



Bearing Faithful Witness' Part 4

19.08.1997 | The United Church of Canada

A Study Paper for an understanding of the Scriptures in their Jewish context and for an interpretation that is not anti-Judaic. Only the first, theological parts are at this site. The complete United Church of Canada document can be found at the Web site of the United Church of Canada: <http://www.united-church.ca/bfw/home.htm>

BEARING FAITHFUL WITNESS

A Study Paper (4)

The New Testament:

Some scholars have claimed that the theological antisemitism of the church has no basis in the New Testament itself. Others have tried to prove the exact opposite. The debate between these opposing standpoints is not resolved. Both sides agree that the church has used conflict between Jesus and his followers and the Jewish leaders of the time to form its language and to justify its historical anti-Judaism.

In the section that follows (and indeed throughout this paper), a fundamental guideline for us is that we intend neither to censure biblical authors nor to censor biblical texts. Rather, we seek to identify anti-Judaic moments in the text and, through encouraging contextual understanding, to move Church members toward a more respectful and informed exposition of the Bible. We note the comment of William Nicholls that "on the very central issue of the relationship of Jesus and Judaism, all but the most recent New Testament scholarship is out of date" (*Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate*, Norvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993, p.10). This comment provides a warning and an encouragement to all Christians to investigate the new scholarship.

By the same token, it is not our intent to deny Jewish animosity toward the Jesus movement. Paul says, "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received stoning." (II Cor. 11:24-25) The anger of particular Jewish individuals and communities toward the followers of Jesus must have been real and intense. It is not unlikely that some followers died at the hands of some Jews (e.g. Acts 7:58,60). In no way, however, does this justify hatred or balance the scales of injustice. To indulge ourselves in vengeance against Jews blocks Christians both from understanding our own texts and from following Jesus who would have us respond to opposition with love.

The Gospel according to Matthew

Matthew is so deeply rooted in Judaism that the author has been called a "Christian Pharisee". Some scholars believe that his Jewish-Christian community is in conflict of interpretation with other Jewish groups, possibly strongly led by Pharisees. Having refused to participate in the disastrous

war with Rome (66-73 C.E.) and angry toward those responsible for it, Matthew's community believes it possesses interpretive insights that are superior to those of other Jewish survivors. The author's major concern seems to be: what is the correct interpretation of Jewish teaching and tradition? He believes that Jesus is the right interpreter, authorized by God, and that in Jesus the promises of the Jewish Scriptures are fulfilled.

Problematic Passages:

According to Matthew, Jesus is sent to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:6). If we took this seriously as one interpretive key for the Gospel, then it might alter our understanding of some of the texts. Consider, for example, the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (20:1-16). One interpretation would see the Jews, represented by the workers hired first, as grumbling about getting the same reward as the gentiles, represented by the workers hired later in the day. But if Jesus' concern really is for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel", then the workers hired early might better represent Jews who readily see the importance of devotion to Torah, and the workers hired late as those who come late to this awareness. The point might be the same: neither group is condemned or cut off by the householder who represents God; both are drawn into God's loving bounty. But the text is no longer seen as being against Jews *per se*.

An Eye for an Eye

(Exodus 21:23-25) How often have we heard Christians say that "The Jewish God calls for revenge: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!"

Many of us have interpreted "an eye for an eye" as meaning God *wants* us to knock out someone's eye if that person is responsible for knocking our eye out. The passage actually means "don't *kill* him if he knocks out your eye. You can't take any more than his one eye." It is preventative. It puts a ceiling on revenge. If an injured person can be more gracious than this, so much the better. This law was prescribed during the tribal era when extended families were responsible for maintaining just relations between themselves. No more hurt could be exacted in penalty than had been suffered. People were not to be vengeful; they were not to allow conflicts to escalate. Over time, the Rabbis came to interpret this directive as referring to monetary compensation.

Jesus understands the Exodus passage very well. When discussing it in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5:38-42), he encourages us to lower the ceilings of retribution that we seek. "Do not resist evil." "Turn the other cheek." Jesus knows that God alone claims the right of vengeance (Deut. 32:35), does not give it to others (nor to us), and exercises it with forgiveness and extreme restraint.

In the Tanakh, there are many, many passages emphasizing the compassion and love of God. It is curious that this "eye" passage is so often quoted; it even has its own name: *lex talionis* (literally, the law of retaliation). What does it mean that Christians are so hung up on it?

Is Jesus the Messiah?

We believe that the right answer is: for Jews, no; for many Christians, yes. Explaining how it can be so has been problematic.

There is a considerable variation of opinion about what would identify and verify the coming of the Messiah in Judaism. For most Jews, "Messiah" means a human figure who will start to bring in the reign of God. For many, a double transformation will provide evidence of this coming: there will be a new world order and a new natural order; peace will prevail (see Isaiah 65:17-25; also 11:7). There have been many messianic claimants before and after the time of Jesus. When they died without bringing the expected changes to the world, their claims were

dismissed. Jesus fits into this category. He could not and cannot be the Messiah of Jewish expectation because the world did not change. The Romans knew the political implications of messianic fervour and undoubtedly considered all messianic claimants to be revolutionary insurgents. They probably killed Jesus simply to be rid of him. Crucifixion was Rome's designated mode of death for such people. The inscription on the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", probably gives the reason for the execution as well as expressing Pilate's derision toward Jesus.

'Mashiach' (in English, 'messiah') is the Hebrew word for "the anointed". It is a title or designation like "king". In the New Testament it is transliterated only twice (John 1:41 and 4:25). The word 'christos' (i.e. 'Christ') is used instead, and it always refers to Jesus. 'Christos' is not a title. In the whole history of the church, only in our century have some theologians begun to speak of "Christ" as a title. In Paul's letters, the word 'kurios' (i.e. 'Lord') is his title for Jesus. He uses 'Christ' in the manner of a name, either alone or in combination with 'Jesus' (as in "Christ Jesus" or "Jesus Christ"). He never uses "Jesus the Christ". The significance of this is that the words 'mashiach' and 'christos', although being counterparts for each other, already function differently as we move from the OT to the NT. It is not surprising that the *ideas* they express came to be different as well. In spite of this, some modern translations of the NT into English have rendered the Greek word 'christos' as "Messiah". This creates confusion by implying that the Christian concept is the same as the Jewish one, and this is not at all clear.

For Christians, the word 'Christ' has taken on new and cosmic meanings that do not attach to 'mashiach'. Jesus is the risen Christ of Christian faith. The transformation that he effected is spiritual. It is amongst us. It is revelatory of the being, nature and intention of God, of the compass of God's grace and the mode of God's acting to achieve God's purposes. "Christ died for our sins" (I Cor. 15:3), something that a Jewish Messiah does not do nor need to do. Christ has brought gentiles into covenant with the God of Israel and thereby effected a transformation in understanding and in reality that is monumental. In this sense, Christians speak of Jesus as "the Messiah", and look forward to the accomplishment, through Christ, of the other transformations on earth that Jews, as well, expect. With these qualifications, neither Jewish denial nor Christian affirmation of the messiahship of Jesus invalidates the other.

Did Jesus think of himself as Messiah? Probably not. Mark's treatment of the discussion at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-33; followed by Luke, see 9:18-22) could be understood as Jesus' horrified denial of messianic claims and directive to the disciples not to promote such an idea. It could only lead to his death. Matthew expands this discussion to explicitly include an affirmation by Jesus of messiahship (Matt. 16:13-23). Of course, the texts we consult here are Christian post-resurrection texts that serve the interests of the church. To use them to go behind the church's affirmation of Christ, seeking to discern the mind of Jesus, is perhaps expecting too much. It makes sense, however, given Jesus' Jewishness, to imagine that he thought of himself as a prophet but not as Messiah. He would know the diverse meanings of 'mashiach' and know that this was not what he was about. Perhaps the disciples interpreted Jesus' life in the way that they did because he died under the charge of messianic pretensions and was vindicated in all things by being raised by God. Perhaps they thought that God was doing more than even Jesus knew, that Jesus had been the Messiah in quite unexpected ways.

Towards the end of Matthew's Gospel bitterness against Pharisees and other Jews seems to heighten. While Jesus is said to approve of the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees (23:2-3), immediately afterward he accuses them harshly in a very generalizing way for their practices

(23:13-35). But perhaps it is some group of them and not *all* Pharisees nor *all* Jews who are criticized. **To see Jesus' critique as internal to Judaism, one Jew to others, changes our understanding of particular texts.** Jesus, then, is very critical of those *in the Jewish community* who are invited guests but do not come to God's banquet (22:1-13), i.e. they do not want to associate with the "lost sheep". Jesus is very critical of those without an active compassion for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, those in prison, and so on (25:31ff). Even the parable of "the wicked tenants" takes on a different slant (21:33-43): following Isaiah 5:1-7, the vineyard is probably the whole of Judaism and the tenants are the Romans or the Roman-collaborating Jews; the tenants probably do *not* personify Judaism nor the vineyard the gentile church. We must be very careful with these texts because **we live in a time when Christians do not have the Jewish background that Matthew presupposes.**

In the Sermon on the Mount Matthew shows his mastery of Jewish thought and Scripture (chapters 5-7). When one considers that Jesus' audience would have been Jewish, references to Jewish symbols (light of the world, salt of the earth) and interpretation of Torah (5:17-19) would not be a problem. Elsewhere, too, Matthew's criticism of Jewish leadership uses Jewish images (e.g. 9:36; compare Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23:1-14, Zechariah 10:2-3). Debate internal to Judaism is healthy ("you have heard it said and I say . . ."). Matthew wants his community to be better at being faithful Jews than those that surround them (6:3,6,9,17). This is not a concern that gentiles be better than Jews. However, once the Sermon on the Mount is taken to be an address to Christians, these very Jewish symbols and Scriptures give the Sermon an air of being confrontational toward Judaism. We must remember that Matthew's (and Jesus') concern is for community faithfulness. The teaching to "love your enemies" is startling, unique, important, consistent with Jesus' understanding of God, and expressive of that faithfulness. In fact, "love for the enemy" is another major interpretive key to the Matthean community's understanding of Jesus' teaching. This, together with its expectation of final (apocalyptic) vindication by God, led the community to be nonviolent and to oppose war with Rome, a stance that set it at odds with other Jews. (Note that Jesus is represented as setting "love your enemies" beside the statement, "you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy". This latter statement nowhere appears in Torah and has not been recommended by Jews. It is not being recommended by Jesus here either and should not be done. Quite possibly, the "wedding garment" that even some of the people of the streets lack as they come to the great banquet is this clothing of love for the enemy, cf. Mt. 22:1-14; it is that important.)

Matthew's treatment of the passion story provides the highest potential for anti-Judaism in the whole of his Gospel. The Jewish high priests and elders conspire to have Jesus killed (26:3-4,47,57-68; 27:1,20-25; **note however that the Pharisees are not included!**). Pilate is portrayed as being weak and almost in sympathy with Jesus. Pilate washes his hands, a Jewish symbolic act, to declare his innocence (27:24). Blame is shifted to the Jewish crowd, the Jewish people. They shout, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25) This horrible saying, undoubtedly a creation of the writer, repeated in thousands of Christian passion plays, sermons and anti-Judaic propaganda throughout history, has been used to justify the murder of countless Jewish men, women and children. In all probability, it was an attempt to make some sense out of the overwhelming devastation that had already befallen Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Jewish people in the Roman war; it was not intended to apply to future generations of Jews as an open-ended curse.

It is hard to imagine that Jews, who hated the Romans and the cruel Roman punishment of crucifixion, would mock one of their own hanging in agony on a cross. We are told that the high priests and elders did this (27:41). Their antagonism is said to have continued even after the resurrection (28:11-15). Perhaps Matthew told the story in this way out of anger over leadership that he perceived as misguided; he hoped that more Jews would adopt his interpretation of events. He was deeply committed to his vision of a renewed Judaism through Jesus. He would be

surprised and hurt by the anti-Judaic sentiment inspired by his Gospel. He stresses the importance of forgiveness, of living by an honourable code, and of love even for the enemy (5:21-26; 18:10-35).

2. The Gospel according to Mark

Most scholars (not all) believe that Mark's Gospel was the first of the canonical gospels to be written. Matthew and Luke probably used Mark as a source in formulating their Gospels. Mark does not know the Jewish Scriptures as well as Matthew; he makes some mistakes in attributing passages to the prophets, for example. In the main, Matthew and Luke follow Mark's chronology and itinerary for Jesus' movements; the odd twists and turns of Jesus' travels suggest that no one really knows the correct chronology of events for Jesus' life. Mark's Gospel is important in shaping the literary form of story telling known as "gospel". He presents Jesus as a courageous and charismatic "son of man", a purposely elusive way of referring to Jesus' humanity (as in Ezekiel 2:1) while suggesting more than humanity (as in Daniel 7:13). Jesus' importance is recognized by metaphysical beings and guessed at by humans. Mark's Gospel as a whole presents "the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God", and leaves it to Jesus' followers to become the next part of the story with the same courage, charisma, and awareness of the new age that Jesus showed.

Problematic Passages:

There are different ways of reading Mark's Gospel. In The United Church of Canada, we tend to downplay references to the demonic. We think that the "unforgivable sin" (3:28-30) cannot be clearly identified. We believe that the opposition to Jesus serves as a foil to raise the question for us, "how strong is *our* commitment, how courageous *our* discipleship?"

Another way of reading Mark, one that has a more anti-Judaic tone and history, would begin by noting that in Mark's Gospel history is divided. The old age, ruled by Satan and demons is invaded by Jesus, who announces the new age, the kingdom of God. The Jews and especially their leaders seem to belong to the old age and are therefore under the influence of demons.

The stories of Jesus' conflict with the Jewish leaders begin very early in the Gospel (2:6-3:6). Already Jesus has been in conflict with demons; this conflict has been linked to the synagogue so as to suggest that the synagogue is a place that is full of demons (1:21-27; 1:39). The authority and new teaching of Jesus defeats these foes. We are prepared for a confrontational presentation of the relationship between Jesus and other prominent Jews. Jesus is accused of being, himself, possessed by demons (3:22). In response, he indirectly charges the Jews with being a house of Satan, divided and coming to an end (3:23-27). He declares the accusation about him to be a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and an unforgivable, eternal sin.

The Jews are already "outside", not able to understand Jesus' message (4:11-12). Jewish traditions and practices are declared obsolete (7:1-23). When the Pharisees "tempt" Jesus (8:11; 10:2), the same Greek word is used as in the story of Jesus' temptations by Satan (1:13). He warns his disciples against "the leaven of the Pharisees" (8:15) and predicts his rejection and death by the Jewish elders and high priests (8:31; 10:33).

The cursing and withering of the fig tree (a Jewish symbol) has been interpreted as symbolizing that the Temple and Israel are under God's curse (11:12-14 and 20-21). In the parable of the vineyard the former tenants (Israel?) will be destroyed and the vineyard given to others (the church?) (12:1-12).

In the passion stories the Jews and their leaders are painted as urgently seeking the death of Jesus (14:1,43 - 15:38). Mark uses the same Greek word for the "shouts" of the crowds as he used for the cries of the people possessed by demons, indicating that Satan has control over them (compare 15:13,14 with 1:24,26; 3:11; 5:5,7; 9:26; for other "cries" Mark uses another word: 6:49; 9:24; 10:48). In Mark, as in the other gospels, the chief priests and scribes mock Jesus at the cross (15:31) and the final blow to Judaism seems to be given by the rending of the veil in the Temple (15:38). Again in this gospel, however, Pharisees have no role in the passion of Jesus.

[Back to Content](#)

3. The Gospel according to Luke and Luke's Acts of the Apostles

Luke's Gospel and Acts are two parts of one work by one author. According to Luke, Christianity and its mission clearly originated within the Jewish community. God's plan called for the message of Jesus Christ to be taken to the ends of the world before Christ would come again. This delay gave time for mission to Jew and gentile alike, seeking their conversion. Because the Jews did not accept and continued to not accept Jesus, and later rejected Paul's message, Luke sees them finally as rejected by God.

The Gospel

Luke is familiar and in sympathy with the Jewish tradition. Mary, a young Jewish woman, and several other Jewish figures at the beginning of the story, faithfully respond to God's intentions (Mary or Miriam 1:38; Elizabeth 1:42ff; Zechariah 1:67; the Jewish shepherds 2:8ff; Simeon 1:27; Anna 2:36). Jewish teachers in the temple are presented in a positive light (2:46).

Problematic Passages:

The purpose of Jesus' mission shines through when he participates in the synagogue service in Nazareth (4:14-30): He applies the word of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 60:1-2) to gentiles, and he uses gentiles as examples - one gentile is a woman and a widow(!) (4:25ff.) and another is a Syrian soldier (4:27). Luke lets the wrathful crowd foretell the conclusion of his story: Jesus is rejected by the Jewish community, driven out of the city and almost killed (4:28-30).

Luke accuses the Jewish leaders of rejecting God's initiatives, not allowing themselves to be baptized by John (7:30). In Luke's account, Jewish leaders become more hostile to Jesus when he comes to Jerusalem. According to one interpretive approach, many parables seem to extend this accusation and rejection to the whole of the Jewish people, contrasted with gentiles who accept Jesus (the prodigal son 15:11-32; Lazarus and the rich man 16:19-31; the Pharisee and the tax collector 18:9-14; the talents 19:11ff. esp. 27; the tenants of the vineyard 20:9-19). However, there is another way of understanding these parables. Take the prodigal son, for example: the amazing father is God, the elder son is the Torah-respecting and Torah-observing Jewish community, the younger son represents those Jews who have not respected Torah; God still cares deeply about the whole of the Jewish community and wants to hold together the beloved family, the Jewish people. The word of Jesus from the cross is forgiveness: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (23:34) This word gives us Luke's vision of the gospel; it is a word addressed both within the Jewish community and then to the world.

In comparing the passion stories scholars have observed that Luke lessens Jewish participation in

Jesus' death. Again, the Pharisees take no part. The assembly trial is abbreviated (22:66-71). Herod, who is disliked by most Jews, including the Pharisees (13:31), plays a larger part in causing the death (23:6-12). Though the Jews still participate in the actions that lead to Jesus' death (chapters 19-20, 22-23), **Luke offers the least anti-Judaic passion story in the Gospels.**

Acts

In Acts anti-Jewish expressions occur in two ways: in speeches of the apostles and other Christians, and through narrations of adverse Jewish responses to Christian preaching and life.

As in his Gospel so also in Acts, Luke starts out with a typical Jewish concern: the disciples ask Jesus about the time of the restoration of Israel (1:6-7). The founding of the church on the day of Pentecost is portrayed as a renewed offer to the Jews to accept Jesus (2:1-13). In the beginning thousands of Jews join the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem (2:41). They do not "convert" to a new religion; they join a renewal movement within Judaism. This new community has the respect of the population (2:47).

When the gospel is carried from Jerusalem to "all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the [gentile] world" (1:8), Luke shows that the offer to join the Christian communion is always made first to the Jews in each new city. Although it is accepted by some individuals, it is mainly rejected by the Jewish communities. Church membership comes to be made up mostly of gentile Christians.

Problematic Passages:

The strongest anti-Jewish expressions in Acts are found in the sermons. Peter declares the people of Israel to be responsible for crucifying and killing Jesus, even if "by the hands of those outside the law" (2:23,36). Later, Peter accuses all Jews of killing Jesus, "the Author of life" (3:15), allowing that they did it in ignorance (3:17). After having been imprisoned together with John and defending himself before the family of the high priest, Peter again declares that "the rulers of the people and elders" crucified Jesus (4:9-10). He repeats the same thing at a later trial: "the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree" (5:30).

These sermons admit that the Jewish authorities did not have the power to kill Jesus. However, they claim that all Jews are responsible because they wanted it done and got others "outside the law" (i.e. the Romans) to do it for them. They seek to impose guilt on Jewish people to move them to become Jewish-Christians. This whole representation of the case is not credible with regard to the Roman motivation for killing Jesus; it serves the self-interest of the Christian church which wants to be on the good side of Rome; and it is eventually anti-Judaic in its effect when the accusations remain and the church is no longer Jewish in its membership. **The Jews did not kill Jesus and we must point that out when we read these texts.** This concern applies also to the impression created by other speeches in Acts such as those of Stephen and of Paul.

Another statement ascribed to Peter about Jesus requires comment: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (4:12). Is this so? Our understanding of the nature and being of God is *the* fundamental doctrine of faith to which all other doctrines relate. Christians claim that Christ shows us what God is like in the clearest way possible for us to grasp. What Christ shows us is a God who desires fullness of life for all. The core of our faith is that "Christ died for our sins . . . and was raised", revealing God's triumph over all sin and failure (I Cor. 15:3-4). If Peter's statement means that God rejects all humans except for professing Christians, then it seems to contradict the fundamental understanding of God that Christ reveals. Instead, we should see it as the speech of an enthusiastic preacher claiming the specialness of God's self-revelation in Christ and speaking out

of the depth of his devotion to Christ.

Shifting to Paul, the picture we get of him from Acts differs from the Paul of the letters in many respects. To cite only one here, we note that Paul always claims to be the apostle to the gentiles; Acts portrays him as adding gentiles to his churches only after trying to attract all the Jews in whatever city he visits. Once the church has separated from the synagogue, the lesson from Acts for Christians is that the relationship with Judaism is one of rivalry, animosity and conversion. Acts never mentions Paul's conviction that God's covenant with Israel continues unbroken (Rom. 11). **Acts presents a different picture of Paul than his self-presentation in the Letters.**

On the positive side, when Peter through his vision comes in conflict with Jewish dietary laws (chapters 10-11), no negative word is said against these laws. The validity of Jewish practices is recognized when the apostles meet to discuss Jewish-gentile relations (15:1-35).

[Back to Contents](#)

4. The Gospel according to John

The world-view of John's Gospel is similar to that of Mark: the cosmos is divided into heavenly and earthly spheres that are opposed to each other. Heaven is ruled by God and earth by Satan. There are elements in the spheres that contrast: grace to law, spirit to flesh, truth to falsehood, light to darkness, belief to unbelief, the church to "the Jews". Judaism belongs to the earthly sphere and to the rule of Satan.

The Jewish-Christian community which is addressed by this Gospel almost certainly had been expelled from the synagogue. This seems to be implied in the story of the man born blind but healed by Jesus (chapter 9), who was formally excommunicated (9:34). Others around Jesus feared the same fate.

The Gospel sees the Jewish-Christian community that it addresses as the true Judaism. Jewish spiritual life has been passed on to the (Jewish) believers in Jesus: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (1:11-13). Moses is the greatest person in Jewish history, but Jesus is greater: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). "No one [not even Moses] has seen God", but Jesus has made God known (1:18). In fact, Jesus Christ is the Word that, in the beginning, "was with God and . . . was God" (1:1); the divine claim is extended through use of the divine name, "I AM", been lied repeatedly by Jesus to himself (6:35; 8:12; 10:7; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1).

"The Woman Taken in Adultery"

(See John 7:53-8:11; manuscript evidence shows that this story is a late addition to the text; it is sometimes printed as a sub-text (NRSV, TEV) or as a footnote (RSV) or even as an appendix (NEB) to the Gospel of John.) In the story, a woman adulteress (but no adulterer) is brought to Jesus by scribes and Pharisees; should she be stoned? is the question they ask; Jesus is compassionate; no one presses the case; the woman finds new life where life could have been denied.

Christians must guard against anti-Judaism in interpreting this story. It is easy to make the scribes and the Pharisees the bad guys, the poor woman the victim, and Jesus the rescuer. But we do not know what the scribes and Pharisees intend to do with the woman; they only cite what the law allows, not what they intend (8:5; see Lev. 20:10); in the end, they do not stone her, presumably because they agree with Jesus' position; maybe they "are dissuaded from stoning the woman, having made Jesus' position their own" (so Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, p.266, n.19; also see pp.180ff. and 267, n.32.); or maybe that was also their position all along; maybe the woman knows this. We are told only that they want to "test" Jesus (8:6) and, it seems, he passes the test. Christian feminists and others sometimes exhibit anti-Judaic interpretations of this passage by claiming that Jesus is presented in radical discontinuity with his Jewish roots. But everyone in the story is Jewish; Jesus is a Jew. His attitude to the woman in the passage represents the possibility of renewal *within* Judaism, and this is recognized by everyone in the story. Rabbi Gunther Plaut, talking about what became Talmudic teaching on Leviticus 20:10, says: The talmudic rabbis, with their great concern for the sanctity of human life, were openly opposed to capital punishment. But, since they had to recognize the letter of the Torah law, they sought a variety of means to render these penal laws inoperative. Thus, in some instances, they held that the Torah referred to death by divine intervention, not to death imposed by a court. They further devised a system of technicalities to prevent the conviction of a defendant for a capital crime. This somewhat offhand approach was relatively easy for them, since the Roman government denied Jewish courts jurisdiction over capital cases. (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981, p.907.)

As one reads from Plaut, one remembers again the popular Biblical story of Esther which celebrates finding creative space for humanity in the midst of irrevocable (Persian) law. Feminist scholar Danna Fewell states, "This text [Esther], like rabbinic commentary [itself], keeps the canon from becoming a law that cannot change; it helps to keep the canon alive and talking." (Quoted in Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, p.215; see the whole discussion pp.215-16.) This "finding of space" for life has traditionally been a Jewish endeavour in the attempt to understand and apply Torah. Perhaps *that* is what the "testing" of Jesus is all about. At any rate, Plaut's comments on capital punishment surely help us "Judaize" the story of the "woman taken in adultery". (They also give us additional perspective on the death of Jesus itself.)

Problematic Passages:

Jesus enters into conflict with "the Jews" almost immediately: at the beginning of the story he drives the merchants and money changers out of the Temple (2:13-21). The signs of Jesus signify the powerful presence of God which changes Judaism and overturns the old practices. In place of the old water of purification (Judaism) there is substituted the new, best wine kept until the last (Christ, possibly meaning the wine of the eucharist) (2:1-11). This portrayal of Judaism is superficial, argumentative and denigrating; it is not likely that it represents the view of the historical Jesus.

While the other Gospels distinguish between different Jewish groups: Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, elders, scribes etc., the Fourth Gospel eliminates all the historical distinctions and uses the phrase "the Jews" about 60 times in a generalizing way. Many of the occurrences depict Jews very negatively. Was the writer of the Gospel not a Jew? Was his community not Jewish? "The Jews" persecute Jesus (5:16), disapprove of him (6:41), and seek to kill him (7:1). They are blind to his teaching (7:35), guilty of unbelief (8:24) and even accused of being the offspring of the devil:

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies (8:43-44).

Because of this some Jews in dialogue with Christians have called John's Gospel, "the gospel of Christian love and Jewish hatred".

Commentators have pointed out that the term, "the Jews", could have a variety of meanings: it could mean the people of Judea (7:1) or the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem (7:13); perhaps it described things unfamiliar to gentiles (7:2) or was used as a cipher for all who did not believe in Jesus (8:22ff.). We know that these passages reflect an intra-Jewish struggle, a family feud in very difficult times. The frustration and antagonism that they express should not be carried on beyond this time of struggle and separation, i.e. we cannot read "the Jews" uncritically and without comment once John's community has ceased to be Jewish; to do so gives new, anti-Judaic meaning to texts in which the designation appears.

John's Gospel contains wonderful confessional passages. Jesus says, for example, "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . . salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." Here the hope of Jeremiah is renewed; John sees a new day when the new covenant, new in that it is now written on the heart, issues forth out of human truthfulness and spirit beyond all liturgical forms and places in praise to God. How can a writer with such a hope be so narrowly exclusive in other passages?

Consider another important confessional passage found in John's Gospel: Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me" (14:6). This passage is not anti-Jewish *per se*, but it can be used to insinuate the exclusiveness of Christianity and the rejection of all who do not believe in Jesus, including Jews (see comments on Acts 4:12, above). The context suggests that Jesus wants the disciples to remember that he and the Father are together always; where one is, the other is. It is a matter of fact, not of necessity, that finding the way to the one means finding the way to the other. Some Christians, citing this passage, claim that God does not hear and answer the prayers of a Jew who comes to God through God's revelation of Torah. The Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig (*The Star of Redemption*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970), a pioneer of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the 20th century, pointed out that Jews are already with the Father; they don't have to come through Jesus. Jesus is God's way for Christians. Finding our way to God, we will also find the Jew there.

To emphasize believing in Jesus in order to be saved is reassuring for Christians. It does not necessarily imply the exclusive claim that *not* believing in Jesus prevents a person from being saved, whole, or "good". Perhaps we are being encouraged to come into Jesus' way of being, thinking and acting, i.e. to come into Jesus' model of living as the guide for our lives. If this is what believing in Jesus means, then it might be that people can *be* this way and be saved, regardless of what they know or think about Jesus. Knowing Jesus helps us find this way of being. Jesus comes to us as a gracious and loving presence from God to help us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (3:16)

Turning to the passion story, we find that John's Gospel states the historically accurate fact that Jews did not have the legal authority to kill Jesus (18:31). However, John again presents "the Jews" as pressuring Pilate for execution (19:1-15). Pilate is shown as an incompetent and weak administrator, manipulated by "the Jews". The chief priests even claim, "We have no king but Caesar" (19:15). "The Jews" alone are made responsible for the death of Jesus. Pilate identifies

Jesus correctly, albeit mockingly, as the King (19:15) and stands by the title that he writes to hang over Jesus on the cross (19:21-22). The picture painted of Pontius Pilate is historically incorrect. He was in fact a ruthless murderer of thousands of Jews.

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#) || [Next Page](#)

This study paper is part of a [larger document](#) of the United Church of Canada