

The Jews and God's Wrath

In one brief section of 1 Thessalonians, Paul goes off on a brief tangent of condemnation against “the Jews” (2:14–16). He levels six charges: (1) they persecuted Christians in Judea; (2) they killed the Lord Jesus; (3) they killed the prophets; (4) they drove Paul and his companions out—probably a reference to forcing them to leave Macedonia (cf. Acts 17:5, 13–14); (5) they displease God; (6) they “oppose everyone” by hindering the Christian evangelization of Gentiles. Paul says that by doing such things, the Jews have been “filling up the measure of their sins” and that now God’s wrath has overtaken them at last.

These verses have had a terrible influence in Christian history, inspiring anti-Semitism and lending support to centuries of mistreatment of Jewish people at the hands of Gentiles versed in the Christian scriptures.

Scholars note that the verses are not typical of Paul. Elsewhere, Paul identifies *himself* as a persecutor of the church (Gal. 1:22–23; cf. Acts 7:58). Instead of blaming the Jews for killing Jesus, he attributes the death of Jesus to “the rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:8), by which he probably means evil spiritual powers (cf. Col. 2:15). And rather than speaking of anyone incurring God’s wrath for killing Jesus, Paul normally speaks of Jesus giving his life voluntarily in order that people might be saved from God’s wrath (Rom. 5:6–9).

Paul was often in conflict with his fellow Jews, and he claims to have suffered at their hands (2 Cor. 11:24). Still, the attitude expressed in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 seems markedly different from his statements about God’s continued dealings with Israel elsewhere (Rom. 9:1–5; 10:1–4; 11:25–32). A few scholars wonder whether these verses (1 Thess. 2:14–16) might have been written by someone other than Paul and inserted into this letter at a later date, but there is no direct evidence in any of our manuscripts to support that supposition. More often, the verses are regarded as “polemical hyperbole”—an angry rant that exemplifies the rhetorical tactics of the day but surely does not represent Paul’s full or reasoned view on the subject. It is possible that he understood such rhetoric as being in line with Israel’s own scriptures, which contain numerous passages that speak words of condemnation against God’s chosen people (cf. Deut. 32; 2 Chron. 36:15–21; Amos 6:1–8).

Other New Testament examples of polemical rants against Jews are found in Matthew 23:13–39; John 8:39–47; Acts 7:51–53.