

On the Jews and the Deicide Charge: From the Time of Christ to the Modern Era

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This paper presents a historical examination of the accusation that the Jewish people were collectively responsible for the death of Jesus Christ—a charge known as *deicide*. Rather than offering theological commentary or modern revisionist perspectives, the study traces the endurance of the charge from its earliest appearance in the New Testament through Church Fathers, medieval liturgy, early modern sermons, and nationalist propaganda in the 20th century. Drawing from primary sources—Scripture, patristic writings, ecclesiastical decrees, Passion plays, and political manifestos—the work documents how the deicide accusation became embedded in Christian tradition across languages, liturgical rites, and doctrinal systems. It reveals how a single theological motif migrated across centuries, resurfacing in new forms but retaining its original moral and rhetorical force. The charge's durability made it not only a theological judgment but a cultural and political tool, shaping attitudes, laws, and acts of persecution against Jews throughout Christian history. Contemporary efforts at reconciliation and reform are left to other treatments; this paper serves as a historical record of what was said, believed, and repeated.

Keywords: deicide, Jews, Jesus Christ, Church Fathers, Passion plays, Martin Luther, antisemitism, Catholic liturgy, Orthodox liturgy, Fourth Lateran Council, Good Friday prayer, Oberammergau, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, theological history, Christian antisemitism, Matthew 27:25, religious polemic, historical theology. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC.4.0.

I. Introduction

The accusation that the Jewish people were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ—commonly referred to as the *deicide charge*—has echoed through Christian history from the earliest Gospel accounts to the turbulent political climates of the twentieth century. This charge, once embedded in sacred texts and formalized in theological doctrine, evolved across centuries through the voices of theologians, preachers, emperors, and dramatists. It has proven to be one of the most enduring and consequential accusations in Western civilization, shaping religious imagination, legal structures, and public violence alike.

The aim of this paper is to document and contextualize the attribution of deicide to the Jews across time. By allowing the key figures in each era to speak for themselves through preserved writings and widely disseminated performances, we trace not merely the presence of this charge but its continuity and adaptation. No effort will be made here to defend, refute, or resolve these positions. Instead, this paper seeks to provide an unbroken account of how the accusation has been articulated and transmitted, often unchanged in theological essence even when rhetorical style or social function has shifted.

The scope of this study begins in the first century CE, with the New Testament writings that serve as the textual bedrock for later interpretations. From there, it moves through the early Church Fathers of the second to fourth centuries, who first solidified the theological narrative of Jewish guilt. The Middle Ages saw the accusation ritualized in liturgy and visually dramatized in public Passion plays, often coinciding with periods of intensified social segregation and mob violence. In the early modern and Reformation eras, figures like Martin Luther revived and sharpened the charge, and in the modern period it found expression in nationalist and racialized forms, contributing to the ideological atmosphere in which antisemitic violence—including the Holocaust—was made thinkable.

The primary sources drawn upon in this analysis include Scripture (both Gospel and apostolic writings), patristic sermons and letters, conciliar decrees, medieval liturgical texts, Reformation polemics, theatrical dramatizations, and state propaganda. Wherever possible, the figures themselves are quoted directly so

that their words, not merely historical summaries, define the evolution of the accusation. The goal is not a theology of the deicide charge, but a historical anatomy: a record of what was said, who said it, and how it was received.

This method of historical continuity, organized chronologically and constructed from direct quotations, will allow readers to observe the persistent themes and rhetorical mechanisms that kept the deicide charge alive in Christian culture for nearly two millennia.

II. Scriptural Foundations

The foundation for the accusation of deicide—asserting that the Jewish people were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ—finds its earliest expression in the New Testament itself. While the historical and theological interpretations of these texts are debated, this section concerns only how the relevant verses have been received and quoted across centuries to justify the charge. The Gospels and apostolic writings contain explicit and implied statements that have been used, often out of their original rhetorical context, to construct a narrative of collective Jewish guilt. These verses became the cornerstone for later patristic and ecclesiastical formulations.

2.1 The Gospel Narratives

Among the most consequential verses in Christian history is Matthew 27:25:

“And all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’”
(Matthew 27:25, ESV)

This cry, uttered by the crowd during Pontius Pilate’s trial of Jesus, has been interpreted by generations of Christian writers as a voluntary assumption of collective guilt. Though uttered by an unspecified crowd in Jerusalem, often imagined to be manipulated by religious elites, the verse became generalized in later centuries to mean *all Jews in all times*. In medieval Passion plays and

sermons, this line was dramatically emphasized, transforming the moment from a judicial proceeding into a transhistorical curse.

John's Gospel contains its own charged declaration, when the chief priests reject Jesus:

"We have no king but Caesar." (John 19:15)

This rejection of Christ's kingship was later interpreted as a spiritual betrayal of God by the religious leadership of Israel, cementing the theological motif of Jewish apostasy. John's Gospel, in particular, uses the term "*the Jews*" (Greek: *hoi Ioudaioi*) over 70 times, often in contexts of opposition to Jesus. For instance:

"The Jews answered him, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy...'" (John 10:33)

While scholars note that this likely referred to the Jerusalem elite or specific opponents of Jesus, the generalization of this language in the liturgical and homiletic traditions contributed to the idea of a unified Jewish rejection of Christ.

Luke's Gospel also records the crowd calling for execution:

"But they kept shouting, 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!'" (Luke 23:21)

This demand, echoed in all four Gospels, is presented as coming from the assembled crowd, stirred by the chief priests and elders. These scenes, taken together, formed the core dramatic arc of Jewish responsibility in Christian theological imagination. The Roman governor, Pilate, is often portrayed as hesitant, even reluctant, thus pushing the narrative burden of guilt onto Jewish figures.

Across the Gospel narratives, the portrayal of Jewish leaders—particularly the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and the Sanhedrin—is largely adversarial. They are repeatedly depicted as scheming, hypocritical, and ultimately as initiators of the plot to have Jesus executed. These characterizations, originating in intra-Jewish conflict in the first century, were later universalized to apply to all Jews and became central to Christian anti-Jewish polemic.

2.2 Apostolic Interpretations

The theme of Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death extends beyond the Gospels into the apostolic preaching recorded in Acts and the epistles.

In Peter's sermon at Pentecost, the apostle makes a pointed accusation:

"This Jesus... you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." (Acts 2:23)

This verse attributes guilt to Peter's Jewish audience while also acknowledging Roman complicity ("lawless men"). The focus, however, is on Israel's failure to recognize its Messiah. Similar accusations appear again in Acts 3:14–15:

"But you denied the Holy and Righteous One... and killed the Author of life."

And again in Acts 7:52, as Stephen declares:

"Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered."

Paul reinforces this theme in his letter to the Thessalonians:

"For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus... for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, *who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets*, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind." (1 Thessalonians 2:14–15)

This is perhaps the clearest Pauline statement linking the Jews directly with the murder of Christ. It includes not only the crucifixion but a broader narrative of opposition to God's messengers, linking Jesus' death to the killing of Old Testament prophets.

While modern scholarship tends to frame these apostolic statements within the context of intra-Jewish sectarian conflict, the reception history of these verses has treated them as unambiguous indictments of the Jewish people as a whole. Thus, they became foundational proof-texts in the centuries-long perpetuation of the deicide charge. Their inclusion in liturgy, homiletics, and polemic ensured that the

theological narrative of Jewish guilt would be transmitted with scriptural authority.

III. The Early Church Fathers (2nd–4th Centuries)

In the centuries following the composition of the New Testament, early Christian writers began to construct a formal theological interpretation of the crucifixion that assigned guilt for Jesus' death to the Jewish people as a whole. This emerging theology was not incidental; it was central to the self-definition of the early Church in contrast to both paganism and rabbinic Judaism. What began as a polemic within Judaism hardened into a foundational doctrine of Jewish rejection of Christ, which became justification for social and spiritual separation, and ultimately persecution.

The writings of the Church Fathers from the 2nd to the 4th centuries reveal an increasingly unified and explicit assertion of Jewish deicide, often drawing directly from the scriptural foundations discussed earlier. These assertions were frequently embedded in arguments for the supersession of the synagogue by the Church and the loss of divine favor once believed to have rested on Israel.

3.1 Justin Martyr (c. 160 AD)

Justin, a philosopher and Christian apologist, composed the *Dialogue with Trypho*, a lengthy theological debate between himself and a fictionalized Jewish interlocutor. This work marks one of the earliest extended Christian polemics against Judaism.

“You slew the Just One, and before Him you killed the prophets.”

(*Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 16)

“The tribulations were justly imposed upon you, for you have slain the Just One, and His prophets before Him.”

(*Dialogue*, ch. 133)

In these passages, Justin builds a case for Jewish guilt not only in the death of Jesus but in the rejection and killing of all God's emissaries. The claim is both retrospective and theological: the Jewish people have a spiritual history of killing God's messengers, culminating in Christ. Justin's writings would become a template for Christian anti-Judaism, blending scriptural accusation with philosophical reasoning.

3.2 Melito of Sardis (c. 170 AD)

Melito's *Peri Pascha* (*On the Pascha*) is one of the most striking and poetic early Christian texts, structured as a homily for Easter. Within this dramatic liturgy, Melito offers perhaps the first complete and explicit Christian formulation of the deicide charge:

"God has been murdered; the King of Israel has been slain by an Israelite hand."
(*On the Pascha*, 96)

"You killed your Lord. He was lifted up upon a tree, and you destroyed the one who made you live."
(*On the Pascha*, 72)

Melito's rhetoric is accusatory, liturgical, and theological. The killing of Christ is not merely a crime but a cosmic reversal: the Creator has been killed by His own creation. The phrase "God has been murdered" (*Theophtonos*) would echo through subsequent centuries and form a paradigmatic charge of divine homicide uniquely applied to the Jewish people.

3.3 Tertullian (c. 200 AD)

A prolific North African theologian and early Latin writer, Tertullian contributed significantly to Western Christian theology. In *Adversus Judaeos* (*Against the Jews*), he drew upon both Old and New Testament sources to indict the Jewish people for rejecting and killing the Messiah.

“The Jews formed the core of the band of Christ-killers.”

(*Adversus Judaeos*, ch. 10)

Tertullian’s writings adopt a legalistic and rhetorical style, building a case against the Jews as a people who forfeited divine covenant. His words would later fuel medieval legal and social restrictions, casting the Jews not only as heretics but as criminals against the divine order.

3.4 Origen of Alexandria (c. 250 AD)

Origen, one of the most intellectually influential theologians of early Christianity, engaged deeply with Jewish exegesis but ultimately contributed to formalizing the idea that the Jews bore divine punishment for their role in Christ's death.

“It was the Jews who conspired against the Savior of mankind.”

(*Against Celsus*, Book 2.8)

“We may thus assert that the Jews will not return to their earlier situation, for they have committed the most abominable of crimes, in forming this conspiracy against the Savior of the human race.”

(*Commentary on Matthew*, 10.17)

Though Origen often allegorized Scripture and allowed for complex readings, on the question of deicide he was unambiguous: Jewish culpability was both moral and historical, and their exile and suffering were divine consequences. He set the precedent for theological explanations of Jewish diaspora as punishment for the crucifixion.

3.5 Cyprian of Carthage (c. 250 AD)

A bishop and martyr, Cyprian contributed to the development of Latin ecclesiology and also endorsed the theological rejection of the Jews based on their treatment of Christ.

“They killed Him whom they ought to have adored.”

(*Ad Quirinum*, III.50)

This terse declaration appears in his *Testimonia ad Quirinum*, a compilation of biblical proof-texts organized to argue Christian truth. Cyprian's phrasing underscores the spiritual betrayal inherent in the deicide charge: the Jews failed not only as a nation but in their divine vocation, exchanging worship for murder.

Across these five early Church Fathers, we observe the development of a theological consensus: the Jewish people, as a collective, rejected the Messiah, killed Him, and inherited divine punishment. This theme moved from scripture to polemic to doctrinal background within just two centuries. It became so ingrained that it was no longer a matter of theological debate but an assumed foundation of Christian teaching about Judaism. The continuity of language—from “killed the Just One” to “murderers of God”—would echo through councils, liturgies, and homilies for centuries to come.

IV. The Latin and Greek Church in Late Antiquity

By the end of the 4th century, the theological foundations of the deicide charge had become institutionally embedded within the thought of both the Latin West and Greek East. The Church, now ascendant as the state religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius I, no longer articulated its theology from a position of marginality or persecution. Instead, it began to exercise coercive power—both ideological and material—against those it now labeled as enemies of God. Chief among these, in the eyes of many bishops and preachers, were the Jews.

This period saw a transition from theological polemic to pastoral and political action, with bishops actively intervening in imperial policy and public life. The Jews were now cast not merely as theological foils but as active threats to the Christian order, and the deicide charge was elevated from rhetoric to rationale for public marginalization.

Two of the most influential voices of this period—John Chrysostom in the East and Ambrose of Milan in the West—provide some of the most virulent and sustained accusations of Jewish guilt, heresy, and divine enmity in all of patristic literature.

4.1 John Chrysostom (c. 386–387 AD)

John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Antioch and later Constantinople, was widely regarded for his eloquence and rhetorical skill—his very name means “golden-mouthed.” Yet his *Homilies Against the Jews*, delivered in Antioch, represent some of the most explicitly hostile and enduring anti-Jewish sermons in Christian history.

In these homilies, Chrysostom targets not only Jews but also Christians who were participating in Jewish festivals or attending synagogues. He condemned both as traitors to Christ and constructed a scathing image of the Jews as irredeemable enemies of God and the Church.

“The synagogue is worse than a brothel... It is the den of scoundrels and the repair of wild beasts... the temple of demons devoted to idolatrous cults... the refuge of brigands and debauchees, and the cavern of devils. It is a criminal assembly of Jews... a place of meeting for the assassins of Christ... a house worse than a drinking shop... a den of thieves, a house of ill fame, a dwelling of iniquity, the refuge of devils, a gulf and an abyss of perdition.”

(Homily 1 Against the Jews)

In another passage, he declares:

“The Jews are the most worthless of men. They are lecherous, greedy, rapacious. They are perfidious murderers of Christ. They worship the Devil; their religion is a sickness. The Jews are the odious assassins of Christ and for this reason they can never be dear to God. They are inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil. Their debauchery and drunkenness gives them the manners of pigs and lusty goats.”

(Homily 1, paraphrased in later citations)

Chrysostom's rhetoric was designed to terrify Christians away from Judaism and instill a sense of Jewish perfidy as an eternal condition. The deicide charge is central to his message: the murder of Christ is not a past event, but a permanent stain, encoded in Jewish nature and culture. For Chrysostom, the Jews' role in Christ's death renders them irrevocably outside the covenant, enemies not only of the Church but of the divine order itself.

His homilies were later reprinted in medieval collections and quoted by both Catholic and Protestant preachers, and even cited during the Nazi era as theological support for antisemitism.

4.2 Ambrose of Milan (388 AD)

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, was a towering figure in the Latin Church—an advisor to emperors, a prolific theologian, and a master of ecclesiastical politics. His role in the Callinicum affair marks a critical moment in the transformation of the deicide charge into a political and legal weapon.

The incident occurred when Christians, likely at the instigation of a local bishop, burned down a synagogue in Callinicum (in modern-day Syria). Emperor Theodosius I, seeking to maintain legal order, ordered that the synagogue be rebuilt at the bishop's expense. Ambrose wrote a forceful letter (*Epistula 40*) to the emperor, opposing this decision.

In it, he declares:

“Shall the bishop be compelled to re-erect a synagogue?... I myself declared the synagogue to be a house of impiety, a home of the impious, a place that God Himself has condemned.”

(*Epistle 40*)

And in the most notorious line:

“To the Jews, slayers of the Lord, enemies of God.”

(*Epistle 40*)

Ambrose does not merely repeat the deicide accusation—he translates it into legal policy, arguing that the destruction of synagogues is not a crime, but an act of justice. The Jews, as "slayers of the Lord," have no moral or religious claim to protection or restitution under a Christian emperor. To rebuild their synagogue would be, in Ambrose's words:

"A sin against Christ. Let no emperor so insult the crucified Lord as to restore the dwelling place of His murderers."

This moment is significant because it demonstrates how the theology of deicide directly influenced imperial governance. The bishop's authority, now extending into state decisions, stood on the doctrinal certainty that the Jews' role in Christ's death permanently excluded them from civic and spiritual favor.

Ambrose's success in reversing the emperor's decision set a precedent for tolerated violence against Jewish communities, provided it could be framed in theological terms. His intervention reveals how Christian theology of deicide was no longer passive doctrine—it was policy.

Together, Chrysostom and Ambrose represent the theological and political consolidation of the deicide charge. In their hands, the accusation ceases to be a scriptural implication or a polemical device—it becomes a permanent identity marker attached to the Jewish people, one that justifies marginalization, legal inferiority, and destruction of property. Their works would be copied, quoted, and canonized for centuries to come, forming a core pillar of Christendom's theological posture toward Judaism.

V. Medieval Formulations and Institutionalization

During the Middle Ages, the deicide charge not only persisted but became formally embedded in the cultural, liturgical, and legal structures of Christian society. The theological views developed by the Church Fathers were now absorbed into the popular imagination through Passion plays, enforced in

ecclesiastical legislation, and expounded upon by monastic theologians. The idea that the Jews bore collective guilt for the death of Christ—once a controversial or polemical claim—was now a normalized, institutionalized feature of Christendom.

This period marked a shift from rhetorical condemnation to ritualized performance and codified exclusion, ensuring that anti-Jewish sentiment became part of the Christian civic order, devotional life, and social hierarchy. The result was a sustained and evolving system of theological antisemitism—built not only on Scripture and preaching, but on law, art, and religious ritual.

5.1 Passion Plays and Popular Piety

One of the most effective vehicles for transmitting the deicide charge to the laity was the medieval Passion play. These public performances dramatized the final hours of Jesus' life and were often staged during Holy Week. Originating in the 10th century and becoming widespread by the 13th, Passion plays visually and viscerally portrayed Jews as Christ's accusers, mockers, and murderers, drawing heavily from the Gospel narratives—particularly the crowd scenes in Matthew and John.

The most infamous line from the Gospel of Matthew became a fixed chorus in many plays:

“His blood be on us and on our children.” (Matthew 27:25)

This line was often delivered in unison by Jewish characters portrayed as bloodthirsty and demonic, reinforcing the idea that the Jewish people invited their own curse, and that it had continued across generations. Jewish characters in the plays were frequently costumed with exaggerated, grotesque features, sometimes with horns or hooked noses, and dressed in distinctive garments intended to mark them as outsiders and villains.

One of the most enduring examples of this tradition is the Oberammergau Passion Play (first performed in 1634 but drawing on older medieval forms), which until modern revisions featured Jews shouting for Christ's death and demanding the

release of Barabbas, presented in deliberate contrast to the innocent suffering of Jesus.

These plays functioned as devotional theatre—meant to inspire repentance and awe in Christian audiences—but their consistent portrayal of Jews as Christ-killers made them powerful transmitters of antisemitic imagery to illiterate and rural populations. Their annual recurrence ensured that the deicide charge was never far from public consciousness.

5.2 Ecclesiastical Decrees

The formal Church hierarchy also contributed to the institutionalization of anti-Jewish policy based on the belief in Jewish culpability for the death of Christ.

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), convened by Pope Innocent III, issued several canons concerning Jews. Canon 68 decreed:

“Jews and Saracens of both sexes... must be distinguished in public from other people by their dress.”

This law did not explicitly mention deicide, but the underlying rationale was theological: Jews were marked as a fallen people, no longer in covenant, and unworthy of social integration. Their continued presence was permitted as a testimony to the truth of Christianity, but their spiritual inferiority was to be made visible and legally codified.

The Good Friday liturgy, practiced throughout medieval Europe, also reinforced the deicide charge. The traditional Latin prayer included the phrase:

“Oremus et pro perfidis Judaeis”

Translation: “Let us pray also for the perfidious Jews...”

Though the Latin *perfidis* originally meant “faithless” or “unbelieving,” it came to carry the connotation of treachery and betrayal, implying that Jews were not merely outside the Church, but guilty of apostasy and conspiracy. The prayer asked God to lift the veil from their hearts, echoing Pauline language from 2

Corinthians 3:15, but in practice, it affirmed that Jews were spiritually blind by nature, having rejected the light of Christ.

Together, Passion plays and liturgy created a cycle of performance and prayer that reinforced the deicide charge each year, linking collective Jewish guilt with the most sacred events of the Christian calendar.

5.3 Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable

While popular and institutional expressions of the deicide charge were growing, influential theologians and monastic leaders further shaped its theological articulation.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the towering figure of 12th-century Cistercian spirituality, was known for his eloquence and deep influence over Church politics, including the preaching of the Second Crusade. While Bernard argued against indiscriminate violence toward Jews, he nevertheless upheld their guilt for the death of Christ:

“They are for a time tolerated, but they live under perpetual disgrace and the wrath of God.”

(Sermon on the Song of Songs, 43)

He pleaded for the protection of Jews not because they were innocent, but because their suffering was already assured by God’s judgment for deicide. In Bernard’s vision, the Jew was a living reminder of the crucifixion, whose suffering fulfilled prophecy.

Peter the Venerable (c. 1092–1156), abbot of Cluny and one of the most respected intellectuals of his age, took a harsher tone. He advocated polemical writing against Islam and Judaism and was uncompromising in his denunciations:

“Yes, you Jews, I say, do you not fear the judgment of God... you who... have not God as your father but the devil?”

(Adversus Iudaeos)

This direct allusion to John 8:44 (“*You are of your father the devil*”) made explicit the belief that Jews were not only guilty of Christ’s death, but were aligned with satanic forces. Peter’s theology served as the moral justification for restrictions, conversionary pressure, and theological contempt.

By the close of the medieval period, the deicide charge had become an organic feature of Christian Europe. It was embedded in the calendar, in legal codes, in literature, and in religious education. Jews lived as tolerated outsiders—permitted to exist, but as marked people, set apart by divine wrath for their alleged crime. Their role as “Christ-killers” was not only believed—it was enacted, prayed, legislated, and memorized. This phase of Christian history ensured that the theological accusation became a permanent feature of the Western imagination, passed from generation to generation through piety as much as through doctrine.

VI. Reformation and Early Modern Echoes

The Protestant Reformation, beginning in the early 16th century, radically reshaped much of Western Christian theology, liturgy, and ecclesiastical authority. Reformers such as Martin Luther rejected papal supremacy, criticized Catholic sacramentalism, and emphasized Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) as the basis of doctrine. However, in their views on the Jews—particularly regarding the deicide charge—the Reformers often preserved and at times intensified the antisemitic legacy of the medieval Church.

This period marks a rhetorical escalation, especially in the later writings of Martin Luther, whose disappointment in the Jews' rejection of his early outreach led to some of the most vitriolic anti-Jewish writings of the early modern period. Luther and his followers not only perpetuated the theological narrative of deicide but expanded it into a program of destruction, exclusion, and demonization, paving the way for centuries of Protestant complicity in anti-Jewish attitudes.

6.1 Martin Luther (1543)

Martin Luther (1483–1546), the German monk and theologian whose 95 Theses sparked the Reformation in 1517, initially held measured and even hopeful views about the Jews. In his early writings, he criticized the Catholic Church's harsh treatment of Jews and expressed the hope that they might convert to Christianity if presented with the true Gospel. However, when such conversions did not materialize, Luther's tone shifted dramatically.

In 1543, near the end of his life, he published *Vom Schem Hamphoras* and *On the Jews and Their Lies*, works that abandoned all restraint and revived the full theological arsenal of deicide accusations. These writings had a profound and lasting impact on German-speaking Protestant regions and would later be cited by Nazis as spiritual precedent.

In *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther wrote:

"They are guilty of the blood of the Lord, for they call down his blood upon themselves and their children, as we read in Matthew 27:25."

(*On the Jews and Their Lies*, §11)

Here Luther explicitly cites the most notorious verse of the Passion narrative, presenting the Jews as having voluntarily accepted the curse of deicide. He uses this scriptural moment not as a past event, but as a living sentence, forever attached to the Jewish people.

He goes further, recommending harsh measures:

"First, their synagogues should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it."

(*On the Jews and Their Lies*, §12)

"Second, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed. Third, they should be deprived of their prayer-books and Talmuds."

(*ibid.*)

These proposals—total destruction of synagogues, banning of Jewish texts, and economic exclusion—amount to a theological justification for systematic persecution. Luther frames these acts as Christian duty, based on the Jews' rejection of Christ and participation in His death.

His legacy in this regard is especially grim. The enduring influence of Luther in German-speaking Protestantism ensured that his antisemitic theology remained in circulation for centuries. During the Third Reich, his anti-Jewish writings were republished by the Nazi Party, and cited in churches and schools as part of their ideological program.

6.2 Early Protestant Sermons and Tracts

Beyond Luther himself, early Protestantism across Europe inherited and adapted the traditional language of Jewish betrayal, even while reforming other aspects of Christian thought. Sermons, catechisms, and polemical tracts continued to portray Jews as blinded by pride, spiritually hardened, and permanently guilty of deicide.

One key example is the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), a foundational doctrinal text for Reformed (Calvinist) communities. While not explicitly antisemitic, its explanation of Christ's death leaves open the traditional interpretive framework, and early Protestant preachers often made the connection explicit.

Reformers in England, such as Hugh Latimer and John Foxe, also used the crucifixion narratives to denounce the Jews as Christ's betrayers. In 1570, an English Passion play performed during Holy Week was described by observers as featuring Jews in demonic masks shouting for Christ's death, followed by triumphant images of Christ's resurrection and the Jews' damnation.

Similarly, in early Puritan preaching in both England and the American colonies, Jews were often invoked in sermons as types of unbelievers—those who had been offered grace but rejected it through murder. The deicide charge, while more implicit in some contexts, was deeply embedded in homiletic symbolism, especially around Easter.

Protestant theology, with its heavy emphasis on covenantal continuity, often portrayed the Jews as having broken the covenant by rejecting and killing Christ. While some Reformers—especially later in the 17th century—began to develop more nuanced views of Israel's role in salvation history, the dominant tone of the early modern era was one of inherited guilt and moral contempt.

The Reformation did not diminish the deicide charge—it reaffirmed it with renewed intensity, merging scriptural literalism with theological polemic and, in the case of Luther, with explicit political recommendations. The claim that the Jews were murderers of Christ persisted as a moral rationale for exclusion, a theological justification for violence, and an emotional symbol of betrayal in Protestant Europe. Though expressed in new vernaculars and printed with the tools of modernity, the message remained faithful to its ancient root: *"His blood be on us and on our children."*

VII. 18th–20th Century Continuities

The Enlightenment, the rise of nationalism, and the eventual secularization of European political structures did not extinguish the theological legacy of the deicide charge. Instead, from the 18th century through the early 20th century, the belief that the Jewish people were responsible for the death of Christ persisted in Catholic and Orthodox homiletics, popular religious theater, and ultimately modern political propaganda. These centuries saw a gradual transmutation of religious antisemitism into racial antisemitism, yet the charge of deicide continued to serve as a moral and historical justification for exclusion, marginalization, and violence.

Even as some Christian intellectuals began to challenge earlier teachings and advocate tolerance, the language of inherited Jewish guilt was regularly heard in churches, read in catechisms, and staged in Passion performances. With the rise of fascism in the 20th century, these ancient themes were co-opted and intensified to serve genocidal aims.

7.1 Catholic and Orthodox Homiletics

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Catholic and Orthodox clergy continued to preach sermons that referenced the Jews as guilty of Christ's death. These teachings were especially prominent during Holy Week, when the Passion narratives were read aloud and dramatized liturgically. The traditional structure of the liturgical calendar itself made the deicide accusation cyclical: each year, the story of Christ's betrayal, condemnation, and crucifixion was retold, and each year the Jews were presented as its principal authors.

The Good Friday liturgy, observed across Latin Christendom, included the prayer:

“Oremus et pro perfidis Judaeis...”

Translation: “Let us pray also for the perfidious Jews...”

Though the Latin *perfidis* originally meant "faithless," by this period it was commonly understood as "treacherous" or "deceitful". The prayer petitioned God to remove the "veil" from Jewish hearts—echoing 2 Corinthians 3:15—but functionally reinforced the view that the Jews were blind by their own sin and were to blame for rejecting and killing the Messiah.

In Orthodox traditions, particularly in Slavic and Greek churches, Holy Week chants and readings similarly described the Jews as murderers of Christ. In Byzantine liturgy, Jews were referred to as *lawless*, *God-slayers*, or *the killers of the Lord*. These hymns, while allegorical in tone, were often received by congregations as historical truths about contemporary Jews rather than ancient actors.

A typical Holy Thursday hymn in the Byzantine Rite reads:

“The law-transgressing people, O Christ, nailed You to the Cross...”

Such phrases, repeated annually in worship, helped reinforce a transgenerational notion of guilt. In both Catholic and Orthodox settings, these texts kept alive the spiritual framework of inherited Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ well into the modern age.

7.2 Passion Plays in Europe

The Passion Play remained one of the most powerful and accessible public forms of Christian teaching into the 20th century. By staging the events of Christ's death before mass audiences, these plays served not only as religious drama but as cultural catechism, embedding theological messages in emotional and symbolic form.

Among the most famous of these was the Oberammergau Passion Play, first performed in Bavaria in 1634 as a votive offering during the plague and regularly performed every ten years thereafter. The script, passed down and adapted over centuries, prominently featured Jewish leaders and crowds demanding Christ's execution and mocking Him as He suffered.

The most inflammatory moment came when the Jewish crowd collectively shouted:

"His blood be on us and on our children!"
(Matthew 27:25)

In the pre-1990s versions of the play, this line was emphasized with ritualized theatricality: the Jewish characters, garbed in caricatured costumes, screamed the verse while Christ was condemned. Their grotesque portrayal, contrasted with Christ's meekness, dramatized the guilt of the Jews in terms easily absorbed by spectators—many of whom were illiterate or doctrinally unsophisticated.

Adolf Hitler, who attended the play in 1934, praised it publicly:

"It is a convincing portrayal of the eternal Jew."

The Nazi regime recognized the play's power to reinforce the racialized antisemitic narratives they were crafting. The theological myth of deicide thus became aesthetic ammunition for political ideology, showing how persistent Christian imagery could be repurposed to modern ends.

It was not until the late 20th century—especially after Vatican II—that the Oberammergau play was substantially revised, with the removal or alteration of lines like Matthew 27:25 and a reduction in the visual demonization of Jews. But

for centuries before that, it functioned as a devotional indictment of the Jewish people, seen by hundreds of thousands and accepted as religious truth.

7.3 Nazi Exploitation

The Third Reich did not invent antisemitism, but it did weaponize its religious roots, including the deicide charge, to build popular support for its racial policies. The Nazis actively drew upon centuries of Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric to legitimize legal discrimination and, eventually, mass extermination.

One of the most infamous propagandists, Julius Streicher, editor of *Der Stürmer*, frequently invoked the idea that Jews were responsible for killing Christ:

“The Jews killed Christ, and they would do it again—today, tomorrow, whenever they could.”

Der Stürmer, a weekly tabloid full of lurid imagery and inflammatory headlines, often depicted Jews as blood-drinkers and Christ-killers, recycling medieval imagery for modern consumption. One notorious 1934 issue featured an illustration of a Jewish butcher stabbing a bleeding Jesus with the caption:

“The Jews are our misfortune. They murdered our Savior.”

This motif—Jesus as the first victim of Jewish malevolence—linked traditional Christian piety with modern racial ideology. It translated centuries of inherited theological accusation into emotional justification for state-sponsored violence.

The Nazi SS publications and education materials also cited Martin Luther’s 1543 tract *On the Jews and Their Lies* to defend their policies of exclusion and annihilation. Luther’s recommendations for burning synagogues and expelling Jews were quoted as the voice of a Christian patriot, revealing how Protestant theological antisemitism was mobilized for genocidal purposes.

In sermons delivered by Nazi-aligned clergy, especially in the pro-Nazi “German Christian” movement (*Deutsche Christen*), the crucifixion was framed as the beginning of Jewish hostility to German civilization. Christ was presented not only

as a spiritual Messiah, but as a proto-Germanic martyr destroyed by a foreign and parasitic race.

In this way, the theological accusation of deicide was secularized, racialized, and modernized, but never abandoned. Its religious authority gave moral cover to policies of marginalization, segregation, and ultimately extermination.

Across the 18th to 20th centuries, the charge that the Jews killed Christ was not merely remembered—it was ritualized, dramatized, institutionalized, and repurposed. From the pulpit to the stage, from the sanctuary to the concentration camp, the accusation endured—an ancient charge made horrifyingly modern.

VIII. Conclusion

The accusation that the Jewish people are collectively responsible for the death of Jesus Christ—the deicide charge—has proven to be one of the most durable and far-reaching theological claims in the history of Christian thought. It began as a cluster of scriptural verses, articulated in moments of conflict and rhetorical defense, and evolved into a foundational component of Christian identity over nearly two millennia. As the Church emerged from a persecuted sect into the dominant religious authority of Europe, the accusation shifted accordingly: from polemic to liturgy, from allegory to law, and from abstract theology to cultural reflex.

This charge was neither marginal nor accidental. It became deeply embedded in the structure of Christian tradition, recited from pulpits, performed on stages, enshrined in prayers, and codified in laws. It was spoken by Church Fathers like John Chrysostom and Ambrose, repeated in medieval Passion plays, affirmed by Reformation leaders like Martin Luther, and finally transformed into a modern myth of racial enmity in Nazi propaganda. From the Gospel cry—“His blood be on us and on our children”—to the public incitements of *Der Stürmer*, the continuity is both striking and undeniable.

The theological power of the deicide charge lies in its scriptural foundation, often cited without context or nuance. Passages from Matthew, Acts, and 1 Thessalonians were repeatedly interpreted to mean not merely that certain Jewish leaders were involved in Christ's death, but that the entire Jewish people, across all generations, bore a unique and irrevocable guilt. These texts were deployed not only to explain Jewish suffering but to justify it, rendering persecution a form of divine justice. Through this lens, exile, poverty, and violence were not crimes against a people but confirmations of a cosmic verdict.

This paper has traced the long arc of the deicide charge from the 1st century to the 20th, without attempting to resolve, repudiate, or theologize beyond historical presentation. It has sought to demonstrate that the accusation, while expressed in different rhetorical registers and social contexts, retained a remarkable consistency of function: to mark the Jew as outsider, traitor, and enemy. Whether voiced in the cathedral, on the stage, or through state-sponsored newspapers, the message endured.

Contemporary efforts to revisit, revise, or reject this history—whether through liturgical reform, theological reconciliation, or interfaith dialogue—belong to another discussion. This work has instead illuminated the uninterrupted presence of the deicide charge within Christian heritage, not as an aberration but as a tradition sustained by religious authority and reinforced by cultural repetition.

To study the charge is not merely to review a polemical idea. It is to encounter a recurring theological grammar of exclusion—a grammar whose consequences shaped the lives of countless individuals and communities for centuries. The question of what the Church has done with this grammar, and what it now chooses to do with it, is the burden of the present.

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