

## Encountering the New Testament

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Since 1945 many detailed accounts have been written of anti-Jewish polemic in Christian literature. With few exceptions they begin with the major theologians of the second century CE. Spurred into action by the claim that there is a direct link between the Nazi Holocaust and the Church's negative attitude towards Judaism, scholars have subjected the views of the early Christian fathers to close scrutiny. Their research has demonstrated that antipathy towards Jews is never far from the surface in the writings of some of the most influential theologians. Consequently, this 'teaching of contempt', as the Early Church's presentation of Judaism has been aptly described, is regarded as containing the seeds of modern antisemitism.

### The Taproot of Antisemitism

Although Christians are ready to scour patristic texts for the slightest trace of anti-Judaism, there is a reluctance to subject the New Testament to the same critique. While the works of the fathers may justly be regarded as the source of much of the persecution suffered by Jews at the hands of Gentiles, such a charge cannot be levelled at the Scriptures. Many biblical scholars are adamant that there is no connection between the prejudicial statements about Jews and Judaism found in the New Testament and the barbarian of Hitler. They refuse to believe that what has been termed the 'theological antisemitism' of the Christian era has any basis in the Bible and deny any possible link between biblical teaching and Nazi anti-Jewish policy.

They refuse to believe, for instance, that the hard sayings about the Pharisees attributed to Jesus in Matthew 23, the pointed remarks of Paul about the inferiority of Judaism, and the phrase 'His blood be upon us and upon our children', which, according to Matthew 27:26, was on the lips of the crowd of onlookers at Calvary, could in any way have augmented the sufferings of the Jews over the past two thousand years. They do not concede that one of the

most belligerent references to Jews in all Christian Scripture, found in 1 Thessalonians 12:16 where the author states that they are the deserved recipients of God's wrath, may have been taken by countless generations of Christians as licence to harass and even murder their Jewish neighbours. They dismiss the antisemitic potential in Jesus' scathing description of his Jewish audience in John 8:44 as the children of the devil, and in John the Divine's reference to the 'synagogue of Satan' in Revelation 2:9.

But this standpoint has not gone unchallenged. Jewish theologians in particular have been vocal in their disagreement. Eliezer Berkovitz, for example, claims that 'Christianity's New Testament has been the most dangerous antisemitic tract in history. Its hatred-charged diatribes against the Pharisees and the Jews have poisoned the hearts and minds of millions and millions of Christians for almost two millennia. Without it Hitler's Mein Kampf could never have been written'. (Judaism 27, 1978, p.325.) Strong words which are totally unacceptable to many Christians. But Berkovitz, an Orthodox Jew, is supported by the eminent Reform theologian Samuel Sandmel. In the last book that he wrote, "Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?" (1978), he concluded that 'it is simply not correct to exempt the New Testament from anti-Semitism and to allocate it to later periods of history. It must be said that innumerable Christians have purged themselves of anti-Semitism, but its expression is to be found in Christian Scripture for all to read' (p. 144).

Jewish scholars are not the only ones to come to this conclusion; their view is shared by reputable Christian theologians. The most extensive investigation to date of the negation of Judaism in Scripture is that carried out by Norman A. Beck, a Lutheran scholar. The subtitle of his book 'Mature Christianity' (2nd. ed. 1993) indicates his concern: 'The recognition and repudiation of the anti-Jewish polemic of the New Testament'. In her controversial study of the theological roots of antisemitism, 'Faith and Fratricide' (1974), the Roman theologian Rosemary Ruether argues that parts of the New Testament were intended by their authors to turn Christians against Jews. She asks pointedly, 'Is it possible to say, "Jesus is the Messiah" without, implicitly or explicitly, saying at the same time "and the Jews be damned"?' (p. 246) James Parkes, the Anglican clergyman who ranks as a doyen in the field of Christian-Jewish

relations, stated categorically that after more than fifty years studying the topic he was convinced that it is dishonest to refuse to face the fact that the basic root of modern antisemitism lies squarely in the New Testament.

## Opposing Views of Scripture

Any consideration of the biblical roots of antisemitism must, therefore, take account of two diametrically opposed views. Both are espoused by distinguished scholars who are acutely conscious of the persecution suffered by Jews and are determined to eradicate the possibility of another Holocaust. However, the lack of agreement between the two sides suggests that the issue will remain on the theological agenda for some time to come and will continue to be vigorously debated. These two views are based on differing concepts of the nature and purpose of Holy Scripture.

The first view, that which denies any connection between the New Testament and later pogroms, is governed by dogmatic considerations. Its protagonists engage in an ideological defence of Scripture. In their opinion, to claim that the Bible is 'sacred' is tantamount to saying that it is morally unassailable and immune to human fallibility. While the early Fathers may be justly condemned for the anti-Judaism because their writings are not considered to be inspired, the same criticism cannot be levelled at the New Testament because in dealing with the Bible the enquirer stands on holy ground.

Proponents of the second view, those who see a connection between Auschwitz and the Gospels, are not as reluctant to submit the Scriptures to searching criticism. They recognize that although Scripture is sacred, it also has a human element. It is linked to historical circumstances. Because the New Testament reflects the ecclesiastical tensions of the nascent Church, the circumstances surrounding its origin should be considered by all who seek to interpret its message in the contemporary world. The implications inherent in the fact that the Word of God comes to us in the words of men and women must be faced, not least with regard to those texts that are hostile to Jews.

The debate between these two standpoints is essentially concerned with authority. The central question is: Have we the right to criticize our religious

traditions? Are we justified in repudiating certain New Testament passages because they are damaging to Jews? Those who use such terms as 'inerrant' and 'infallible' in relation to the Bible will deny the existence of such a right. Our Christian forefathers, however, had no qualms about engaging in subjective interpretation of their own Scriptures. The Early Church pressed selected portions of the Hebrew Bible into service to prove the superiority of Christianity, while neglecting the rest. Appropriate passages were used as a quarry for messianic prophecies and used to prove that the Messiah had come in Jesus of Nazareth, whereas laws governing diet and circumcision, to take but two examples, were given a meaning other than the literal.

Such selectivity and reinterpretation was not confined to the Hebrew Bible; it was applied to the New Testament as well. The stipulations about non-retaliation, almsgiving, self-denial, celibacy, and the role of women in the Church have been either ignored in practice or spiritualized by most Christians. If some aspects of New Testament teaching can justifiably be repudiated, in the sense of their not being regarded as binding the contemporary Christians, cannot the same principle be applied to passages that have proved injurious to Jews for almost two millennia?

### Neutralizing the Antisemitic Potential

It is obvious that a deep antipathy to certain groups of Jews exists in Christian Scripture. Whatever we believe about the intention of the original writers, the dangerous power and antisemitic potential of what they wrote must be recognized. The negative stereotypes, still current in Christian thinking, are to be found in the Bible. Because the Jews, as the children of Satan, killed Christ, they were rejected by God and replaced by the Church. In an attempt to neutralize this potential many biblical scholars are insisting that the New Testament writings be put in their correct historical and sociological context.

To take but one example, the importance of discovering the context of John's Gospel for understanding the author's negative portrayal of Jews has at least three significant ramifications. First, it mitigates the harshness when we appreciate that the early Christians were on the defensive and that vilifying

others was a way of defining themselves. Second, it reminds us that John expresses time bound prejudices against the Jews of his own age, not global anti-Judaism valid for all time. Third, the recognition that the Gospel contains the meditations of a devoted disciple on the Jesus tradition reminds us that John's views of Judaism are his own and not necessarily those of Jesus.

If preachers and teachers over the past two millennia had taken such considerations into account and had wrestled, as we now must, with the limitations imposed on the Bible by the circumstances under which it was written, the Christian perception of the Jew would have been far less negative.

**Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith & Ireana Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000, pp. 210-213**