

## Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition

**Review Number:** 1558

**Publish date:** Thursday, 6 March, 2014

**Author:** David Nirenberg

**ISBN:** 9780393058246

**Date of Publication:** 2013

**Price:** £20.00

**Pages:** 624pp.

**Publisher:** W. W. Norton

**Publisher url:** <http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=24677>

**Place of Publication:** New York, NY

**Reviewer:** Christopher Smith

David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* is an impressive scholarly accomplishment that matches a dauntingly large subject matter with a vast vault of personal knowledge. At 474 pages and 13 chapters covering more than 3000 years, it is thorough without being exhaustive. (1) The book cogently follows the development of anti-Judaism from Ancient Egypt through to the de-Judaising theories of Martin Heidegger and Joseph Goebbels. It is, however, first and foremost a history of ideas rather than of societies and some of Nirenberg's focus and conclusions may sit uncomfortably with readers expecting a straight socio-political history of anti-Judaism. Jewish communities and their religion Judaism appear infrequently in the context of Nirenberg's sources. They haunt his history like invisible ghosts, invoked by Judaism's critics to attack perceived enemies who were as likely to be non-Jews as Jews. Take for instance the war of words between the fourth-century Christian theologians St Jerome and St Augustine. Jerome (340/2–420CE) accused Augustine (354–430CE) of demonstrating 'Judaising' tendencies in his defence of Jewish law; Augustine in turn labelled Jerome a 'Judaiser' for reading original Hebrew texts rather than the Greek translations. Neither of them knew or had any actual contact with Jews, but their debates on the dangers of Judaism remained seminal guidelines for generations of Christian theologians (pp. 120–34).

Nirenberg focuses rather on how certain aspects of Christian teaching and culture used criticism of Jews and Judaism to make sense of their own religion and society. It is not a history of anti-Semitism, and Nirenberg differs from Robert Wistrich antithetically. (2) He does not examine anti-Judaism to explain the Holocaust, or contemporary western and Middle Eastern attitudes towards Israel. His purpose is more ambitious than this; he aims to show that 'pathological' fantasies of Judaism are central to the history of ideas that became deeply ingrained in the Western tradition (p. 468). Ancient civilisations, medieval kingdoms and modern industrial states each developed discourses on the Jewish threat that society could be defined against. For Nirenberg, the barbarism of the Holocaust is the conceivable product of the encoded threat of Judaism in western thought, but was not made inevitable by it. Previous historical instances of anti-Judaism did not create the anti-Semitic ideologies of the 20th century, but they did build on each other to create the cultural and political conditions for them to occur (pp. 469–70).

Nirenberg buttresses this argument with reference to influential thinkers from each era. The Ptolemaic historian Manetho's (282–246BCE) demonising of the Jewish 'shepherds' was central to the development of

a unique Egyptian historical and political thought (p. 22). St Jerome and St Augustine's theological slanging match influenced the medieval Church and monarchies' treatment of minorities (pp. 120–34). Martin Luther accused his papist opponents of 'Pharasaism' and attempted to 'drain' Jewish letters from the word of God (p. 252). Both Voltaire and Kant identified Jewish vices in the Old Testament as the source of intolerance in Ancien Régime society (pp. 352–60). And Marx, Heidegger and Sobert provided the philosophical context for Joseph Goebbels' 1933 declaration 'The age of rampant Jewish intellectualism is now at an end' (p. 423).

With a book this ambitious, however, a wide ranging and generous smattering of primary source material drawn from lesser known thinkers is expected. Second-century writers such as Justin Martyr (pp. 100–3) and the chronicler Hegesippus (pp. 92–8) inform the reader of the early Church's anti-Judaism as much as Augustine and Jerome in Nirenberg's narrative. Likewise Nirenberg uses Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* in 1494 to reveal the dramatization of Early Modern English concerns with the 'Jewishness' of Christian commerce as relevantly as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1598) or Christopher Marlow's *Jew of Malta* (1589). It is a testament to Nirenberg's masterful scholarly skills that his interweaving of diverse primary sources – often across eras and continents – feels appropriate and convincing.

It is hard to avoid the impression that *Anti-Judaism: the History of a Way of Thinking* represents for Nirenberg the culmination of a career volte-face in respects to his methodological approach. His 1996 work *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* rejected a *longue durée* history of anti-Semitism.<sup>(3)</sup> This approach, Nirenberg argued, was liable to assess individual events in structures contextually grounded in the Holocaust, and not in the climatic conditions in which they occurred. The Montcluse massacre of 1320 was more relevant for understanding socio-economic relations between Jews and their Aragonese overlords than explaining the Holocaust, for example.<sup>(4)</sup> *Communities of Violence* used a relatively narrow belt of sources covering southwest France and the Crown of Aragon. With *Anti-Judaism*, his work takes in 3,000 years of historical thought from the Ancient Egyptians to Nazi Germany on a subject almost impossibly vast: how anti-Judaism became the basis for people to criticise and understand their societies, and subsequently, how this became the bedrock of the Western tradition.

In *Anti-Judaism*, Nirenberg allows for a continuation of trends in the development of a shared concept of anti-Judaism built on and progressed over the periods covered in his book. Nirenberg would not consider this a determinist argument: that questions of Judaism in the history of ideas necessarily connected with each other, or culminated in 20th-century anti-Semitism (pp. 456–7). He attempts to combine his disdain for a structural approach by viewing anti-Judaism within the context of each period 'and with an awareness of potential futures- that is, of how that material will be put to the work of generating different worldviews in later periods and places' (p. 11). This leads to dead ends as often as open doors. It is a history of how ideas on Judaism drove forward key concepts of Western thought concerning Christian (and Muslim) society, but that this tradition was not what inherently drove Western civilisation towards the Final Solution. This is perhaps an unsettling conclusion: by implication that the Holocaust was far from inevitable, but equally that it could have occurred not in Germany but in France, Britain, the United States or anywhere in the Western world (p. 458–9).

The great focus of the book is on the Christian history of thinking about Judaism, but the influence of pagan writers and concepts from antiquity were instrumental to the guidance of the early Church on Jewish subjects. In chapter one ('The ancient world: Egypt, exodus, empire') Nirenberg shows how Egyptian scholars used negative stories and stereotypes of Jews and Judaism, assigning a centrality to them that helped explain Egyptian civilisation's past – and just as importantly its future direction. The Passover festival for Jews celebrated their liberation; for Egyptians it was an offensive celebration of their society's destruction and the defeat of their gods (p. 18). In this context, Nirenberg asserts (conjecturally as the source base provides little assistance) that ancient Egyptians created their own pro-Egyptian versions of the 'Passover'. Nirenberg quotes Manetho (282–246BCE), an Egyptian priest from Heliopolis, who relates an invasion of Egypt by a people called the 'shepherds' residing in Judea, bringing rapine pillage and murder, but more shockingly in Manetho's view, impious destruction of temples and divine images (p. 23). Ultimately the Shepherds were resisted, and this became the basis for the Egyptian version of the exodus as

well as Nirenberg's first example of how 'a people's sense of their past and present place in the world could be articulated through the construction of a fundamental opposition to Jews and Judaism' (p. 24).

Nirenberg shows how Egyptian anti-Judaism had a powerful influence on the two powers that bequeathed the West its political and cultural heritage: Rome and Greece. Greek thinkers such as Lysimachus (Second century BCE, p.30) accepted Egyptian narratives of Jews acting as the enemies of native piety and prosperity, and Alexandria saw some of the most brutal anti-Jewish riots of antiquity (pp. 40–1). By lobbying for the exclusion of Jews from the privileges of citizenship, Nirenberg asserts that Greeks in Alexandria were in effect defending their own sovereign rights, and by the act of anti-Jewish violence were hypostatizing political and theoretical criticism of the imperial power of Rome onto a powerless minority. Roman generals and governors used Egyptian histories to draw their own conclusions about how to deal with the perpetual rebelliousness of the state of Judea. However, unlike for the Egyptians and Greeks, the Jews mattered little to how Romans thought of themselves. Nirenberg leaves this unexplained but it perhaps resulted from a lack of physical threat from Jews in Roman historical origins (p. 46).

It was within the framework of the Greek cultural world (although deeply within the political sphere and territory of the Roman Empire) that the early Christian Church developed a contrary attitude towards Judaism which Nirenberg discusses in chapters two and three. Nirenberg details the overriding concern amongst early Christians (who were themselves predominantly of Jewish background) to define 'true teaching' from 'false' in their interpretations of the New Testament (p. 87). It was with the consolidation of the early Church that 'false teaching' became equated with 'Jewish practice'. Second-century CE Christian theologians such as Marcion used the teachings of Paul and the other apostles to denounce as 'Judaisers' Christians who adhered too closely to the flesh (i.e. acceptance of circumcision or placing too much focus on Jesus' mortal status) rather than the spirit (pp. 97–9). This marked a crucial phase in early Christian history. As the Church became increasingly a Gentile movement independent of Jews, they became the medium for which Christians condemned bad practice. Judaism became the 'Anti-Christianity' to which the narrative of their own Church and wider gentile society could be favourably compared.

Nirenberg focuses on the continuation of this theme in the medieval period, which became increasingly politicised (chapters four to six). Jews – barred from communal economic activities and guild membership – often found employment as money lenders or tax collectors with tacit sovereign approval. Despite not usually predominating in either professions, Jews became associated with them and therefore with sovereign and fiscal power. Political opponents would accuse rulers of becoming 'Judaised'. Thus Simon De Montfort based the righteousness of his rebellion against Henry III of England in the King's endorsement of Jewish economic activity. Nirenberg shows how this built on the teachings of St Augustine – that Jews should be tolerated only as an example to Christians of the 'wandering' fate awaiting adherents to a failed and tainted religion. As a De Montfort supporter, the 13th-century CE theologian Robert Grosseteste, stated, toleration should not extend to princely protection and favour: 'Such lords, like the Jews, drink the blood of their subjects' (p. 198).

Such powerful anti-Judaist sentiment contributed to the mass expulsion or forced conversions of Jewish populations by European monarchs. Vast tracts of Europe became Jew-free zones. Paradoxically, Nirenberg shows how this widened the scope and range of anti-Judaism in the West. The line between Jews and non-Jews suddenly became blurred. The Inquisition in Spain to root out secret Jews led to accusations of 'Jewish tendencies' for as little as refusing to buy an apple on the Sabbath or nodding one's head during prayer (p. 242). In a Europe largely free from Jews, now potentially everyone could be a Jew or be accused of being 'Judaisers'.

This was true also of the world of the Reformation as Nirenberg relates in chapter seven. Martin Luther in his polemic 'That Jesus Christ was born a Jew' (1523) inferred that the Catholic brand of Christianity was worse even than Judaism in its focus on the flesh and hypocrisy (p. 261). His later hard line towards 'real' Jews ('On the Jews and their lies', 1543) was perhaps influenced by Catholic counter attempts to Judaize him, and contributed towards the violent expulsion of Jews from most of the German lands by the 1570s (p.

262). But Luther was more concerned with attacking his Christian opponents, seeking to portray them as more 'Jewish' than the Jews for their perversion of the sacraments and other 'Jewish' crimes (p. 260).

Nirenberg shows how Luther refocused the debate surrounding the interpretation of the Scriptures and the word of God, and made the ghostly spectre of Judaism a 'real' threat to which Christian teaching was set against in the Confessional age. The centrality of the threat of Judaism within Europe did not diminish with the gradual move from a divinely to a secularised conception of the ordering of the world – it merely shifted (chapter ten – 'Enlightenment revolts against Judaism: 1670–1789'). Enlightenment philosophes from Voltaire to Kant derided Christianity for its coupling with, and origin from, the 'sterile' and unreligious 'legalism' of Judaism (p.359). Only by throwing off the shackles of Judaism could Christianity become the true universal religion of humanity, by separating religious institutions and observance from the mechanisms of state. Here again then, Nirenberg shows political thinkers using Judaism to characterise their opponents and conceptualise the evils they observed in their society.

19th- and early 20th-century Germany provides Nirenberg's focus in his later chapters. He shows how German philosophers from Hegel (1770–1831) to Schopenhauer (1788–1860) saw the remnants of Jewish law as the principle barrier to the freedom of the individual and human spirit (pp. 404–5). Concerns at the creeping calamity of industrialisation, urbanisation and commercialisation from 1750 onwards animated the writings of Heine (1797–1856), Fichte (1762–1814) and Marx (1818–83) with each equating in their own way these 'dangerous' processes with 'Judaism' (p. 422). Werner Sombart (1863–1941) saw the origins of capitalism deeply rooted in the migrations of the Jewish people; Max Weber (1864–1920) counters this with his assertion that Protestant capitalism and the 'capitalist spirit' originated separately from what he saw as the unethical history of Jewish economic activity. Marx, Sombart and Weber remain towering figures within the modern social sciences, and Nirenberg shows how all of them developed their theories to some degree by thinking about Judaism. And it was within the influence and schooling in such high intellectual German culture that Goebbels's propaganda developed and provided the context in which it was delivered and received (p. 448).

Ultimately, Nirenberg seeks to show how each era of anti-Judaism to differing degrees built upon one another to develop the 20<sup>th</sup>-century political and cultural framework in which the Holocaust was realisable, if not inevitable. His is a history of anti-Judaism, but not particularly a history of interaction between Jews and non-Jews. It seeks to ask why so many people through history have thought negatively about Judaism. There is consequently little room for Jewish voices, or evidence of 'Judeophilia'. The reader is left waiting in vain for a Jewish champion to stand up to the blistering barrage 'Jews' are subjected to in this history, or at least for someone to throw in the towel. Nirenberg no doubt would argue that this is not for him to provide; his focus is anti-Judaism and its relevance to Western thought, not the history of philosemitism. However, some acknowledgement of tolerance and co-existence between Jews and non-Jews would provide a useful counterbalance to the relentless pursuit of evidence of anti-Judaism which occasionally feels laboured.

This book is primarily a history of thought not a social history. Given this, Nirenberg is occasionally too quick to inflate the societal importance of the ideas he discusses. Broad socio-economic, cultural and political developments are summarised and dogmatic doctrinal debates between scholars indulged. Generalisations litter these summaries, such as the assertion that the rise of a stock capitalised banking system meant 'every man became willy nilly a speculator' (p. 425). 19th-century workers in sweated industries may have had something to say about this statement. It perhaps falls outside the scope of Nirenberg's work, but I find the general reluctance to directly explore the impact and influence of anti-Judaism on the societies from which his thinkers originate (and vice versa) a tad frustrating. For instance, was the rhetoric and nature of anti-Semitism in 19th- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century German towns and villages influenced by the anti-Judaism of Heidegger, Marx and Sombart? Was support for the Third Reich a product of this continually evolving process of self-perlustration-by-Judaism?

A case in point is the Russian Jewish community of London during the First World War. A particularly

nasty anti-Jewish incident occurred in September 1917 in Bethnal Green; Jewish businesses were looted and vandalised, and hundreds of immigrant Jews subjected to violent attacks in the streets. In determining the motivation driving the English crowd to violence against their Jewish neighbours, documentary analysis has uncovered several key determinants. Anger at a perceived non-commitment on behalf of the Jewish community to Britain's war cause; war-strain and shortages on the home front; economic xenophobia resulting from Jewish encroachment in traditionally English industries such as tailoring and cabinet making. (5) In truth all three factors – their perception as much as reality – blended together to create the conditions for local fury to pour forth. Local memory mythologised how English tailors serving in the war were muscled out of their territory by entrepreneurial Jews 'shirking' their responsibilities, making quick bucks whilst East London families starved.

But was this focus on their supposed fiscal avarice a further example of an historic in-grained anti-Semitic discourse of Jews as money grabbers? A link perhaps from the time of the expulsion under Edward I, which has animated English perceptions of Jews ever since, from Shakespeare to Lord Northcliffe? Was it the legacy of the development of the ideology of anti-Judaism? If only such developments could be explained so simply. The Bethnal Green disturbances in 1917 were the product of a diverse and overlapping set of factors, the chief amongst which was a seemingly indiscriminate economic xenophobia on the part of the East End working class that spared few newcomers, be they French, Irish, Jewish, or Bangladeshi for that matter. In any case Nirenberg does not attempt to answer such questions; his is a history of ideas not a history of peoples. Besides, if Nirenberg had attempted this, his book would take on a length that would necessarily negate the punchy pace and direction that makes it such a delight to read.

This book represents a scholarly feat few writers could hope to match, engagingly tracking the history of how influential thinkers – from ancient Egyptian historians to Weimer Republic philosophers – negatively interpreted Judaism to better understand their own religions and society. But the focus on high philosophical thought, the broad sweeps through major societal transformations, and the brevity of analysis on how anti-Judaism influenced communal interaction between Jews and non-Jews will trouble some historians, perhaps even a young David Nirenberg.

## Notes

1. This rises to 610 pages with notes and index.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. A. Wistrich, *Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to Global Jihad* (New York, NY 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. D. Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), pp. 6–7.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ibid, pp.69–93.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. PROHO 45/10822/318095/478, 'Anti-Jewish Demonstration', Report of Superintendent J. Best, Hackney Police Station, J Division, 24 September 1917.[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author does not wish to reply.

**Other reviews:**

H-Net

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

Marginalia

<http://themarginaliareview.com/archives/tag/david-nirenberg> [3]

New Republic

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114894/david-nirenbergs-anti-judaism-reviewed-sordid-representation-jews> [4]

Huffington Post

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-roth/review-of-david-nirenberg\\_b\\_3175416.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-roth/review-of-david-nirenberg_b_3175416.html) [5]

New York Review of Books

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/mar/20/imaginary-jews/> [6]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1558>

**Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/50314>

[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37993>

[3] <http://themarginaliareview.com/archives/tag/david-nirenberg>

[4] <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114894/david-nirenbergs-anti-judaism-reviewed-sordid-representation-jews>

[5] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-roth/review-of-david-nirenberg\\_b\\_3175416.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-roth/review-of-david-nirenberg_b_3175416.html)

[6] <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/mar/20/imaginary-jews/>