily,
the tumultuous state of Italy demonstrates that the earth and skies rise once again to
proclaim the Second Coming, for there are “great earthquakes in various places, and

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 41.
\(^{23}\) Ibid, 55-6.
pestilence and famine.”

The implication of this warning is that those who transgress Christian orthodoxy like the Jews do will be similarly condemned.

As is evident from nearly every text examined thus far, Gregory's adjudication of Jewish-Christian relations entails an important apocalyptic component. It is within this context that his attitude toward the Jews is best understood. To Gregory, proper Jewish-Christian relations are necessary for the Second Coming of Christ. Referring back to Gregory's epistle to Januarius, where Gregory suggests that the Bishop should put an end to Jewish persecution “since at this time especially, when there is alarm from the enemy, you ought not to have a divided people,” Bachrach might direct attention to the ability of Jewish politics to cause a divide amongst the people. However, he would be overlooking the significance of “time” to the author. In this case, Gregory's words do not only refer to actual time, but to eschatalogical time.

Gregory understood the present time within the historical and moral framework posited in sacred Christian texts. The major historical events which Gregory referenced in comprehending his time included the Fall of Mankind, the Crucifixion of Christ, and the pre-ordained Second Coming of Christ. As Lee Quinby explains in her book Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Geneological Criticism, "apocalyptic time presumes a unity framed by a moment of origin and a moment of end," and thus the apocalyptic thinker “understands mundane and momentous events in relation to the belief that the end of time is near.”

Apocalyptic thinkers understand the progression of history from one specific point to another one, and thus every act occurring between those specific points is

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understood to occur in relation to both the moment of origin and moment of end. To Gregory, every moment of his life was a reminder that the end of the world will soon arrive. In a letter to Edilbert, king of the Angli, he writes that “signs of the end of the world” insist that “we should be solicitous about our souls, suspectful of the hour of death, and in our good deeds be found prepared for the coming age.”

Gregory's own apocalyptic desires may have been accentuated by the atmosphere in Rome in his time. The Eastern Roman Empire's effort to re-conquer the Italian peninsula was accompanied by starvation and plague and followed by an economic recession and a Lombard invasion only fourteen years later. The Roman Empire was unstable and its control over the Italian peninsula was mercurial. Carole Straw, in her book Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection, explains that "Gregory's times were the stuff of apocalyptic dreams and visions to impressionable minds such as his." Referring to the warning in Luke that one will know the coming apocalyptic age when, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues” (Luke XXI:10-11); Gregory says “We see some of these things already coming to pass...” Others also understood the world through the lenses of apocalypse. The Irish missionary Columbanus describes Gregory as the “most fair ornament of the Church, a certain most august flower, as it were, of the whole of withering Europe.” To Columbanus, Europe is in a state of decay and will soon come to its end. Gregory is a shining beacon in this era of darkness.

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27 Gregory I, “Gregory to Edilbert, King of the Angli, Epistle LXVI,” 82.
28 Straw, 2.
29 Ibid.
30 Gregory I. Forty gospel homilies, 19.
However, morbid as they are, apocalyptic times are fertile grounds for change because they can mark the deconstruction of an old social order and enable the construction of a new. Gregory saw the disunity of the Christian nations and the general chaos around him as the culmination of a divinely ordained sequence of events for which he was chosen to amend. Straw explains that, to Gregory, although “the fall [of mankind due to Original Sin] has brought separation and discord, the pattern of original unity persists despite profound dislocation.” Indeed Gregory assumed that his charge as Papal See would be one of the last, the one to ready the world for the Second Coming, the grand resolution to the woes of his world. In an epistle to Bishop Leander of Seville, Gregory writes, “For because, now that the end of the world is at hand...I should receive the mighty charge of the Holy Order...”

Gregory’s realization of the weakness of the Constantinople-centered Roman Empire, evident in its haphazard battles with the Persian Empire and its Pyrrhic conquest of Italy, likely lead him to consider instilling an organized, stable, and ecumenical Christendom that could be self-sustaining and, most importantly, self-protecting. In one letter to Reccared, king of the Visigoths, Gregory praises him for bringing the Goths “over from the error of Arian heresy to the firmness of a right faith…” He continues his praise of Reccared by asking,

32 Straw, 30.
33 Gregory I, Book of Morals, 3.
34 Gregory I, “To Rechared, King of the Visigoths, Epistle CXXII,” 35
What then shall I say to the coming Judge in that tremendous assize, if I shall then come thither empty, [meanwhile] thy Excellency shall bring after flocks of faithful ones, whom thou hast now drawn to the grace of a true faith by assiduous and continual preaching.\textsuperscript{35}

To Gregory, the conversion of peoples to Orthodox Christianity is not only a political act, but a religious one that will be rewarded on the Day of Judgment.

However, when conversion entailed Jews, Gregory believed that such conversion ought to be authentic. In his article “Hatred of the Jews or Love of the Church,” Kenneth Stow explains that Gregory opposed forcible conversion of the Jews because he understood “that such converts soon became apostates, threatening the integrity of the faith and making a mockery of the sacrament of baptism.”\textsuperscript{36} As Stow explains, Romans 11:26-28 “epitomizes both the dilemma and the polarity of medieval Christian theology in its dealing with the Jews.”\textsuperscript{37} This is because, while Paul denounces the Jews as “enemies of God” as regards the gospel, “as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors” and thus, “Israel will be saved,” in the Second Coming (Romans XI:26-8).

Gregory's adamant disapproval of forced conversion of the Jews was meant to demonstrate to God that Christians were fully capable of bringing Jews to the faith by their own will and thus that the Christian world would soon be prepared, even deserving, of the Second Advent. Consequently, in adjudicating Jewish-Christian relations, Gregory typically emphasizes the importance of not converting Jews by force, but enabling them to come to realize Jesus' messiahship and divinity on their own. Addressing the event of a

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Stow, 75.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 71.
synagogue in Cagliari being consecrated, Gregory writes “seeing that, as legal enactment does not suffer Jews to erect new synagogues, so also it allows them to keep their old ones without disturbance.” However, it is not only the transgression of civil law that concerns Gregory, but that “moderation should rather be used towards them; that so the will not to resist may be elicited from them.” For Gregory, authenticity in religion is key, for God is not fooled by contrivance.

Gregory’s eschatology was constructed with the belief that the apocalypse will come to fruition only through genuine Jewish conversions. In a letter to the Bishop Paschasius addressing persecutions of Jews in Naples that inhibited Jews from practicing their rituals and observing their laws, Gregory asks, “what is the use, when even such long unaccustomed prohibition is of no avail for their faith and conversion?” This fact was evident in the example of the Emperor Justinian’s restrictions on Jewish religious expression only a few decades earlier, which were ultimately a failure. To Gregory, forced conversion bore no fruit. He thus counsels Paschasius to study kindness when dealing with the Jews “lest such as reason rendered with smoothness might have appealed to should be driven off by opposition.”

The reason Gregory opposed Jews owning Christian slaves is also evident within the context of apocalyptic thought. The apocalypse of the Gospels and Revelation constructs a system of elect and damned. The elect are privileged and accommodated (Matthew XXIV:22), it is they who will inherit the gifts of God (Revelation XXI:7). Meanwhile, it is the damned who “will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur,

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39 Stow, 75.
40 Gregory I, “To Paschasius, Bishop of Neapolis (Naples),” 96.
41 Ibid.
which is the second death” (Revelation XXI:8). Gregory is troubled by contradictions of this privilege system. In a letter to Brunichild, Queen of the Franks, concerning Christian slaves being sold to Jews in the Frankish realm, Gregory writes, “But let your Excellency consider how inconsistent it is to honour the Head [the Church and its members] and to allow the members to be trampled by his enemies [the Jews].” Gregory similarly includes this same exact paragraph in a letter to Theoderic and Theodebert, kings of the Franks.

The issue of Jews owning Christian slaves was a sensitive subject in Gregory's time because it clearly demonstrated a contradiction between the image of the degraded Jew espoused by the Church and the reality that not all Jews were subjugated. It stood in the historical shadow of a Christian revolt which took place between 509 and 511. After a group of Christian slaves attacked and killed some of their Jewish slave owners, other Jewish slave owners retaliated by beating their slaves, a not unusual response. However, Christian in Rome reacted by burning down synagogues. Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king ruling Italy at the time, forced the Christians of the city to pay a special tax to rebuild the synagogues. Those who could not pay were whipped publicly.

To Gregory, proper Jewish-Christian relations not only unified Christendom in eschatological time, but, because it is God's will, the proper execution of Jewish-Christian relations could only bring good tidings from the Creator. Indeed, as he states in the letter to Callinicus, Exarch of Italy, Gregory believed that the secular leadership of Christendom could prevail over their enemies if they were to “maintain the causes of

42 Gregory I, “To Brunichild, Queen of the Franks, CIX,” 29.
44 Bachrach, 30-1.
Similarly, in a letter to Bertha, Queen of the Angli, Gregory explains that she may witness the fruition of her desires for earthly domination so long as she desires for a heavenly kingdom and labors “earnestly to bring in gain to [the] Creator.” It is not coincidental that he ends some of these religiously inspirational letters with his own adjudication of Jewish-Christian relations. For example, his letters to Brunichild and to Theoderic and Theodebert, each ending with identical admonitions of the lenient policies in the Frankish realm that enabled Jews to purchase Christian slaves, are preceded with the similar ideas that they “should therein please more perfectly the Almighty Lord who gives health and wealth to kings.”

Gregory’s goal was not to maximize the comfort of Jews throughout Christendom, nor was his goal executed with a modern spirit of religious tolerance. In the same letter to Rechared, Gregory similarly praises the king for upholding “a certain ordinance against the perfidy of the Jews” and not terminating the ordinance after the Jews “attempted to bend the rectitude of [his] mind by offering a sum of money...[and] preferred innocence to gold.” In his letter to Fortunatus concerning the occurrences of Christian slaves being sold accidentally to Jews, while Gregory does state that Jewish slaveowners should not incur “loss for what they did in ignorance before the prohibition [was made evident],” it is, however, right that “they should sustain [losses] after being forbidden.”

To Gregory, authentic conversion of Jews was essential for the unification of Christendom. Gregory’s enforcement of a prescribed relationship between Christians and

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45 “To Callinicus, Exarch of Italy, Epistle IX,” 5.
46 Gregory I, “To Bertha, Queen of the Angli, Gregory to Bertha, Epistle XXIX,” 56.
47 Ibid.
Jews was part of a larger agenda of establishing a Christian orthodoxy, centralizing Papal authority, and unifying Christians into a collectivity known as Christendom. As a paradigm, Jewish-Christian relations functioned well due to their apocalyptic aspects and promises of a new world order and a unified Christian collectivity. Gregory accordingly utilized this paradigm for the purpose of understanding his increasingly chaotic world. A testament to the effectiveness of Gregory's effort to establish his own attitude about Christian-Jewish relations is that it became the official policy of the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{49} Marcus, 124.
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