



John Chrysostom

The Architect of Antisemitism

CTEC

Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism



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The Architect of Antisemitism



By J.M. Berger and Michael Broschowitz, April 2024

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Abstract

Modern antisemitism is informed by concepts articulated more than 1,600 years ago by John Chrysostom, an early father of the Christian Church. While a direct causal lineage is hard to establish, Chrysostom's influence on historical and modern antisemitism is well-documented. Chrysostom articulated several key tropes of antisemitic ideology, including the belief that Jewish people are "schemers" and that they engage in human sacrifice. He also introduced dehumanizing language that foreshadowed the genocidal rhetoric of the Nazis, who cited Chrysostom as a historical source legitimizing their bigotry. Chrysostom is still cited by antisemitic extremists online and offline on a daily basis.

Cover Image: Lone cypress on 17-mile Drive, Monterey. LYNN YEH / SHUTTERSTOCK ([source](#)).

Title Image: Portrait of Saint John Chrysostom of Antioch (Hagios Ioannis Chrysostomos). An early Byzantine mosaic from the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (modern Istanbul). ([source](#))

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1. Introduction

No single person “invented” antisemitism. But John Chrysostom, a Church father and a canonized saint, has a better claim than most.

A prolific preacher in Antioch during the fourth century C.E., Chrysostom authored hundreds of sermons and other texts that have survived to this day. He is considered an important and influential figure in early Church history.

However one assesses his other contributions, one of his most important legacies is dark. Known for combative rhetoric, Chrysostom’s most virulent attacks were focused on LGBTQIA+ people and Jews. Many today remember him primarily for his impact on later strains of antisemitism. The content of his attacks, while not wholly original, established and enshrined key elements of anti-Jewish stereotyping that persist today.

2. Chrysostom’s context

The early history of Christianity is not always clear, but few would dispute that Jesus was a Jewish man preaching primarily to Jews in a Jewish homeland. Soon after his death, Jewish and Christian identities began to diverge, a process that quickly turned contentious, a subject complex enough to fill a book—or dozens of them. Chrysostom was born in 347 CE, and baptized in 370 CE, possibly as a convert to Christianity. In 386 CE, he was tasked with leading a Christian flock in the Greek city of Antioch, today part of Turkey. Antioch was a diverse city, home to at least three different Christian sects and a robust Jewish community. At the time, some Christians in Antioch and elsewhere still maintained Jewish practices, despite centuries of growing separation between Jews and Christians.

Chrysostom’s writings, like many of the early Christian fathers, seeks to differentiate a singular Christian identity from Judaism and competing Christian sects deemed to be heretical. Tensions were especially high in Antioch, Chrysostom’s social setting, which informs his work without necessarily mitigating the toxicity of his invective. Even if one is inclined to excuse Chrysostom’s intent, his words have traveled far from their original context as a collection of sermons to a specific flock in a specific city at a specific time.

In his notorious Eight Homilies Against the Jews, Chrysostom sought to dissuade fellow Christians from associating with Jews and taking part in Jewish observances. He seeks to discouraged these “Judaized Christians” by recounting the “evil” ways of Jewish people at incredible length. Elements of his descriptions endured for centuries after his death and continue to reverberate today.

Many of these ideas pre-dated Chrysostom. For instance, rhetoric blaming the Jews for killing Jesus appears in the first century CE, including scriptural references that Chrysostom later quoted in *Against the Jews*. In addition, Chrysostom catastrophizes religious disagreements, accusing Jewish people of the “ultimate evil” for failing to recognize the authority and divinity of Jesus—a sin that he says resulted in God revoking protection from the Jewish nation, leading directly to the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

With respect to general sinfulness, Chrysostom’s attacks are comprehensive but generic, cataloging a series of sins without much reference to specific events. Overlapping with the obsessive attitudes about sexuality found in his other writings,³ he repeatedly accuses Jews of associating with “harlots” and “effeminates.” Beyond this generalized invective, four specific accusations have proven to be durable, extending into contemporary antisemitic rhetoric.

3.1. Scheming

Chrysostom complains that all Jews are engaged in scheming. They are “revolutionists bent on stirring up sedition,” who are constantly “whispering in everybody’s ear.” This charge is based in part on historical events that took place during Chrysostom’s lifetime. The Roman emperor Julian (known to Catholics as “Julian the Apostate”) persecuted Christians in Antioch and elsewhere about 20 years before the composition of *Against the Jews*. Chrysostom alleges that the Jews sought to persuade Julian to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem in defiance of God’s punishment, and that they “never stop whispering in everybody’s ear” to advance that goal.

Chrysostom also cites scripture for examples of how earlier generations of Jews “plotted against their brothers.” In addition, Jews are said to collude with demonic forces that seek to “plot and do harm.” Unlike modern antisemites, however, Chrysostom does not portray these conspiratorial efforts as being particularly successful, and the scheming theme is less pronounced than some of Chrysostom’s other charges.

Nevertheless, stories of covert Jewish conspiracies to control the world have proliferated to such an extent that they dominate the conspiracy theory space today. These conspiracy theories are deployed as explanations for all the real or perceived social ills associated with modernity. This paradigm traces back to the 19th century emancipation of Jews in parts of Western and Central Europe, a social shift that allowed Jews to be integrated into society and to exercise political agency. The

extension of political rights to Jews was followed by a secularized antisemitic canard of Jewish plots against the nation, its institutions, and its way of life.

This idea was infamously codified in the wildly popular antisemitic hoax text, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which has been since translated into nearly every language. The influence of *The Protocols* and the theme of Jewish scheming is seen in the interconnected conspiracy theories of Cultural Marxism, Zionist-Occupied Government, and The Great Replacement. Modern racial stereotypes of Jewish identity, whether grand or petty,⁴ are overwhelmingly associated with the idea of Jewish plots and covert control.⁵

Like Chrysostom, modern antisemites integrate the theme of scheming with dehumanizing language. As seen in Figure 2, Chrysostom characterizes the Jew as “the demon who plots against you,” bridging the accusation of scheming with the use of dehumanizing language. But his literal demonization of Jews did not stop there.

3.2. Dehumanizing language

Chrysostom uses several dehumanizing tactics in *Against the Jews*, comparing his targets to animals and supernatural entities. He repeatedly refers to Jews as “dogs” or “akin to dogs,” saying they are “more dangerous than wolves” and “not better than ... pigs or goats.”

In one of his most troubling comparisons, he calls Jews “brute animals,” interpreting a scriptural text as saying they are “obstinate as a stubborn heifer” or an “untamed calf.” “Although such beasts are unfit for work, they are fit for killing,” Chrysostom writes. “And this is what happened to the Jews: while they were making themselves unfit for work, they grew fit for slaughter.” Obviously, this is a comparison that raises the specter of genocide, although Chrysostom stops well short of instructing his followers to kill Jews.

Other dehumanizing language in *Against the Jews* is more clearly reflected in modern antisemitism. Chrysostom repeatedly accuses the Jews of being in league with demons or claiming “the Jews themselves are demons” with several different iterations of language that often calls back to his overarching accusation that the Jews killed Jesus. “For I am persuaded to call the fasting of the Jews a table of demons because they slew God,” he writes in one instance. “If the Jews are acting against God, must they not be serving the demons?” Chrysostom’s scores of references to demons or demonic forces also include several passages characterizing the synagogue as a “dwelling place” of demons, which will be discussed further below.

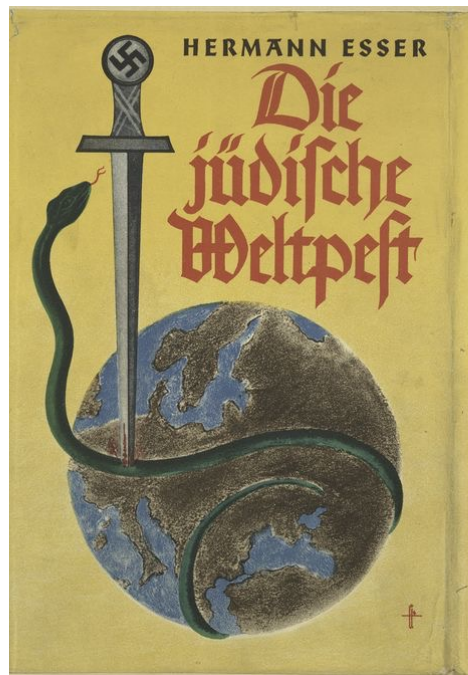


Figure 2: *Die jüdische Weltpest*, 1939. Source: New York Public Library⁶

Finally, Chrysostom repeatedly refers to Jews and Judaism as a “disease” infecting the “body of the church,” a type of rhetoric known as “biologization” that has been directly tied to genocidal beliefs.⁷ One example is an infamous pro-Nazi publication that directly cited Chrysostom, titled *Die jüdische Weltpest* (“The Jewish World Plague”).⁸

This language appears to stand apart from the religious notion of the church as the “body of Christ,” which Chrysostom references twice, but not in a disease-related context. Members of Chrysostom’s Christian community are “rotting with” or “sick with the Judaizing disease,” meaning that they associate with Jews and continue to maintain some Jewish practices, and they must be “cured” in short order. If they cannot be cured in a timely manner, Chrysostom writes, they must be expelled from the Christian community, “by a quick and sharp excision.” Expulsion is compared to “cauterization with a point of steel,” a metaphor that unambiguously raises the specter of violence.

Here, again, Chrysostom stops just short of modern antisemitic rhetoric, referring to the “Judaizing disease” but not directly referring to Jews themselves as disease organisms, such as germs or viruses, or disease-carrying vermin, such as rats or insects.

But while he does not cross that line, his language primes later antisemites for such comparisons. In modern antisemitic discourse, the likening of Jews to vermin or carriers of disease is a common theme. Nazi Germany state and medical officials

often warned that Jews carried lice and typhus.⁹ In more contemporary extremist political discourse, Jews have been blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic, either as planning it or as responsible for its spread.¹⁰

The framing of Jews as bearers of illness often carries over to the social realm as a metaphor, echoing Chrysostom's framing of Judaism as a social contagion and depicting Jews as a malignant tumor within a nation's body, a corrosive influence of sinister scheming that portends the decline of any society in which they may be found. In another example from Nazi Germany, Julius Streicher's publication *Der Stürmer* printed that Jews are "the germ that has thrown the world into a disease which irrevocably leads to death... [T]he world will be restored to health only when the most terrible germ of all times, the Jew, has been removed."¹¹

3.3. Synagogue of Satan

The Book of Revelation, a visionary (in the sense of not being literal) apocalypse written toward the end of the first century C.E., includes two references to a "synagogue of Satan," which is said to be comprised of "who say they are Jews and are not."¹² Scholars have long pondered the identity of the group being referenced, a question muddled by the lack of clear boundaries between Christians and Jews during this era.¹³ Regardless of its origins, the expression eventually mutated into an evocative condemnation of Jewish communities.

Chrysostom does not employ the precise phrase, but he had much to say about synagogues and Satanic forces, repeatedly describing synagogues as a "dwelling place of demons" (in addition to being a "den of thieves," a "brothel," and an animal house). "Who should not make bold to declare plainly that the synagogue is a dwelling of demons?" he writes. "God is not worshipped there."

The link between the synagogue and dehumanizing language persisted into the 21st century and beyond. The "synagogue of Satan" epithet found fertile ground in the soil of Christian Identity and Black Hebrew Israelite theology, both of which espouse overtly antisemitic worldviews. The Christian Identity movement claims Aryans are the "true" Jewish people—described as "god's Chosen"—with Jews being Satanic usurpers of the "serpent seed" of Cain. Likewise, Black Hebrew Israelism, a Black nationalist offshoot of Christian Identity, claims that African-American descendants of slaves are the "real" Jewish nation, similarly vilifying those known today as Jews as imposters of the "synagogue of Satan."

3.4. Human sacrifice

Conspiracy theories of Jewish ritual sacrifice are primarily found in medieval Christianity, but they derived from earlier pagan beliefs about Jews in classical Greco-Roman antiquity. For instance, such claims are found in the writings of Apion, a noted Homeric scholar, historian of Egypt, and immigrant to Alexandria. In his polemical writings against Jews, Apion claimed that Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes came across a Greek captive when entering the Jewish temple who claimed to have been fattened for ritual slaughter. Apion alleged that Jews kidnapped a Greek every year for such ritual slaughter and consumption while proclaiming their hatred of Greeks.¹⁸

Chrysostom adopts some of this language in largely generic attacks, sometimes tied to the locus of the synagogue. “In their synagogue stands an invisible altar of deceit on which they sacrifice not sheep and calves but the souls of men,” he writes, without further explanation. In another passage of unclear context, but likely derived from a biased reading of stories from Jewish scriptures,¹⁹ he writes:

No necessity forced the Jews when they slew their own children with their own hands to pay honor to the avenging demons, the foes of our life. What deed of theirs should strike us with greater astonishment? Their ungodliness or their cruelty or their inhumanity? That they sacrificed their children or that they sacrificed them to demons? Because of their licentiousness, did they not show a lust beyond that of irrational animals?

In similar passages citing Jewish scriptures with deliberate alterations to the text and removal of context,²⁰ Chrysostom accuses Jewish prophets of “slaughtering their own children” and Jewish mothers of “eating their own children”:

“The refined and delicate woman, so delicate and refined that she would not venture to put her foot upon the step, shall put her hand to the unholy table and eat her own children.” But Jeremiah shows that this came true when he said: “The hands of compassionate women boiled their own children.”

Medieval Christians leveled a more-specific accusation that Jewish people ritually murdered Christian children, alleging they used the blood in the making of Passover matzah. The first known incident of this blood libel was an accusation that the Jewish community of Norwich ritually slaughtered a young child named William in 1144. Such claims quickly spread through England and continental Europe, resulting in the expulsion or extermination of entire Jewish communities and were responsible for well-known pogroms and trials into the 20th century.²¹ Blood libel conspiracy theories and derivatives have extended into our contemporary political



Figure 3: John Chrysostom, Constantinople, early or middle 11th century. Soapstone and highlights of gold. ([source](#))

discourse, notably including the QAnon conspiracy movement and its allegations of Jewish-coded or -affiliated elites ritually consuming children to harvest a substance called adrenochrome which adherents falsely claim can restore youth.²²

4. Conclusions

When ideas persist over millennia, it can be difficult to fully assess their provenance. John Chrysostom's *Against the Jews* is unambiguously remembered today as one early source of antisemitic ideas, and key themes in his construction of a Jewish out-group continue to resonate strongly with modern extremists. While it would be challenging to draw a straight causal line from Chrysostom's writing to the tenets of modern antisemitism, his continuing influence is unmistakable, and it can be credited in significant part to a process of identity construction that formalized an all-too-familiar set of stereotypes.

For centuries, *Against the Jews* has been cited directly by antisemites, as seen in books, magazines, websites, and more recently in online posts on various listservs and other White nationalist outlets. Thanks to his status as a Church father and canonized saint, Chrysostom can be cited to validate antisemitic views as both historically and religiously grounded, and his adherents explicitly use this framing.²³

While Chrysostom has more than his fair share of mainstream religious apologists, his legacy is perhaps best summed up by Catholic priest and author Edward Flannery, who wrote that Chrysostom “stands without peer or parallel” in early Christian writings about Judaism:

The virulence of his attack is surprising even in an age in which rhetorical

denunciation was often indulged with complete abandon. ... Rigid on principle, a born reformer and a fiery preacher, he threw the whole of his energy and talent into castigating Judaism. How to accomplish it? There was one way: show the Jews and the Synagogue in their true colors; engender in Christians a fear and disgust of Judaism that would discourage all desire to Judaize. ... Christian as well as Jew can only deplore these sermons. In the eye of the historian, Chrysostom cannot be spared his niche in the pantheon of anti-Semitism.²⁴

John Chrysostom did not invent antisemitism, but he created a lasting articulation of its key principles that has already cast a long shadow over history and continues to create harm today, more than 1,600 years after he delivered his sermons in ancient Antioch.

While Chrysostom's themes derived in part from his lived experience, he painstakingly universalized his contempt to transcend his local context—never leveling a specific complaint against an individual Jewish person, always applying his condemnation to every Jewish person.

What *Against the Jews* is unmistakably against is deliberately sweeping, a robust conceptualization of “the Jews” as a faceless, homogenous collective. As a result of this rhetorical choice, Chrysostom's construction of a Jewish out-group identity has proven durable through social and technological changes he could scarcely have imagined.

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