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St. Augustine's Jews and the Undeserving Poor

[📅 August 30, 2019 \(https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/st-augustines-jews-undeserving-poor/\)](https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/st-augustines-jews-undeserving-poor/) [👤 \(\)](#)

Azzan Yadin-Israel on the vilification of the poor

That the Republican Party has championed laws hostile to the poor is more a factual observation than political polemic. Many of the policies precede the Trump administration (partial list): refusal of Republican-controlled state governments to implement federally-funded expansions of the Medicaid program, ongoing reductions to unemployment benefits, opposition to raising the minimum wage, and severe cuts to public education and services borne disproportionately by low-income Americans. Populist rhetoric aside, the current president's policies have stayed the course, with budget proposals that include cuts to Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, food stamps (SNAP), and assistance for needy families (TANF). Perhaps the most dramatic assault on the poor is the Republican Party's sustained attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act even, or maybe precisely, absent an alternative.

Despite the prominence of these policies, the political calculus motivating them is not clear, as they would prove devastating to the lower-income white voters who provide electoral support to Republicans in, inter alia, a number of battleground states. Some observers try to explain the anti-poor animus as the result of growing partisanship within American politics, a sort of radicalized legislative offspring of Ronald Reagan's demonization of public-aid recipients as "welfare queens." But this explanation fails on two counts. First, in areas such as immigration, trade, energy, the EU, Russia, and more, current Republican positions would be unrecognizable to Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, so it is necessary to explain why the anti-poor policies were radicalized while others were not. Second, any attempt to divide anti-poor policies along neat partisan lines distorts the more complex historical reality. The Republican Richard Nixon established the progressive Earned Income Tax Credit and proposed an expansion of the food stamp program, while the Democrat Bill Clinton oversaw the dismantling of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children and passed the Welfare Reform Bill. As the late Michael Katz showed in his classic work, *The Undeserving Poor*, these are only the most recent examples of an ongoing struggle between two conceptions of poverty that traverse the partisan divide: poverty as a state of economic misfortune that could, under certain circumstances, affect anyone; versus poverty as the result of moral failings—sloth, alcoholism, and the like. But if Katz shows that the debate is perennial, it still remains an open question why the "undeserving poor" view came to such prominence in the eighties and why it continues to dominate Republican policies today.

I want to approach this question through the fourth-century writings of St. Augustine and his discussion of the theological scandal of continued Jewish life, in his tractate *Against Faustus*. The Faustus in question was a Manichean gnostic who understood the advent of Christ as signaling a radically new beginning. The New Testament, in this view, is neither an

outgrowth of the Hebrew Bible, nor the fulfillment of its prophetic promise. Rather, the New Testament is a repudiation of the Hebrew Bible, revealing it to be the work of a deity that oppresses humanity and seeks to deny it the possibility of salvation. Augustine's response to Faustus leverages the astounding historic success of the church's mission, which Augustine presents as a realization of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis that "I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands." Augustine writes:

"[S]omeone could perhaps without impudence refuse to believe this before he saw all the nations come to believe in Christ, who was proclaimed to be descendant of Abraham. But now we see what we read was predicted so long ago has been brought about, since all the nations are now blessed in the descendant of Abraham."

This statement reflects the historic particularity of Augustine's situation. Born in 345, three decades after Constantine's conversion to Christianity, and two decades after the Council of Nicaea, Augustine was 35 at the time of the Edict of Thessalonica, which declared Christianity the formal religion of the Roman—now Holy Roman—Empire. Augustine knew the church was beset by challenges from within (heresy) and without (paganism), but he was keenly aware that Christianity had gone from being a religion persecuted by the Roman Empire to the heir and successor of the empire, a religion that now encompassed "all nations."

But if the transformation of the church into a universal institution can be framed as the realization of the words of the Hebrew prophets, it also casts the continued existence of Jews, that is, their non-conversion, as a theological conundrum. In part, this is due to the fact that Jews are the descendants of Abraham and as such the intended recipients of the biblical promise fulfilled through Jesus, who was himself "proclaimed to be a descendant of Abraham." And in part because Jesus and his apostles were Jews who preached to other Jews, often in synagogues. Both as the original addressees of God's promise, then, and as the earliest audience of Jesus' teaching, the Jews should have been the first to embrace the Gospel. Their refusal to do so, their ongoing preference for the debased state of Carnal Israel over elevation to Israel in the Spirit, might be understood as a refutation of the church's claim to empire, a particularist rebel outpost holding out against Christian universalism.

Augustine addresses this theological difficulty through his doctrine of Jewish witness. "Look now," he exhorts Faustus, and see that "wherever that people is scattered, how they groan in grief over the Kingdom that they lost and tremble with fear under the countless Christian peoples." The Jews have lost their national home and their Temple, and they now live in a state of constant wandering, a degraded existence divinely ordained as a sign to the world of the fate of those who reject Christ. In so arguing, Augustine brilliantly reverses the valence of Jewish perseverance, transforming it from a recalcitrant refusal to embrace Christ's kingdom—and thus a challenge to the universality of the church—into a witness to that very universality.

But does God keep an entire nation in a state of suffering and degradation merely to serve as witnesses to the glory of the Church? Not in the least, Augustine argues. Rather, God rightly punishes the the Jews for their failure to embrace Christ: "even if the Jews were formerly right in doing those works [the commandments, AYI] they are guilty of unbelief insofar as, when Christ came, they did not distinguish the time of the New Testament from the time of the Old Testament." Guilty, because their failure stems not from factual error but from moral failing. Instead of embracing Christ's teachings, "sin reigned in their mortal body so that they obeyed its desires." In a particularly damning image, Augustine links Israel to Cain. Like Cain, Israel murdered their brother, Jesus; and like Cain, who said, "Am I my brother's keeper?" they refuse to confess: "If Cain had acknowledged his guilt ... he might have mastered his sin," but neither he nor Israel do so. Ultimately, then, the empirical failure of the Church's universal claim (i.e., the non-conversion of the Jews) is rooted not in a

theological error on the part of the Church, but in the immorality and corruption of the Jews. Their refusal to submit to God's grace is willful and defiant, and as such does not detract from the universal truth of the Gospel but rather justifies the Jews' ongoing punishment.

No direct historical lineage runs from Augustine to those who today promote anti-poor legislation, but Augustine's Jews are an illuminating analogue to the idea of the undeserving poor. The concept that unites these disparate historical situations is "empire," understood as a form of universal hegemony. Like the Jews in relation to the church, the poor are—at least potentially—proof of the shortcomings of American capitalism: living counterexamples to the capitalist catechism that the United States is the land of opportunity, where all can prosper so long as they work hard and play by the rules. No, argue the champions of the empire of capitalism, the persistence of poverty proves nothing of the sort; the opportunity is there, but the poor refuse to take it. Their ongoing existence is not evidence of flaws in America's political and economic system, but rather of their own moral failings: their laziness, their selfishness, their stiff-necked refusal to rise out of poverty even though economic redemption is there for the taking. Like Augustine's Jews, the degraded status of the poor is at once evidence of their moral failure and its rightful punishment.

It is no coincidence that the vilification of the poor becomes a prominent political motif during Reagan's presidency and finds legislative expression in Clinton's welfare reforms, a period in which claims to American supremacy were framed not so much in national or ethnic language, but in terms of political economy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc were viewed at the time as the global-political manifestation of Capitalism's self-evident superiority to Communism—a view espoused by mainstream Republicans and Democrats alike. In recent years, the political discourse has shifted and some of the fault lines of American capitalism have come under increased scrutiny. Issues like growing inequality, stagnant wage growth, and the need for affordable health care are now part of the mainstream political conversation—all issues that, at their core, speak to the desperate plight of many of America's poor. It should come as no surprise, then, that the defenders of the current system would seek to discredit the notion that poverty is an inherent problem of capitalism, working tirelessly to demonstrate the perfidy of the poor and to punish them for the sin of poverty.

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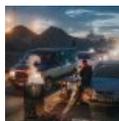
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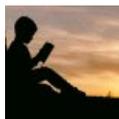
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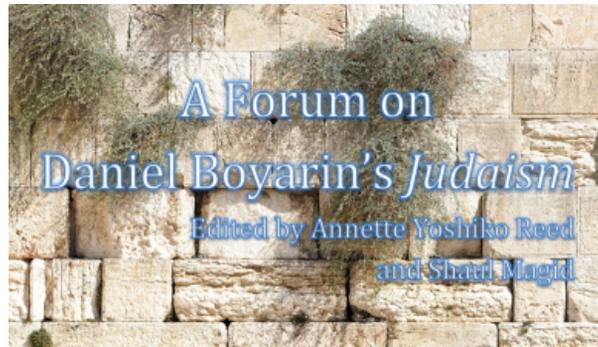


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