HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY
“The First Crusade and the Jews” (John 18:36)

The Jews in the Byzantine Empire became known as the Sephardic Jews. After the death of Justinian the Great in 565 AD many of the laws against the Jews remained. However, over time the Jews were granted more toleration. It is reckoned that from the 7th to the 13th century the Jews only endured three sustained periods (totaling 50 years) of persecution in the Byzantine Empire.

MUSLIM CONQUESTS

From 634 AD onwards the Muslim conquests (also referred to as the Arab Conquests) began to slowly erode the powers and territories of the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Sassanid Empire. The constant wars between the Byzantines and the Persian Sassanids eventually exhausted both empires both militarily and economically. It was at this period of vulnerability that led to the 7th century Muslim Conquests.

Eventually the Muslims conquered the Sassanid Empire around 642 AD, which is why Iran, Iraq, and Syria are predominantly Islamic countries today. The Muslim conquests in the 7th century established a Islamic Caliphate of around thirteen million square kilometers (five million square miles). This included the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, Middle East, and Central Asia. It eventually stretched from the borders of China and India in the East to Spain and Portugal in the West.

The Sephardic Jews were caught in the middle of these changing borders in the Middle East and North Africa. Some of the Jews favoured the Muslim conquerors, as they hoped this would result in greater religious freedom for them. Islam and Judaism have many parallel beliefs and the Arab people and the Jews are both descended from Abraham. Although the Arabs never
regarded the Jews as their equals, it is generally fair to observe that down the centuries the Jews have been treated better by the Arabs in the lands of the Muslim conquests than by the so-called Christian Byzantine and Western Roman Empires. The Jews adopted Arabic as their second language.

The net result of the Muslim conquests was that the territories in the Middle East controlled by the Byzantines were diminished. The favourable attitude of the Jews to the Arabs angered many of the Byzantines. The Byzantine Emperor, Heraclius who ruled from 610 to 641 AD became the first emperor to force the conversion of Jews to Christianity. By the 12th century it is reported that there were only about 2,500 Jews in Constantinople, 500 Jews in Thessalonica, and around 300 to 400 in Rhodes and Corinth.

GREAT SCHISM OF 1054

For centuries the two rival churches of East and West had grown apart. One was predominantly Latin speaking and the other was predominantly Greek speaking. This was further intensified after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD when the last emperor of the western part of the Roman Empire was deposed. Germanic tribes and other invaders ruled over various parts of what was the Western Roman Empire. This resulted in a diminishing of direct communication and cooperation between East and West. As a consequence the number of individuals who spoke both Latin and Greek dwindled.

Another significant difference was that in the Eastern Byzantine Empire the Emperor was the supreme authority in both church and state whereas in the West the Bishop of Rome had relative independence from the state as there was no longer a Western Roman Emperor. This enhanced greatly the power and influence of the papacy over the leaders of the Eastern Church. Apart from linguistic and cultural differences, they had profound theological disagreements on matters pertaining to the Holy Spirit known as the "Filioque dispute," leavened bread in the Eucharist, Emperor's authority, papal primacy etc. Things came to a head in the 11th century and a public split emerged.

In 1054, the Greek Orthodox Church of the Byzantine Empire severed all relations with the Western Roman Catholic Church. This was known as The Great Schism. In 1053 the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople Michael Cerularius ordered the closure of all Latin churches in Constantinople. In 1054 the representatives of the Western Roman Catholic Church came to Constantinople to demand that the Eastern Church submit to the supremacy of the papacy. When this was refused, the leader of the Roman Catholic legation, Cardinal Humbert, excommunicated Cerularius. The Greek Patriarch of Constantinople responded by excommunicating the Catholic representatives.

These public excommunications led to a bitter split between the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox churches that lasted till the present day. Both sides accuse the other of heresy and initiating the split. Despite a number of very public attempts to reconcile the two divided churches no effective reconciliation has occurred. Even the advent of the ecumenical movement through organisations like the World Council of Churches has not managed to bridge the gap.

CRUSADES AND THE JEWS
In the 11th century we saw the rise of the Crusades. These crusades with their atrocities only serve to witness the utter spiritual degradation of the mediaeval Roman church. Church Historian, Philip Schaff sums them up,

The Crusades were armed pilgrimages to Jerusalem under the banner of the cross. They form one of the most characteristic chapters of the Middle Ages and have a romantic and sentimental, as well as a religious and military, interest. They were a sublime product of the Christian imagination, and constitute a chapter of rare interest in the history of humanity. They exhibit the muscular Christianity of the new nations of the West which were just emerging from barbarism and heathenism….They were a succession of tournaments between two continents and two religions, struggling for supremacy,—Europe and Asia, Christianity and Mohammedanism. Such a spectacle the world has never seen before nor since, and may never see again. These expeditions occupied the attention of Europe for more than two centuries, beginning with 1095…There were seven greater Crusades, the first beginning in 1095, the last terminating with the death of St. Louis, 1270. Between these dates and after 1270 there were other minor expeditions, and of these not the least worthy of attention were the tragic Crusades of the children.

The First Crusade came about because of: (1) the threat of Islam to the Byzantine Empire and (2) the control of the Holy Land by the Muslims. The Byzantines lost control of Palestine since 636 AD at the Battle of Yarmouk along what today are the borders of Syria-Jordan and Syria-Israel, east of the Sea of Galilee. Christian sites in the Holy Land were affected by the change of rule. For instance, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was destroyed and latter another Islamic ruler permitted it to be rebuilt. A number of Jews and Christians were allowed to live in Palestine, as long as they accepted their subordinate Dhimmi status as “People of the Book.” Although there was a degree of toleration of Christians in Palestine, things began to change over the centuries. Many Christian pilgrims complained of their ill treatment when visiting Jerusalem by the conquering Seljuk Turks. Some were captured and some were even murdered.

As early as 1074 the Byzantine Orthodox church requested help from the Church of Rome to the imminent threat to them from the expanding Islamic Empire, which had now captured Palestine, Antioch, and Turkey. They were now threatening the borders of Albania and Bulgaria. The remaining Byzantine Empire was at risk, especially from the Seljuk Turks. The Byzantines urgently wrote to the pope seeking assistance.

At this critical moment Pope Urban II had just been elected to the papal throne in Rome. He saw an opportunity to unify the divided East and West churches. He called for a crusading army at the Council of Clermont in 1095 to aid their brethren in the Eastern Church and deliver the Holy City from the control of unbelievers. One of the popular advocates of the crusades was an eccentric preacher called Peter the Hermit. Peter was a monk who had been in Jerusalem and witnessed the troubles of the Christian community there. This call raised an army of 60,000 men (mostly French) in Western Europe that was then sent out in the First Crusade. Pope Urban II told the crusaders, “You are soldiers of the cross. Wear on your breasts or shoulders the blood-red sign of the cross. Wear it as a token that His help will never fail you, as the pledge of a vow never to be recalled.”

One of the promises that the pope gave was that anyone who went on a crusade would be guaranteed forgiveness of sins and a place in heaven. This promise particularly attracted some
of the worst of society such as criminals, who felt this was the only way to get to heaven and have an adventure at the same time. Another attraction was the thought of walking on the sacred soil of the Holy Land. Pilgrims who had returned from the land were thought to have an almost saintly appearance.

It took almost two years for the Crusaders to reach the Holy Land. More than half of them never arrived because of plague, war, and hunger. These marauding hordes went through Western and Eastern Europe and engaged in pillaging and killing. One of the enemies of Christianity they were told were the Jews. They were particularly incited by the sermons of anti-Semitic priests and Cardinals. So as they travelled throughout Europe the crusaders took the opportunity to attack Jews in France and Germany. The riches of the Jews were especially plundered. The soldiers also attacked Jewish communities in the Byzantine Empire such as in Hungary as they made their way to Turkey to fight with the Muslims. Many Jews were forced to embrace Christianity or face death. There are a number of recorded mass suicides by Jews who refused to do so. Some estimate that as many as 25,000 Jews died. Some have called this period of genocide “the first Holocaust.”

The crusaders joined with the Byzantine troops in Constantinople and managed to defeat the Turks. Eventually they re-conquered Lebanon, Antioch, and finally the greatest prize of all, Jerusalem in 1099. This took place after the siege of Jerusalem from 7 June to 15 July 1099. Christian pilgrims from all over Europe flocked to the Holy Land to celebrate that Jerusalem was under Christian rule for the first time in 461 years. The First Crusade established the first four crusader states in the Eastern Mediterranean:

(1) The County of Edessa (1098)
(2) The Principality of Antioch (1098)
(3) The Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099)  
(4) The County of Tripoli (1104)

One of the leaders of the First Crusade, Godfrey of Boullion was made *Advocatus Sancti Sepulchri* ("advocate" or "defender of the Holy Sepulchre"). He was elected king but refused to accept the crown as king declaring that he could not accept a golden crown in the place that Christ wore a crown of thorns.

Most of the Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem had fought with the Muslim rulers against the invading Crusaders. When the Crusaders took control of Jerusalem they massacred many of the Muslim inhabitants on the Temple Mount. They also burned all the synagogues down with the Jews inside of them. The Crusaders converted the Dome of the Rock that was built in the 9th century into a church. Archbishop and historian, William of Tyre (c. 1130-1186) records, “They cut down with the sword, every one whom they found in Jerusalem, and spared no one. The victors were covered with blood from head to foot.” Many of the remaining Arab residents were forcibly converted at the point of the sword to Christianity. This is the root of many of the Christian Arab population in the land of Israel today.

Most of the crusader knights returned home to Europe. They were regarded as heroes. This was only the beginning of centuries of bloody wars between the Crusaders and the Arabs. Capturing the city of Jerusalem was relatively straightforward. But defending the city and the surrounding areas would prove much more difficult. The First Crusade was soon followed by the Second to the Ninth Crusades. The crusades were a tragic and unbiblical campaign that did nothing to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. Philip Schaff sums the whole era up well when he wrote,

> The Crusaders sought the living among the dead. They mistook the visible for the invisible, confused the terrestrial and the celestial Jerusalem, and returned disillusioned. They learned in Jerusalem, or after ages have learned through them, that Christ is not there, that He is risen, and ascended into heaven, where He sits at the head of a spiritual kingdom. They conquered Jerusalem, 1099, and lost it, 1187; they reconquered, 1229, and lost again, 1244, the city in which Christ was crucified. False religions are not to be converted by violence, they can only be converted by the slow but sure process of moral persuasion. Hatred kindles hatred, and those who take the sword shall perish by the sword.