

History of Antisemitism

Antisemitism is a term that refers to prejudice or discrimination¹ against people of the Jewish religion. This is a history that dates as far back as the creation of Judaism as a religion and continues to impact the lives of Jews around the world today.

Ancient Times

Early Jewish people, the Hebrews, were the first documented monotheistic² religion in the Ancient world. From the beginning they stood out as different from the other polytheistic³ religions in civilizations such as Greece, Egypt and Rome.

Jesus of Nazareth was, himself, Jewish. When he was crucified, many people blamed the Jews for the events leading up to his death. In the years following his death, his disciples came to be known as “Christians.” The Jewish people did not recognize Christ as the Messiah and were discriminated against for their unwillingness to adopt the new religion of Christianity.

The Middle Ages (700 – 1500 A.D.)

During the Middle Ages, Christians continued to spread hateful, false information about Jews. They made up stories that Jews grew horns and tails and ritually murdered Christians. This contributed to Jews being pushed to the outskirts of society.

In the 14th century, continued hatred of the Jewish people was spread by Christians because they were enraged that Jews refused to convert to Christianity. At that time, the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) killed approximately one-third of the population in Europe. Christians continued to spread lies and blame the Jews for causing the Plague. This is an example of how Jewish people were blamed for societal problems for which they had no control.

¹ Discrimination: To be treated unfairly based on your religion, gender, race, etc.

² Monotheistic: A religion that believes in one God

³ Polytheistic: A religion that believes in many gods

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Christian Church continued to spread false information that encouraged Christians to kill Jews. Many Jewish people were deprived of their Civil Rights and were not allowed to own land. They were forced to live in ghettos, and they had to identify themselves with a hat or badge, so everyone knew they were Jewish. Since many Jews did not have political or economic opportunities for success, many became moneylenders. This was a trade that many Christians considered below their stature and provided another source of persecution of Jews. Nonetheless, this led to financial success for many Jewish people. From this practice of moneylending, a stereotype was created that all Jews were hungry for money and greedy.

Exclusion, Persecution, and Genocide⁴ of Jews in 20th Century

Based on the hundreds of years of prejudice that was normalized by empires and the Catholic church, it became standard practice for Jews to be singled out as the source of misfortune⁵.

This false belief was part of what led to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany in the 1930s. The German Nazis implemented what they called “The Final Solution.” This was an attempt to kill all Jews living in Europe, and as a result, 6 million Jews lost their lives.

This part of history proves that hateful language about a group of people can result in serious consequences. As a matter of fact, hate crimes against Jews continue to happen in the United States and around the world today. The perpetrators⁶ of these crimes, use the same excuses and lies that started with the history of antisemitism.

⁴ Genocide: To kill a large group of people on purpose.

⁵ Misfortune: Bad luck

⁶ Perpetrator: A person who carries out an illegal act