

Introduction

Fact Sheets on Misreadings of the Gospels that Bear False Witness against Jews and Judaism

In 1997, Pope Saint John Paul II lamented that “erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament [about] the Jewish people and their presumed guilt [have] circulated for too long, engendering sentiments of hostility toward this people.”¹ Indeed, as French bishops stated the previous month, “it is a well-proven fact that for centuries ... an anti-Jewish tradition stamped its mark in differing ways on Christian doctrine and teaching It was on such ground that the venomous plant of hatred for the Jews was able to flourish.”²

That “venomous plant” of modern antisemitism is arguably a mutation of the earlier Christian “anti-Jewish tradition” into racialist forms, incited by pseudo-scientific classifications of human beings into supposedly superior and inferior ethnic groups. Christian forms of antisemitism went so far as to claim that Jesus was not Jewish but Aryan and that even baptized Jews still genetically bore the guilt of the Jewish “original sin” of killing Christ. Both religiously and racially motivated antipathy and suspicion toward Jews thus became entwined in secularized Christian culture.

This long history helps explain why recent, numerous, forceful Catholic condemnations of antisemitism seem to have little impact. Instead, verbal and physical—sometimes lethal—assaults on Jews are increasing. Within the Church itself, and even though the Second Vatican Council repudiated the notion of a “blood curse” on Jews, reading the New Testament in anti-Jewish ways endures, if more subtly.

This habit is rooted in what could be called an unconscious “oppositional imagination” that sees Judaism and Christianity as opposed or antithetical religions. In this binary outlook, for Christianity to be true, Judaism must be false, and therefore Jesus himself must have opposed a corrupted Judaism of his day. Preaching or teaching from the New Testament with this assumption leads to caricatures of both the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism, and to reading polemical Gospel passages as showing a deadly hostility between Jews and Jesus. Such historically incorrect and pastorally dangerous construals surface with some regularity in everyday Christian speech, in letters to the editor of Catholic publications, in reflections on the Sunday lectionary readings, and in educational materials. A Vatican text from almost forty years ago should be kept in mind: “The urgency and importance of precise, objective, and rigorously accurate teaching on Judaism ... follows ... from the danger of antisemitism which is always ready to reappear under different guises.”³

In these FACT SHEETS, members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America briefly explain common misrepresentations of Jews when reading the New Testament and offer several remedies, drawing upon current biblical scholarship and Catholic hermeneutical principles. It is hoped that authors, editors, teachers, and preachers will take cognizance of them when writing and speaking about New Testament texts. In this way, they will constructively impart to the Catholic community “an exact knowledge of the wholly unique ‘bond’ (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4) which joins us as a Church to the Jews and to Judaism.”⁴

¹ “Address to Participants in the Vatican Symposium on ‘The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Milieu,’” October 31, 1997, §1.

² “Declaration of Repentance,” September 30, 1997 (Read in Drancy, France on the 75th anniversary of the passage of antisemitic laws by the collaborationist Vichy government during the Nazi occupation of France.)

³ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” June 24, 1985, §8.

⁴ Ibid.