

2. The Evidence: A Selection of New Testament Texts

The temptation to perpetuate the negative stereotypes about Jews found in Holy Scripture is very real for Christian teachers and preachers. This is so for two reasons. First, it is much easier to interpret New Testament texts literally than to enquire into the socio-historical conditions and the theological presuppositions which produced them. Second, the claims made by New Testament writers are regarded as authoritative and factually true by the vast majority of readers because they are biblical. However, since the *prima facie* evidence seems to be to the contrary, those Christians who deny any connection between the New Testament and the Holocaust cannot escape the duty of reading the earliest Christian sources more carefully if they wish to engage in dialogue with Jews.

The chosen texts are examined under four headings which reflect the main thrust of Christian anti-Jewish polemic for almost two millennia. In each case an attempt will be made to demonstrate the possible link between post-biblical anti-Judaism, if not Nazi antisemitism, and the negative portrayal of Jews found in Christian Scripture. Many texts must be reconsidered in the light of the results of critical study before they can be appealed to in justification of any anti-Judaic position. The traditional interpretation of New Testament statements on Judaism is not the only one possible.

2.1 *The Diabolization of the Jews*

In 1936 the Nazis published a picture-book for children which contained an artist's impression of a Jew. The caption read, 'The father of the Jews is the devil'.¹⁵ Though such a notion played a prominent part in Hitler's antisemitic propaganda, it was not original to twentieth century Germany. It had been voiced four hundred years previously by Martin Luther who concluded that since the Jews were no longer God's people they must be 'the devil's people'. He advised his readers thus: 'Whenever you see a genuine Jew, you may with a good conscience cross yourself

¹⁵ E. Bauer, *Ein Bilderbuch für Gross und Klein*, Nürnberg, 1936.

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and bluntly say, "There goes a devil incarnate". He was convinced that 'next to the devil, a Christian has no more bitter and galling foe than a Jew. There is no other ... from whom we suffer as much as we do from these base children of the devil'.¹⁶ But Luther is not to be credited with originality either. In his anti-Jewish tirades he was simply stepping into the past and regurgitating the slanders and false accusations of preceding centuries.

In the high Middle Ages interest in the devil as a malevolent being who could assume human form swept through Europe, and it was not long before the Jew was regarded as an instrument of Satan. Jews were identifiable by their 'satanic smell' which could be eradicated only by the water of baptism. They featured prominently in woodcuts and paintings with goat-like and bulging eyes - characteristics of the devil.¹⁷ But the mediaeval polemicists were guilty of no more than expressing what was implied in the teachings of early Christian theologians. In a series of sermons preached in Antioch in 386, John Chrysostom, later to become Bishop of Constantinople, sought to dissuade members of his congregation from fraternising with Jews by describing them as allies of Satan. 'It is time for me to show that demons dwell in the synagogue not only in the place itself, but also in the souls of the Jews. ... If the Jews are acting against God, must they not be serving the demons?'¹⁸ The diabolization of the Jews is a prominent theme in the most respected Church Fathers, but it is rooted in two New Testament texts.

2.1.1 The Synagogue of Satan

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. (Revelation 2:9-10; cf. 3:9)

During the final decades of the first century CE, the cult of emperor worship was compulsory throughout the Roman world. Christians had

¹⁶ *Op.cit.*, p.25.

¹⁷ See J. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, New Haven, 1943.

¹⁸ P.W. Harkins, Eng. trans., *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, 1:6-6 and 1:7-5, Fathers of the Church, Washington, 1979, Vol.68, pp.24,28.

to choose between worshipping Domitian, referred to as a 'second Nero' on account of his cruelty, and suffering persecution. John, the author of Revelation, was exiled to Patmos, an island off the Turkish coast, because he refused to compromise his belief in Christ. From his prison he wrote letters to seven churches on the mainland imploring them to keep the faith despite severe persecution. The Christian congregation at Smyrna, to whom the above passage is addressed, was one of these churches.

The identity of those who claim to be Jews but are not has occasioned much debate. Some scholars take literally the statement that they were not Jews. In their opinion they were Judaizing Christians, that is, baptised Gentiles who advocated Jewish practices such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, but claimed Jewish identity in order to avoid persecution.¹⁹ This theory is supported by the fact that there is no sustained polemic in Revelation against Jews and Judaism, only against Rome. The prevailing view, however, is that John is referring to the local Jewish community in Smyrna which had increased considerably in size and influence after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.²⁰ By slandering those who believed in Jesus, and even colluding with the Roman authorities to imprison Christians, the Jews of Smyrna had lost the right to their name. In John's eyes, true Jews were those who accepted Jesus as Messiah. Jews who antagonised true believers by denouncing their way of life or denying the lordship of Christ, were agents of Satan bent on their destruction. Such open conflict between the Jewish and Christian communities is attested to by the participation of Jews in the execution of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, some sixty years later.

The friction between these two groups, in Smyrna as elsewhere, was primarily concerned with status, resources and values. Jews were a threat to Christians because they enjoyed the privileges linked to superior status within the Empire. Missionary endeavours by both sides led to an inevitable clash over adherents; each would accuse the other of poaching. The interpretation and significance of Scripture, especially the messianic passages was a perennial source of discord. In the ancient world, conflicts of this kind, in which opponents inevitably sought to

neutralise or injure their rivals, were often expressed by the rhetorical device of *vituperatio*.²¹ The curriculum in the schools of rhetoric included instruction in oral and written techniques of vilification: the students were taught how to be abusive. John uses this technique to great effect against three groups: the emperor (13:1-18), rival Christian teachers (2:20-23) and the Jews of Smyrna and Philadelphia (2:9; 3:9). The vilification of the Jews has a social function in that it defines who the Christians are. In Smyrna, 'they [the Christians] are the genuine Jews, the heirs of the promises to Israel. ... Vilification reinforces a consciousness of a difference in values. It serves to demarcate and define a new group. Vituperation also serves to neutralise the opponent by casting doubt on the legitimacy of the rival group. It challenges that legitimacy, when opportunity arises, before the authorities. It discourages potential adherents from choosing the opposing group and seeks to prevent the defection of members in order to join or return to that group'.²²

The charge of being a synagogue of Satan must be placed in its historical and social context. The function of such abusive language in Revelation was to strengthen and encourage Christians struggling to survive and seeking to establish a legitimate identity in competition with a powerful Jewish community. By the end of the fourth century, the age of Chrysostom and Augustine, when Christianity had become the imperial religion and was supported by Rome, there was hardly the same need to vilify Jews. But taken out of context, as inevitably happened in mediaeval Christian exegesis, the phrase provided a perfect pretext for those who wished to incite mindless mobs to plunder Jewish neighbourhoods.

19 J. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, Oxford, 1983, p. 132.
20 See e.g. G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, London, 1966, p. 35; J.M.P. Sweet, *Revelation*, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 85.

21 See S. Frayne, 'Vilifying the Other and Defining the Self: Matthew and John's Anti-Jewish Polemic in Focus', in J. Neuser and E.S. Frericks (eds), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity*, California, 1985, pp. 118f.
22 A.Y. Collins, 'Vilification and Self-Definition in the Book of Revelation', in G.W. Nickelburg and G.W. MacRae (eds), *Christians among Jews and Gentiles*, Philadelphia, 1986, p. 314.

2.1.2 The Children of the Devil

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, ... You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him'. (John 8:31, 44)

One obvious difference between John's Gospel and the Synoptics (Mt, Mk and Lk) is the way in which the author refers to the enemies of Jesus. While the Synoptics identify those who take issue with Jesus' teachings as Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Herodians, or simply 'the crowd', John disregards all differences and replaces the restricted wording of his sources with the umbrella term 'the Jews'. He obliterates the historical distinctions of the earlier records by altering the specific designation of Jesus' opponents and using an unqualified word. Whereas the Synoptics refer to 'the Jews' fifteen times between them, John uses the term seventy times in twenty-one chapters. In almost half of the Johannine instances the reference is derogatory, indicating deep-seated animosity between Jesus and his contemporaries. The Jews persecute him (5:16), speak disapprovingly of him (6:41) and finally seek to kill him (7:1). They do this because they are blind to his teaching (7:35) and sinful in their unbelief (8:24), but above all, because they are the spawn of the devil (8:44). In each of these cases the hostile use of the term 'the Jews' is very obvious, not only because of the verbs or phrases attached to it, but because of its larger context.

This negative portrayal of Jews is one reason why many commentators consider the Fourth Gospel to be the least suitable text for Jewish-Christian dialogue. Despite its lasting and universal popularity, E.J. Epp regards it as a 'baleful' gospel, more responsible than any other segment of the New Testament for abetting 'anti-Semitic actions at various later times'.²³ Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler describes it as the 'gospel of Christian love and Jewish hatred'.²⁴ But equally, there are those who claim that John is not as hostile to the Jewish people as is commonly supposed, and have sought to exculpate him from the charge of antisemitism.²⁵ These commentators maintain that the term 'the Jews'

should not be taken literally and have suggested several possible meanings for it. It could refer simply to the people of Judea (7:1) or to the religious authorities in Jerusalem (7:13). It could be used to distinguish one group of the inhabitants of Palestine from another (4:9), to describe customs unfamiliar to gentiles (7:2), or as a cipher for all Jews and Gentiles, who did not believe in Jesus (8:22-25). Such explanations, if accepted, put the negative references into perspective and defuse the situation appreciably. But in the interests of negating the antisemitic potential of the text, another approach should be considered, namely that which seeks to place the gospel in its correct historical and sociological context.²⁶

A reconstruction of John's milieu, between 80 and 90 CE, has led many scholars to posit the existence of two distinct communities: Jews and Christians. The Jewish community was trying to preserve its identity in the face of Christian evangelism and experiencing a growing number of converts who accepted Jesus as the Messiah but wanted to remain within Judaism. Jewish Christians were rapidly developing a high Christology, that is to say, they firmly believed in the divinity of Jesus - an article of faith which their opponents could never accept. Eventually these secret believers were expelled from the synagogue and suffered at the hands of the Romans to whom they had been denounced by the local Jewish leaders. (See 9:22; 12:42; 16:2-3) Such violence left 'deep scars in the Johannine psyche', and the evangelist reacted by launching a vicious attack on the local Jewish community.²⁷ His anti-Jewish polemic seems linked to his insistence that Jesus was divine, what Rueher calls, as we have already noted, the left hand of his Christology. However, despite such hostility, it must be recognised that John was criticising those from among *his own people* who had rejected Jesus. The quarrel is essentially an intra-Jewish one.

The importance of the historical context for our understanding of John's portrayal of the Jews is threefold. First, it mitigates, to a certain extent, his harshness towards them. When we appreciate that his attitude is influenced by the dire circumstances of his own day, by the crisis experienced by both groups, we are less ready to judge him harshly. As

²³ 'Anti-Semitism and the Popularity of the Fourth Gospel in Christianity', *CCARJ* 22, 1975, p. 49.

²⁴ Art. 'New Testament' in *JE*, 1905, Vol. 9, p. 251.

²⁵ For a useful review see J.T. Townsend, 'The Gospel of John and the Jews:

the Story of a Religious Divorce' in A.T. Davies (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 72ff.

²⁶ See the seminal studies of J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. ed. Nashville, 1979, and R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, New York, 1979.

²⁷ R.E. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

we have noted, vilifying the other seems to be part of defining the self in New Testament times.²⁸ We may not agree with his methods, but at least we can understand his point of view. Second, it reminds us that John expresses time-bound prejudices against the Jews of his own age and locality, not global anti-Judaism. Since he was reacting to a specific situation, his words must not be taken out of context and applied to Jews generally. Third, it demonstrates that the views of Judaism put forward here are not representative of Jesus and do not reflect his attitude to the Jews of his day. It helps the reader to appreciate that the gospel does not necessarily contain the exact words of Jesus but the meditations of a devoted disciple on the Jesus tradition, and the application of that tradition to his own community. If Christian exegetes over the past two millennia had been able to take such considerations into account with reference to 8:44, the fate of the Jews might have been very different.

2.2 *The Charge of Deicide*

In 1942 a Slovak rabbi asked the local Roman Catholic archbishop to intervene to stop the deportations to the concentration camps. Since the rabbi knew nothing of gas chambers, he stressed the danger of hunger and disease for women, the children and the elderly. The archbishop replied, 'It is not just a matter of deportation. You will not die there of hunger and disease. They will slaughter all of you, old and young alike, women and children at once. It is the punishment you deserve for the death of our Lord and Redeemer.'²⁹ It seems that the appropriate punishment for deicide was genocide. The Jews of the twentieth century were to be regarded as cursed and rejected by God because a small group of their ancestors aided and abetted the crucifixion, and in so doing killed God, whether intentionally or in ignorance.

The archbishop's reaction demonstrates that the deicide charge has persisted well into our own era. Even in 1965, during Vatican Council II, the view that the Jews should still bear the collective guilt for killing God was very much alive. The Council Fathers responsible for the declaration on non-Christian religions encountered considerable opposition when they advocated that the crucifixion should not be

²⁸ See S. Frayne and A.Y. Collins, *op.cit.*

²⁹ Quoted by I. Greenberg, 'Judaism and Christianity after the Holocaust', *JES* 12, 1975, p.526.

charged against all Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.³⁰

The link between the death of Christ and the plight of Jews not yet born at the time of the crucifixion is made quite explicitly by the Church Fathers. Addressing the Jews of his own day, early in the fifth century, Augustine writes, 'You, in the person of your parents, have killed Christ.'³¹ His contemporary, Jerome, commenting on Psalm 108, claims that the Jews 'have become vagabonds because they crucified God and our Lord.'³² These are the words of two of the most authoritative theologians of the Western Church, men whose works were widely disseminated. In the East, Melito of Sardis, a second century bishop, has the doubtful distinction of being 'the first poet of deicide' because of an elegant Easter homily in which he ascribes the crucifixion directly and exclusively to Jews.³³ In each case, the argument is grounded in the teaching of Holy Scripture, albeit indirectly.

2.2.1 The Voice of the People

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves". And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children". (Matthew 27:24-25)

Although there is no New Testament text which charges the Jews with deicide in so many words, Mt 27:24f. is invariably quoted in connection with the imputed crime of murdering God. This passage has haunted Jewish-Christian relations for almost sixteen hundred years. It has probably done more to fan the flames of anti-Judaism than any other biblical text because of the frequency with which it has been used and because it has been regarded as proof, not only that the Jews of the first

³⁰ J.M. Oesterreicher, 'Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, New York, 1967-69, Vol.3, pp.33-40, 80, 107, 113f.

³¹ Eng. trans. *In Answer to the Jews*, 7:10 and 8:11, Fathers of the Church: Washington, 1975, Vol.27, pp.405, 407.

³² See D.G. Morn, *Anecdota Maredsolana*, 1897, Vol.3, pt.2, p.191, lines 12-15.

³³ E. Werner, 'Melito of Sardis: the First Poet of Deicide', *HUCA* 37, 1966, pp.191ff.