

Are the Gospels Anti-Semitic?

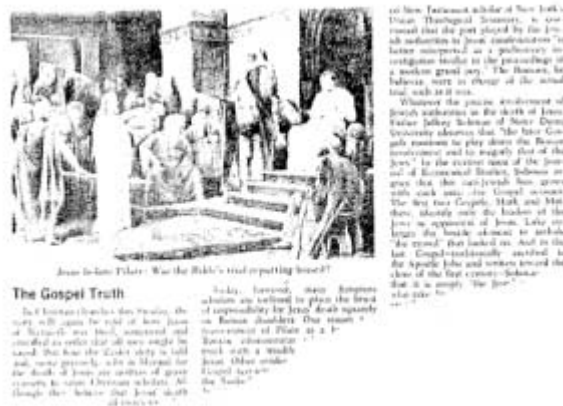
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In the wake of centuries of anti-Jewish prejudice, many Christian scholars and leaders are busy today mending fences. Spokesmen from the Pope to Billy Graham have explicitly relieved the Jewish people from the unique and blanket charge of deicide—a real milestone in Jewish-Christian relations.

But now arises a new twist. A variety of scholars, both Christian and Jewish, are saying that anti-Semitism is fostered by the Gospels themselves. Popular magazines like Newsweek (illustration) have aired the claim that the original writers of the Gospels are to blame for the prejudice that has hounded Jews for centuries.

The charge is as serious as it is sensational. In the following pages we have asked two widely recognized scholars to answer candidly and completely. Eds.



When we consider that three of the Evangelists—Matthew, Mark and John—were themselves Jews, that the principal figure to whom they bear witness was a Jew, and that all His friends and associates were likewise Jews, it seems odd that charges of anti-Semitism should be brought against the Gospel records. But when such charges are made in all seriousness and supported by reasoned arguments, it is right that the evidence should be examined.

We do well to remind ourselves that the question of the actual course of events is irrelevant to the issue of anti-Semitism (racial prejudice) or anti-Judaism (religious prejudice). If we want to determine if Jesus was condemned to death for blasphemy by a plenary session of the Sanhedrin; or if Pilate was disposed to release Jesus until he was intimidated by the scarcely veiled threats of the chief priests into confirming the death sentence; or if

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there was such a custom as the annual release of a prisoner at Passover—these are all matters which have to be decided by disciplined historical inquiry.

But the question which is to be considered here is whether or not the Evangelists, and especially John, were influenced by anti-Judaic bias in their selection and presentation of the events.

SPECIAL INTERESTS OF EVANGELISTS

One must recognize the varying interests and motives of the Evangelists as they wrote to meet contemporary needs. We can see the concern of Mark to encourage the persecuted Christians of Rome in the aftermath of Nero's assault upon them in A.D. 64. We can see Luke's concern, in Acts as well as Luke, to defend the record of Jesus and the early Christians in the eyes of Roman law. We can see the polemical situations in which Matthew and John wrote (different as these two situations were) as they are reflected in their respective reports of controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees.

But these factors do not add up to positive anti-Judaism. How objective the canonical Evangelists are in this regard can be appreciated if their records are compared with the apocryphal gospels of the second century, where the Jews as such tend to be the villains of the piece and Pilate is almost completely exonerated.

The way the record reads in the canonical Gospels, it is clear that ultimate responsibility rests with Pilate throughout, and especially so in the Gospel of John. The charge that in this Gospel Jewish guilt is emphasized and that Pilate's responsibility is reduced to the vanishing point will not hold water.

One reason for this charge lies in a failure to ascertain precisely who are meant in different places in John's Gospel when the phrase "the Jews" is used.

Sometimes "the Jews" are the Jewish people in general, as when reference is made to feasts of the Jews (John 2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 11:55; 19:42) or customs of the Jews (John 2:6; 19:40), or when Jesus is convicted and executed as "King of the Jews" (John 18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21).

In this sense, too, Jews are contrasted with Samaritans (John 4:9), and it is in the context of this contrast that the striking affirmation is made: "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). This should be sufficient in itself to acquit the Fourth Evangelist from the imputation of anti-Judaism.

'THE JEWS': MANY MEANINGS

Sometimes, again, "the Jews" are the hearers or spectators when Jesus is engaged in teaching or some other activity, as at the raising of Lazarus (John 11:19 ff.); these may be neutral or positively friendly (John 8:31; 11:45; 12:11). At other times "the Jews" are the religious authorities, in Judaea (John 1:19, etc.) or occasionally in Galilee (John 6:52), with whom Jesus engages in debate. These "Jews" are mostly associated with the party of the Pharisees (cf. John 1:19, 24). Since Jesus and they are regularly found on opposing sides of theological controversy, and since John regards Jesus as "the truth" (John 14:6), it follows that he presents Jesus' opponents as being in error—but something more than this is usually implied in the charge that John is anti-Judaic.

This charge is more usually bound up with the use of the phrase "the Jews" in John's account of the trial and passion of Jesus. Here it bears a sense which it hardly bears anywhere in the

Gospel before John 18:12. From that point on it means the Sanhedrin, or more precisely the chief-priestly establishment. It is their leader, Caiaphas, who decides that national expediency demands the death of Jesus; it is he and his father-in-law Annas, together with their closest colleagues, who arrange for Jesus' arrest and act as His prosecutors before Pilate's tribunal.

An interpretative paraphrase would make this clear; John's readers would then understand that when "the Jews" demand that Pilate convict Jesus, the reference is to the chief priests and their associates (John 19:12-15); it is they who cry "Crucify him!" (John 19:6).

ROMAN PARTICIPATION EMPHASIZED

John, in fact, gives the Romans a greater share in the proceedings against Jesus than any other Evangelist does. Some of our translations obscure the fact that the "band of soldiers" which accompanied the officers of the Sanhedrin to the place of Jesus' arrest in John 18:3 was a detachment of the Roman garrison in the Antonia fortress; their "captain," who is mentioned in John 18:12, was the "chiliarch" or military tribune in charge of the garrison. From this

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point on to his permission for the removal and burial of Jesus' body (John 19:38), Pilate is in control. It is the Evangelist John who makes this clear.

When in John 19:16 Pilate is said to have handed Jesus over "to them" to be crucified, it is absurd to conclude, as some have done, that John means that the work of crucifixion was entrusted to the Jewish authorities; the sequel makes it plain that in this sense it was to the Roman soldiers that Pilate handed him over. If "to them" means "to the chief priests and their associates," then the New English Bible conveys the sense accurately by rendering: "Then at last, *to satisfy them*, he handed Jesus over to be crucified."

It is Pilate who dictates the wording of the title on the cross; it is Pilate who must be consulted before the death of the crucified men can be expedited. Pilate, in John's Gospel, has the gift of epigrammatic utterance, but in action he exhibits the same mixture of obstinacy and weakness as in his portrayal by Josephus. It is indeed indicated in John 19:11 that Caiaphas's responsibility was greater than Pilate's; but this does not reduce Pilate's responsibility. None could pronounce an *effective* death sentence upon Jesus but Pilate; and Pilate did it.

SALVATION FROM THE JEWS

But if "the Jews" who acted as Jesus' prosecutors are the legal but unworthy representatives of their nation, it is nevertheless from "the Jews," in a nobler and more comprehensive sense, that the world's salvation comes. Over against the discredited and quisling establishment of Caiaphas and his colleagues, John presents Jesus as the true King of the Jews and (at the same time) the Savior of the world; it is through Him, as His people's authentic representative, that "salvation is from the Jews."

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Documents: Are They Reliable? (Inter-Varsity), *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eerdmans) and numerous other books and articles.

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