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Rethinking Christian Caricatures of 1st Century Judaism. The Christian story cannot be told, in classroom or pulpit, without reference to 'the Jews'. In the last 50 years, many crude racist stereotypes have almost entirely disappeared from the language and mindset of popular Christianity, but the pejorative depiction of 'the Jews' in much of the New Testament ensures that negative attitudes to Jews and Judaism continue to be promulgated as part of the Christian message.

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Rethinking Christian Caricatures of 1st Century Judaism.

By Nigel B. Mitchell

The Christian story cannot be told, in classroom or pulpit, without reference to "the Jews". In the last 50 years, many crude racist stereotypes have almost entirely disappeared from the language and mindset of popular Christianity, but the pejorative depiction of "the Jews" in much of the New Testament ensures that negative attitudes to Jews and Judaism continue to be promulgated as part of the Christian message. In this paper I will examine some of the inaccurate depictions of 1st century Judaism in the New Testament, and suggest some strategies by which those who teach Christianity can avoid the pitfalls of inadvertent antisemitism. I will also present a critical appraisal of a recent publication by the Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria, Australia), entitled "Rightly explaining the word of truth", which gives guidelines for Christian teachers and preachers in this area.

In July 1921 a prominent American scholar of Judaism, George Foote Moore,¹ published an article in which he drew attention to the fact that almost everything said about Judaism from a Christian viewpoint tends to be apologetic or polemical rather than historical. In his survey of Christian writings about Judaism from the first century to the nineteenth, Moore catalogues a history of misunderstanding and deliberate bias, made all the worse by the practice of many scholars' uncritical use of secondary sources in this area. Moore particularly drew attention to the inadequacies of two authors often quoted to this day as authorities on Judaism; Frederick Weber² and Emil Schürer³. Weber, who early in his life felt called to the mission of converting Jews to Christianity, wrote of 1st century Judaism with the express purpose of showing that Christianity was superior in every respect. Schürer's work is essentially a political and social history of Judaism in late antiquity, but is often used by Christian authors as a source of Jewish religious beliefs and practices quite outside the scope of the author's intention or expertise. Moore draws attention to the many inaccuracies and misinterpretations derived from Weber and Schürer's work such as the presentation of the Jewish God as remote and inaccessible, and the doctrine of salvation by works. Neither of these are supported by any Jewish literature in antiquity, but they continue to form a part of Christian teaching and preaching about Judaism to the present day. Moore draws attention to the alarming tendency of more modern authors to quote Weber and Schürer uncritically as if they were the primary sources on 1st century Judaism.

Moore went on to write a monumental three-volume text on Judaism in the time of Jesus⁴, in which he went back to the sources, and gave what has long been recognised by Jews and Christians

alike as an authoritative and sensitive portrayal of his subject. Professor Ed. Sanders, discusses at length the unfortunate observation that scholars throughout the twentieth century have largely ignored Moore, and continued to perpetuate the errors of Weber and Schürer.⁵ Rudolf Bultmann is but the best known of a number of scholars to be criticized by Sanders in this regard.⁶

Charlotte Klein⁷ published an important book in 1975 in which she drew attention to the continued inaccurate depiction of Judaism in mainstream Christian theology. Klein's book, which takes the form of a survey of 20th century theological literature on Jews and Judaism, was prompted by a classroom exercise in which students in a University undergraduate course were given an assignment to investigate the topic "How do you explain the general lack of understanding of Jesus on the part of his contemporaries?". Despite having had considerable input in the course of lectures giving a balanced view of Judaism, based on the sources, the students unanimously produced essays which uncritically reproduced the views of Schürer and Weber, e.g. the teaching and ethical values of Judaism are inferior to Christianity; Judaism has been superseded and replaced by Christianity; consequently, Judaism scarcely has any right to exist. It is alarming that the students to whom Klein refers were working in Germany in the 1970's. Many of them were preparing for ordination in various denominations of the Christian Church. Some New Testament scholars like Krister Stendahl⁸ and James Dunn⁹ have also brought this problem to light in their work. Jewish scholars have not been silent, and Daniel Boyarin¹⁰ looms large as one who has seriously answered the Christian critique of 1st century Judaism, particularly in relation to the letters of Paul. It is clear that the scholarly community has not been silent in attempting to present an unbiased view of 1st century Judaism in the context of the study of religion in a Christian context, but all too often the scholars' voices are not heard, or are discounted.¹¹ It seems to escape many people that reading the New Testament as the major source on 1st century Judaism is a little like reading Labor Party campaign speeches as an authoritative guide to conservative party policy; perfectly adequate for building up the faithful and reinforcing identity within the group, but quite useless if the aim is to come to any sort of understanding of the opposing view, and a very long way from any objective concept of "truth". For Christians, the New Testament is scripture, "... inspired by God, and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness".¹² The truth of scripture is in what it teaches about God, not in what can be inferred from it about 1st century Judaism. The time has come for Christians, and those who teach about Judaism in a Christian milieu, to acknowledge that there are statements in the New Testament about "the Jews" which need to be understood in their context, and used in the modern world with great sensitivity. If we are not careful in this regard, we can repeat the errors and distortions of the past, and be guilty of not only a mistaken understanding of 1st century Judaism, but also of inadvertently promoting antisemitism in the name of religious studies or Christian truth.

In 1995m the Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria, Australia) published *Rightly proclaiming the word of truth - guidelines for Christian Clergy and Teachers in their use of the New Testament with reference to the New Testament's presentation of Jews and Judaism*,¹³ (*Guidelines*). The Guidelines draw attention to some of the most inaccurate depictions in the New Testament, particularly with reference to the Pharisees, the trial and death of Jesus, and the use of the term "the Jews" in the fourth Gospel. They provide an invaluable resource for teachers of religious studies, particularly for those who speak from a Christian background, or who have learnt much of what they know about Judaism in a Christian environment. I do have one criticism of the *Guidelines*, to which I shall draw attention later in this paper, but it is with reference to a sin of omission, not of commission, and I have no hesitation in recommending the *Guidelines* for use by Christian teachers and preachers, and all whose academic endeavors touch on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

The *Guidelines* remind us that the New Testament tells the Christian story from the standpoint of those who were promoting Christianity amongst Jews and Gentiles in the second half of the 1st century CE. At that time, the emerging Christian community was beginning to see itself as 'other' than the people it knew as 'the Jews'. The agenda of the New Testament authors was to argue that

those Jews who rejected and plotted against Jesus were misguided, and that Gentile converts to Christianity would gain nothing from first converting to Judaism, as some within the Church encouraged them to do. The language used to argue these propositions, if taken out of context and applied to the Judaism and Jews of a different time and place, can not only lead to error, but also present such a distorted understanding that bigotry and persecution are the almost inevitable result.

The *Guidelines* identify several areas as needing particular care in Christian presentation, amongst which the Pharisees are probably foremost. This group is so often misunderstood that in common language (even in many dictionaries), their name is synonymous with formalism, self-righteousness and hypocrisy.¹⁴

Pharisees are mentioned some one hundred times in the New Testament, often portrayed as the villains who opposed and plotted against Jesus, eventually conspiring to bring about his death. This view of Pharisees, which is reinforced in much Christian teaching and preaching, is not the only one even in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, Pharisees are portrayed as allies of the Christian group. Paul before the Sanhedrin successfully calls on the Pharisees for assistance, and Pharisees take up Paul's case, pressing for his release.¹⁵ Paul himself is identified as being a member of the Pharisees.¹⁶

With Peter before the Sanhedrin, the great teacher Gamaliel, a Pharisee, counsels against persecuting the Church.¹⁷ Pharisees who were Christians took part in the debate over whether or not Christians should keep the Jewish Law.¹⁸ Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, comes to Jesus with the words "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God . . .".¹⁹ From this brief summary of texts it is clear that not all Pharisees were antipathetic towards Jesus, or seen to be so by the New Testament authors. Some Pharisees no doubt were critical of Jesus and his teaching. It is likely also that some were corrupt, self-righteous, and hypocritical. But not even the New Testament consistently presents the view that all Pharisees were corrupt, self-righteous, and hypocritical, and there is no justification for the presentation of them in this light.

As well as being critical of the Pharisees, there are a number of texts in the New Testament which are critical of "the Jews" as a group.²⁰ All of these texts can be read at face value as condemnations of all the Jews of Jesus' generation, and of every generation since. Sadly they have often been so applied. But as the *Guidelines* point out, even if the texts are meant to be taken literally as a condemnation of the behaviour of Jews, they cannot be applied against any but the Jews at whom they were originally directed. Substituting phrases such as "some religious leaders", "the crowd", or "some Jews" for expressions like "the Pharisees" and "the Jews",²¹ not only avoids the pitfalls of these passages being misunderstood as condemnations of the Jews of today, but actually makes the re-telling of the story more accurate by capturing the original meaning and intent of the authors.

As I stated above, the *Guidelines* are an excellent resource, which should be consulted by every Christian teacher and preacher, and those who teach Christianity and Judaism from a religious studies background. If I was to make one criticism, however, it would be that the predominantly "Liberal/high Church" Christian representation on the Council and the special committee²² formed to write the *Guidelines* provides an unbalanced view of the content of Christian preaching about Jews and Judaism. In general, a high proportion of Catholic, Anglican, and Uniting Church preaching is based on the Gospel accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. In this area, the *Guidelines* deal very well. In evangelical and more Protestant proclamations, however, a much greater emphasis is placed upon the Pauline epistles, and in respect of these the *Guidelines* sadly have little to offer.

A common Protestant depiction of Judaism is typified by the phrase "works righteousness". Judaism is presented as a religion in which the object of the exercise is to earn one's way into

heaven through keeping the law and doing good works.²³ In the 16th century, Martin Luther took issue with widespread corruption in the Catholic Church of his day. A particular target for Luther was the practice of selling indulgences, and the associated teaching that through the practice of Good Works a person could be assured of salvation. Luther understood Paul as arguing specifically against this view, and his assertion that Justification (Salvation) is by faith alone²⁴ became a rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation. Understandably, but regrettably, in his opposition to the doctrine of salvation through Good Works, and his use of the writings of Paul in his arguments, Luther projected the issues of his own day back to the Judaism of the 1st century,²⁵ and to this day it is a fondly held and often preached view in evangelical and Protestant Churches around the globe that Judaism is a religion of Works righteousness which is totally opposed to the Christian understanding of Justification by faith alone. Jewish scholars have always protested against this caricature of their religion, but have not always been heard. As Daniel Boyarin points out,

Jews had always had a notion and powerful sense of God's grace, . . . and of the necessity for grace in life and for salvation. Judaism, moreover, had always been inhabited by a profound spirituality experienced both through performance of the commandments and also in such experiences as prayer.²⁶

In part, the argument I am presenting here is from silence. When taken in context no Jewish source before, during or since the 1st century presents Judaism as an attempt to earn salvation from a distant, inaccessible God through the doing of good works or the keeping of the law. Space does not permit a comprehensive survey of all the sources which refute this caricature, but lest I fall into the same trap as others by relying solely on secondary sources, I offer the following texts as examples of Jewish teaching which show the religion in a different light. At the very least, it must be conceded that these texts disprove claims that all, or even most, Jews held views on salvation, works, and the nature of God which are diametrically opposed to those of Christianity.

The first three quotations are from the Talmud, written some four hundred years after the time of Jesus but ostensibly recording the theological debates and consensus of the 1st century CE.

A Gentile said that he would convert if Hillel could teach him the whole Torah whilst standing on one foot. Hillel said to him "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and study it."²⁷

Five qualities avail before the throne of Glory; faith, righteousness, mercy, truth, and peace.²⁸

Who will have a place in the world to come? The one who is meek and humble, walks about with a lowly demeanor, studies the Torah constantly and takes no credit to himself.²⁹

The Mishnah, on which the Talmudim are commentaries, was completed around the end of the 2nd century CE. There we read:

All humans are beloved, for they were created in the image of God, but it was by a special love that it was made known to them that they were created in the image of God; as it was said 'In the image of God he created them'.³⁰

Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher and Bible commentator, lived in Egypt at the same time as Jesus and Paul. He wrote:

Even if we are not yet suitable to be called the sons and daughters of God, still we may be called the children of his eternal image, of his most sacred word (logos); for the image of God is his most ancient word (logos).³¹

Philo did not have the same understanding of the incarnate *logos* that we find in the prologue to the fourth Gospel,³² but it is nevertheless interesting and thought-provoking that a Jew, who lived at the same time as the authors of the New Testament, and who probably never even heard of Jesus, spoke of the fatherhood of God, and of the *logos* as his image.

Whether the aim of a particular exercise is the study of religion, or the proclamation of faith, the highest principle should always be to tell the truth. It is true that the authors of the New Testament portrayed some Jews as active and willing participants in the execution of Jesus and persecution of the Church, but it would be untrue, and unjust, to present the New Testament as condemning Judaism or all Jews. Those who would speak the truth have an obligation to ensure that their use of the New Testament, and of expressions such as "Jews", "Pharisees", and "works righteousness" is appropriate and in context, and does nothing to add fuel to the smoldering fires of racism and bigotry.

Footnotes

1. "Christian Writers on Judaism", *Harvard Theological Review*, (Volume XIV, Number 3, July 1921).
2. *System der altsynagogalen palatinischen Theologie aus Targum, Midrasch und Talmud* (1880), later revised and published as *Jüdische Theologie auf Grund des Talmud und verwandter Schriften* (Leipzig, 1897).
3. *Lehrbuch der Neutestamentlichen Zeitgeschichte* (1874), later revised and published as *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* (1886-90) ET: *A History of the Jewish People in the time of Jesus* (J. Macpherson et.al Trans, Edinburgh, 1885-91, revised edition by G. Vermes and F. Millar, vol.1, 1973)
4. *Judaism in the first centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (3 vols. Cambridge UP, Massachusetts, 1927-30)
5. In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (SCM, London, 1977), Sanders describes Schürer as "untrustworthy" (p.234), and Weber as "based on a massive perversion and misunderstanding of the material" (p.59). His general comment is that the inadequacies in both are so intrinsic that they cannot be repaired by revision, and must be discarded by those committed to teaching the truth.
6. For example: ". . . Jesus' message is a *great protest against Jewish legalism* - i.e. against a form of piety which regards the will of God as expressed in the written Law and in the Tradition which interprets it, a piety which endeavors to win God's favor by the toil of minutely fulfilling the Law's stipulations" Bultmann, R *Theology of the New Testament* (volume 1, SCM, London, 1952), p.11 (Bultmann's emphasis). Sanders is critical of the methodology of Joachim Jeremias' *New Testament Theology*, (SCM London, 1971), *Jerusalem in the time of Jesus* (SCM, London, 1969) for similar reasons.
7. *Theologie und Anti-Judaismus*, (Chr.Kaiser Verlag, München, 1975). ET: *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology* (Edward Quinn, Trans, SPCK, London, 1978)
8. "The Apostle Paul and the introspective conscience of the West", *Harvard Theological Review*, (Volume 56, 1963, pp.199-215)
9. *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, (SPCK, London, 1990) *The Partings of the Ways*, (SCM, Philadelphia, 1991)
10. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994)

11. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (pp. 35-6) refers to Samuel Sandmel, a respected Jewish scholar of the New Testament, who in 1967 publicly gave up the struggle to make Christians reappraise their presentation and distortions of 1st century Judaism, "on the grounds that it is fruitless to try to persuade those who refuse to be enlightened".
12. 2 Timothy 3:16
13. Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria) Inc. (1995).
14. The origin of the Pharisees is not clearly understood, but we can say that from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (return from exile, some 550 years before Jesus), there was tension between the priestly hierarchy of the Temple and the prophetic group who had kept Judaism alive during the exile in Babylon. During the periods of Persian, Greek and Roman occupation, and the brief independence under the Maccabees, the priests of the Temple developed into an aristocratic ruling class. But the scholars of Israel, the lawyers and scribes, did not always support the ruling elite, and there was tension between those who had the power, and those who interpreted the law. Over time, the prophetic and legal groups came to be known and to function as a unified group within Judaism, and that group took the name "Pharisees". The word is usually understood to come from a Hebrew word meaning "separate". Another possibility is that it started out as an insulting nickname comparing the Pharisees to Parsees (i.e. Persians). Whatever their origins, the Pharisees in the time of Jesus were a group who took the Scriptures seriously, and at least some of them became Christians. They were probably the group within Judaism which most closely resembled Christianity, and their spiritual descendants, the Tannaim, were the ones who after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE reconstructed Judaism and set it on its present course. To use the word "Pharisee" as a 83, nym for hypocrisy or self-righteousness probably impacts upon the Jews of today much as a similar use of the word "Apostle" would do for Christians.
15. Acts 23:6-9
16. Acts 26:5, and in Philipians 3:5
17. Acts 5:34-40
18. Acts 15:5
19. John 3:2
20. Some of the most significant texts in this regard are:
Matthew 23 – Jesus refers to the scribes and Pharisees as snakes (v 33), vipers (v 33), hypocrites (v 13 et al), blind guides (v 16), children of hell (v 15), whitewashed tombs (v 27), descendants of the murderers of the prophets (v 31) and persecutors of the Church (v 34).
John 8 – Jesus accuses "the Jews who had believed in him" (v31) of plotting to kill him (v 31), and says that their father is the Devil (v 44).
Matthew 27 – the crowd calling for Jesus' death cries "His blood be on us and on our children" (v 25).
1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 – Paul accuses "The Jews" of killing Jesus, and of persecuting and obstructing the Church. (Some commentators regard this passage as a later interpolation)
Revelation 2:9, 3:9 – reference to false Jews who inhabit a 'synagogue of Satan'.
21. As suggested in the *Guidelines* (p. 6)
22. Listed in the *Guidelines* (page ii)
23. See Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (pp. 33f) "The persistence of the view of Rabbinic religion as one of legalistic works-righteousness". Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (pp1 83ff) "The new perspective on Paul".
24. Romans 5:1. Luther added the word "alone".
25. See Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West".
26. Boyarin *A Radical Jew*, p. 41
27. BT *Shabbat* 31 A
28. BT *Aboth d'Rabbi Nathan* XXXVII
29. BT *Sanhedrin* 88B

30. M *Aboth* III:14

31. Philo, *On the Confusion of tongues* 147. Cf. Galatians 3:26: "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith."

32. John 1 :1-11

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