



The New Testament: Confronting Its Impact on Jewish-Christian Relations

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I. INTRODUCTION

Jews receive frequent mention in the Christian scriptures, commonly called the New Testament. But the tenor of these references is usually disparaging, and many of the criticisms lodged against Jews or their religious practice are, regrettably, ascribed to Jesus personally. Aside from rare reports of camaraderie between Jesus and the Jews' leaders, the gospels generally show him chiding, sometimes even maligning, the scribes and Pharisees, priests and Sadducees. And these authorities, in turn, are regularly depicted as bent on embarrassing or tricking Jesus and, particularly toward the end of his ministry, even on destroying him. Nor is such malevolence limited to the leaders; sometimes the Jews as a people are also thus portrayed, especially once they too seem to join in clamoring for Jesus' execution.

Negative depictions of Jews punctuate not only the four gospels but also the book of Acts, and appear occasionally in Paul's epistles as well. It is hardly difficult, therefore, to surmise the likely impact of these texts on the history of Jewish-Christian relations: over the centuries, not only have many Jews come to consider the New Testament a virtual catalogue of anti-Judaism, but many Christian readers have been unable to ignore how consistently the Jews come across as villainous. Moreover, since the figure of Jesus serves as a role model for Christians, they may naturally assimilate as their own those same disapproving attitudes toward Jews apparently advanced by Jesus himself.

II. SAMPLE PASSAGES AND STEREOTYPES

Most scholars view the "scribes" and "Pharisees" as having been forerunners of the rabbis, who, a generation after Jesus' death, began laying the foundations of Ju-

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daism as it has evolved even to the present day. It becomes especially instructive, therefore, to observe how the New Testament depicts Jesus in relation to these two groups in particular, for his assessments of them were undoubtedly determinative of how many later Christians, readily appropriating his sentiments, came to relate both to the Jews and the Judaism of their own day.

The gospels show us Jesus addressing these scribes and Pharisees with hostility, often accusing them of "hypocrisy." One well-known chapter, Matthew 23,¹ features Jesus relentlessly berating or belittling these groups.

In the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke), only the Jews' chief priests and other leaders are cast as orchestrating Jesus' arrest and trial, and plotting his execution; ultimately, however, the Jews as a people are themselves enlisted in urging Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to "crucify him! . . . crucify him!" (Mk 15:13-14). And Matthew, for good measure, adds the infamous "blood curse," wherein the Jews, already collectively to blame for Jesus' death, now also eagerly foist responsibility on their offspring as well: "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25). In Mark and Matthew, the Jewish masses need to be "stirred up" (Mk 15:11) or "persuaded" (Mt 27:20) by their priests to demand Jesus' death, but in Luke they require no encouragement whatsoever.

While in the synoptic gospels it is only near the conclusion of Jesus' ministry that the Jews as a people emerge actively as his adversaries, in the gospel of John they surface in this capacity far earlier. John's frequent use of the collective term "the Jews"—seventy-one times compared to but five or six times in each synoptic gospel—suggests his desire not only to cast "the Jews" as Jesus' enemies, but to do so *throughout* Jesus' ministry, not merely at its end.

Thus, John informs us (*italics added*) that "*the Jews* persecuted Jesus" (5:16), and that "*the Jews* sought all the more to kill him" (5:18; also 7:1). Some who accepted Jesus as the Christ dared not admit it publicly "because they feared *the Jews*" (9:22; also 7:13). Joseph of Arimathea had to ask for Jesus' body secretly "for fear of *the Jews*" (19:38). The disciples' doors were kept shut "for fear of *the Jews*" (20:19). Strangely, John even has Jesus denounce Jews *accepting* of him: they are of their "father the devil . . . a murderer from the beginning . . . a liar and the father of lies" (8:44), with the reason why they do not hear the word of God being that they "are not of God" (8:47).

This antagonism, so intense in John, may even obscure from readers Jesus' Jewish identity and that of his inner circle. John 10:34, for example, presents Jesus as saying to Jews (*italics added*): "Is it not written in *your* law?" (why not "*our* law"?); John 13:33 has Jesus address his disciples (*italics added*): "as I said to *the Jews* so now I say to you" (why not "as I said to *our fellow Jews*"?). Such texts may only reinforce an already erroneous impression that Jesus somehow perceived himself as *outside* the Jewish people.

When viewed most broadly, the New Testament appears to have spawned negative stereotypes persisting for centuries—in some circles, even to the present day: that the Jews are responsible for crucifying Jesus and, as such, guilty of deicide; that their tribulations throughout history constitute God's punishment of them for killing Jesus; that Jesus originally came to preach only to Jews but, when

they rejected him, he urged their abandonment in favor of Gentiles (non-Jews) instead; that Christianity (typified by Jesus and his teachings) emphasizes love, while Judaism (typified by the Pharisees and the "Old" Testament) stands for an oppressive legalism, stern justice, and a God of wrath; that, by Jesus' day, Judaism had entirely ceased to be a living faith; and, above all, that while the children of Israel were God's original chosen people by virtue of an ancient covenant, in rejecting Jesus they forfeited that chosenness—and now, through a new covenant, Christians (the "new" Israel) have replaced the Jews as God's chosen people, with the church now becoming the people of God.

III. THE MODERN LEGACY

The legacy of these themes and developments remains influential today because the New Testament continues to serve as such a vibrant stimulus of Christian teaching: aside from regular scripture readings in church (wherein the selections frequently happen to include anti-Jewish verses), and textual sermons (many based on passages targeting the Pharisees as models of what *not* to be²), the New Testament is also the central focus of thousands of books as well as university courses, not to mention adult education and sectarian training in churches and religious schools. Added to these is the seemingly endless citation of New Testament texts heard on an ever-growing number of radio and "televangelism" programs on national broadcasting networks.

Jews today frequently encounter expressions of the New Testament's anti-Jewish bias. Naturally they sometimes expect that Christians, in addition to looking askance, unjustifiedly, at the Jews of *Jesus'* day, will also carry this over when viewing *modern* Jews as well. This suggests that the ways in which the New Testament refers to Jews and Judaism may continue to set much of the tenor of Jewish-Christian relations in the future even as they have in the past—that these texts still constitute an imposing *obstacle for Jews* and a serious *quandary for Christians* interested in improving Jewish-Christian relations today.

IV. THE NEW TESTAMENT: HOW IT BECAME AN OBSTACLE FOR JEWS

When most Jews think of Jesus, the image they readily conjure up is not that of the actual historical figure but rather of the gospel portraits of him completed long after his ministry. The difference is notable, for there is no reason to believe that the historical Jesus was himself anti-Jewish, even though his later gospel image indisputably *is*.

It was this latter depiction that first induced Jews to dismiss Jesus as an apostate, i.e. as someone who had turned against his own religion, Judaism. And be-

cause missionaries sought to draw Jews into Christianity in Jesus' name, the rabbis condemned Jesus himself for attempting to deceive the Jewish people and lead them astray. It is probable that the proliferation of Christian writings toward the end of the first century catalyzed the rabbis into "closing" the Jewish Bible so as to prevent any such "external books" from gaining acceptance among the Jewish populace at large.

Of course, religious opinions of one age are not always consequential for subsequent eras. But the rabbis' disaffection with the New Testament did, in point of fact, set the trend for centuries of later Jews who, identifying the historical Jesus by the New Testament's depiction of him, came to relate to Christianity accordingly.

The New Testament's anti-Jewish Jesus also determined the attitudes of many Christians. During the middle ages, by which time the church had established a virtual monopoly on European learning, gospel teachings in particular conditioned the mindset of the masses against Jews. And since the laity was generally illiterate, church art became employed to teach that the Jews were accursed, with the "synagogue" depicted as either blindfolded or literally blind (cf. 2 Cor 3:14ff).³

Since, moreover, the gospels held the Jews as a people responsible for Jesus' execution, they gave rise to the epithet that Jews were "Christ-killers." This identification often inflamed popular passions against Jews in Christian Europe, who lived with perpetual anxiety that the gospels' accusations would become pretexts for pogroms (massacres of Jews). Nor was their fear without good reason: during the various crusades (beginning in 1096), Christian armies, trekking through Europe to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslim "infidel," routinely ransacked Jewish communities en route and murdered the inhabitants—justifying these actions by appeals to the gospels' own assessments of Jews as murderers of Jesus and infidels themselves. Other pogroms were triggered by outrageous "blood libels," to the effect that Jews were regularly reenacting their execution of Jesus by kidnapping Christian children to secure blood Jews supposedly needed to bake Passover *matzah* (unleavened bread).⁴

Etched even deeper into the modern Jewish psyche, after centuries of such continual prejudice, was Nazism's malicious exploitation of the New Testament's supersessionist theology. This conviction—that Gentile Christians had superseded the Jews, displacing and replacing them as God's chosen people—was now manipulated by Hitler's ideologues to suggest that the persistence of Jews into the twentieth century was an anomaly, a quirk or mistake of history, that they were a fossil meant to have disappeared far earlier. Such a ploy lessened potential resistance to Hitler's "final solution," the plan to exterminate the entire Jewish people.

Since Christian anti-Judaism has thus been such a source of anxiety for Jews over the centuries, it should come as no surprise how many Jews today continue to bristle or flinch, even to cringe, upon hearing the name of Jesus, and to view the New Testament with varying degrees of dismay and distrust, if not dread. This explains why these Christian texts loom up for Jews as such a fundamental and im-

posing obstacle in interfaith relations today.

V. THE NEW TESTAMENT: HOW IT POSES A QUANDARY FOR CHRISTIANS

It should be obvious now that these texts likewise pose a serious dilemma for Christians committed to interfaith relations. Their quandary is inescapable: what to do when their scriptures, sacred repository of their cherished teachings, also seem to generate such intensely anti-Jewish sentiment?

Their responses have usually resolved themselves into at least three different avenues of approach: (1) a *denial* that the New Testament itself is anti-Jewish; or (2) an acknowledgment of anti-Jewishness in the New Testament, but mainly in terms that tend to *minimize* its importance or otherwise explain it away; or (3) an open recognition that the New Testament is profoundly anti-Jewish and that this is a serious problem requiring full *confrontation*. It is important to recognize that these three categories of response are largely incompatible with each other: that is to say, either the New Testament is not anti-Jewish (#1) or it *is*, and if it *is*, either this problem is not especially serious (#2) or it is definitely so (#3). Agreement in these regards may be a necessary pre-condition for achieving any significant progress in Jewish-Christian relations in the future.

AVENUE #1—DENIAL THAT THE NEW TESTAMENT IS ITSELF ANTI-JEWISH

Christians espousing this approach believe interfaith relations will improve once Jews and Christians come to view the New Testament itself as neither a source nor a cause of Christian anti-Judaism. In the service of this viewpoint, at least a four-fold argument has been advanced:

- a. Inspired by God, the New Testament reflects the ultimate revelation of divine love and could in no way have been intended to encourage the contempt of any people. Jesus himself spoke this language of love: he preached the turning of the other cheek, even the love of one's enemies. Therefore, those recording his spiritual teachings, and deeply committed to him themselves, could hardly have written works that are anti-Jewish.
- b. The New Testament's apparently harsh language against the Jews is not anti-Judaism at all but simply prophetic rebuke out of love. Just as the Hebrew prophets of old, reprimanding the Israelites in their day, are surely not to be judged anti-Jewish, neither then should Jesus' criticisms of Jews be so construed. Diatribes against the Jews—whether by Jesus or Paul—were only a kind of oratorical style or a literary device intended not to be final but merely to shock people into repentance before it was too late.
- c. The gospels and the book of Acts show us, approvingly, thousands of Jews accepting Jesus' message, or at least eager to hear what he had to say. How then, when the New Testament so *approvingly* presents so many Jews so positively disposed, can modern Jews consider it anti-Jewish?
- d. Though, in subsequent eras, Christian theology did evolve along anti-Jewish lines,

this later orientation toward Jews should not be confused with that in the New Testament itself, where such bias is not evident, even latent. Denunciations of Jews by church fathers, especially in the third century and following, were a function of a time long after the New Testament was completed, when Christian preachers were forging new weapons for the church in the church's ongoing conflict with Judaism. Interpreting the sacred gospel, the church fathers added their own errors and prejudices against Jews to the holy, eternal, and infallible truths of the New Testament itself. Thus, it is misunderstandings by *later* Christian interpreters which must be confronted, not sentiments of the New Testament writers themselves.

ASSESSING AVENUE #1

This first category of approach—*denying* as it does that the New Testament is anti-Jewish—strikes me as serving no constructive purpose; well-intentioned as it may be, it nevertheless depends on arguments which, from a Jewish point of view, are simply not compelling:

- a. Respecting the first argument advanced—that the New Testament reflects the ultimate revelation of divine love—I do not wish to respond insensitively. But since Jews do not include the New Testament among their sacred texts, any argument proceeding, as if self-evidently, from the New Testament's divine inspiration is not seen as persuasive. Moreover, that Jesus himself spoke this language of love hardly guarantees that all those committed to him (including the later gospel authors) did so as well.
- b. I welcome the second argument, that the admittedly harsh language against the Jews in the gospels, Acts, and Paul's epistles is only prophetic rebuke out of love. But I also experience a nagging sense that these reprimands far exceed any rebuke I know of by the Hebrew prophets of old. After all, were not the prophets acting out of love for and loyalty to the Jewish people, with their message designed to *solidify* the covenantal bonds between God and the Jewish people? Yet many censures of Jews in the New Testament predict that God will choose *others* to replace them! While Jesus himself may well have scolded some fellow Jews out of love, the particular intensity and animosity characterizing rebukes attributed to him by the gospels most likely reflect interjections by the gospel authors themselves, not the sentiments of the historical Jesus personally. And given the prominence of this editorial element, the New Testament, while sacred to Christianity, is nonetheless unavoidably to be construed as *itself* anti-Jewish.
- c. How should we address the argument that, since it represents approvingly so many Jews as having accepted or at least having been open to Jesus, the New Testament cannot itself, therefore, be considered anti-Jewish? While the gospels, Acts and Pauline epistles are not biased against *all* Jews, they are biased against Jews not accepting Jesus. Not biased against Christian Jews (those accepting Jesus as the "messiah," or "Christ"), they *are* biased against *non*-Christian Jews. Since, in terms of Jewish theology, a Jew who professes belief in Jesus as the messiah has thereby, by definition, become a Christian—and is no longer a Jew⁵—in effect the only persons mentioned in the gospels with whom modern Jews can readily identify is with those not accepting Jesus, and the New Testament is hostile toward these Jews. It is therefore anti-Jewish.
- d. In terms of the fourth argument cited—that anti-Jewish stereotypes originated in later Christian theology but not in or with the New Testament itself—my own

reading of New Testament texts leaves me unpersuaded by the argument for this defense. I still feel that the four evangelists themselves have conveyed anti-Jewish sentiment in the very process of describing Jesus' ministry in their gospels.

AVENUE #2—THE NEW TESTAMENT'S ANTI-JEWISHNESS IS ACKNOWLEDGED, BUT MAINLY IN TERMS THAT TEND TO MINIMIZE ITS IMPORTANCE OR OTHERWISE EXPLAIN IT AWAY

Christians espousing this general approach, while acknowledging the New Testament's anti-Judaism, hope nonetheless to reduce its impact. They offer a variety of mitigating interpretations, or suggest a number of extenuating circumstances, which make that bias appear to be of only minor consequence. Their intent is to induce Jews to feel less offended by New Testament texts, and to move Christians themselves to take these texts less seriously. Arguments reflecting this position are quite varied, and not necessarily consistent with one another:

- a. The Christian scriptures were hardly unique in attacking opponents; other religious or philosophical literatures of that age partook of this same tendency, and New Testament polemics even turn out to be relatively *mild* by comparison. This realization may help blunt any current-day effects of the New Testament's rhetoric by robbing it of "its capacity for mischief"⁶—since now Jews as well as Christians, identifying these diatribes as but the convention of a bygone era, will be able to dismiss them as inconsequential for the modern day.
- b. It would be beneficial if Jews apprised themselves of the polemical nature of their *own* ancient literature! The Hebrew Bible itself, for example, abounds in condemnation of Israel's enemies. The first century Jewish historian Josephus, meanwhile, considers hostile Gentiles "frivolous and utterly senseless specimens of humanity,"⁷ and caricatures his opponent, Apion, for having "the mind of an ass and the impudence of a dog, which his countrymen are wont to worship."⁸ The first century Jewish philosopher Philo terms his Gentile opponents in Egypt "a seed bed of evil in whose souls both the venom and the temper of the native crocodiles and wasps are reproduced."⁹ Moreover, rabbinic literature as well engages in considerable invective, directed even—it should be noted—against Christians and Christianity! In fact, if Jews themselves had ever become a majority presence, would not anti-Christian sentiment, imbedded within their own tradition, have occasioned the same kind of predicament for *them* vis-à-vis Christians as is now faced by Christians vis-à-vis Jews?
- c. Also constructive would be the realization that authors of New Testament writings were not consciously contributing to a new corpus of scripture. In their day, their only Bible, recognized or envisioned, was the *Jewish* Bible. Had they imagined the importance their writings might someday assume, or surmised the detrimental effect of a "New" Testament on the Jewish people, such authors—themselves good Christians—may well have been more judicious in their presentations of Jews.
- d. Anti-Judaism, moreover, hardly began with the New Testament since Jews had already become negatively perceived by many pagans well before these writings even emerged. This suggests that influxes of pagans into Christianity may have played a significant role in the introduction of anti-Jewish bias into Christian traditions. Thus, while the New Testament's anti-Judaism may now be admitted, its substantial origin *outside* Christianity should also now be more widely acknowledged—in the hope

both of lessening resentment toward the New Testament among modern Jews and of weakening the attachment of modern Christians to prejudices so at variance with truly Christian ethics.

- e. Conceivably, Jews whom the New Testament attacked were not all "the Jews" but only a *segment* of them, or perhaps even a group *outside* them altogether! When Jesus denounced the Pharisees, for example, he may have been targeting only a minority of "hypocrites" amongst them—or only the disciples of Shammai.¹⁰ Alternatively, what appear to be anti-Judaic diatribes could actually have been rebukes only of particular Christians called "Judaizers."¹¹ Whichever the case, *modern* Jews, themselves akin neither to disreputable Pharisees nor to partisans of Shammai, and still less to Christian Judaizers, need in no way feel attacked by New Testament censures which only inadvertently became misapplied to them. And all the more so, therefore, should modern Christians understand that Jesus' and Paul's criticisms were in no sense applicable to all Jews of the first century, still less to those of later times.
- f. The most formidable argument falling within this general approach offers an alternative way of viewing matters. The apparent anti-Jewish polemic in the New Testament was actually only *intra*-Jewish: admittedly intense, it was nevertheless only "in-house squabbling" between one segment of Jews (who had accepted Christianity) over against another (who had not). If what appears to be anti-Jewish rhetoric is thus merely recorded argument against those within the *same* family, then those scolding the Jews turn out still to be Jews *themselves*—with their condemnations therefore ceasing to be *anti*-Jewish in any meaningful sense.

ASSESSING AVENUE #2

The sentiments of this second approach also are well-intentioned. But do they effectively address our problem? Several arguments strike me as not genuinely relevant; and some, possibly relevant, may be unfounded.

- a. Yes, the New Testament's invective was hardly unique; perhaps it was even relatively mild. But how many Christians today are sufficiently conversant with the conventions of ancient polemic to bring them to bear in an evaluation of the New Testament's anti-Judaism? Moreover, for Christians the New Testament, in sharp distinction from most other ancient writings, is *sacred* literature: as such, its polemics, whether comparatively tame or not, command authority as the inspired word of God. This sanctified status of their scripture accords its censures of Jews a compelling quality, and thus more than compensates for what is supposedly the *comparative* mildness of its anti-Judaism.
- b. Yes, Jews too were certainly polemical in their own literature and should at the least consider whether, had they themselves become dominant in history, a Christian minority might not have suffered accordingly. But conjecture must pale before reality: Christianity, not Judaism, has been dominant, and Jews the victims of persecution fueled and justified by recourse to New Testament texts.
- c. Yes, New Testament writers may have been unaware that their criticisms of Jews would become enshrined in a new corpus of scripture. To suggest, however, that such an awareness would have induced them to abstain from abusive language, or at least to tone it down, is again conjectural, and not relevant to realities at hand.
- d. Yes, Jews were disliked by other peoples even prior to the rise of Christianity. Yet, for

most Christian readers, would not such an awareness tend to *universalize* the New Testament's polemic rather than neutralize it? Arguing that other peoples (prior to and independent of Christians) also disapproved of Jews may have the unintentional effect of reinforcing if not validating the New Testament's prejudice by seeming to suggest that it was somehow justified or warranted.

- e. Were the New Testament's rebukes against Jews actually directed only against a minority among them, or even persons outside them altogether? I am unconvinced. Even if correct, however, such speculation would render us little assistance in coping with the modern-day effects of these censures which especially after centuries of Christian preaching are still often *heard* today as attacks on *all* Jews of the first century (if not now as well).
- f. Finally, I must take issue with the "in-house squabbling" argument which is sufficiently crucial to this discussion to require, at this juncture, an extended treatment.

Scholars holding to this theory usually accept the testimony of the book of Acts, which would have us believe that *early* Christianity had been swelled by "myriads" (literally, "tens of thousands"¹²) of Jews. This huge number of Jewish entrants feeds—or renders more plausible—the idea that, even in the post-70 era when the gospels were being composed, anti-Jewish polemics could have been essentially only "in-house" rebukes by one segment of Jews (accepting Christianity) against others (rejecting it). Gospel writers, assigned by this theory to the former category, would thus turn out to be polemicizing only against *fellow* Jews.

In responding, I feel that we must first dispense with one preliminary: at the least, let us not be misled by the *titles* of the gospels. While persons named Mark, Matthew, and John may indeed have been among Jesus' *Jewish*¹³ contemporaries back around 30 C.E.,¹⁴ these (together with Luke¹⁵) were not the actual authors of gospels written and ascribed to them so many years later. The four gospels apparently circulated initially as *anonymous* writings. Only belatedly, probably in the second century, did they come to be incorrectly attributed to contemporaries of Jesus.¹⁶ Since we do not know the identity of the actual authors, certainly any names of *Jews* assigned to the gospel titles should not be enlisted in support of the "in-house squabbling" argument alleging that the gospels were written *by* Jews against *other* Jews. For some, possibly even all, of the actual authors could have been Gentiles themselves (i.e. of no Jewish extraction or affiliation)—and anti-Jewish ones at that.¹⁷

As for the "myriads" of Jews claimed originally to have joined Christianity's ranks, this is myth, not history. Paul's own epistles, dating from the 40s into the 60s, are not only far earlier than Acts (ca. the late 80s), but emanate from the very time frame when Acts insists "myriads" of Jews had *already* flocked to Christianity. Yet Paul advances a radically different assessment of Christian demography, expressing disappointment that so *few* Jews (only "a remnant" [Rom 11:5]) had become Christian. Most "were hardened" (2 Cor 3:14), resisting Christ and not attaining righteousness (Rom 9:31–33); "not enlightened" (10:2); a "contrary people" (10:21) who, in a "stupor," neither "see" nor "hear . . . down to this very day" (11:8; italics added), branches "broken off because of their unbelief" (11:20). Hence, Christianity's successful inroads, as early as Paul's own day, were already predominantly among *Gentiles*, hardly Jews.

Paul's statements should caution readers to be wary of Acts' alternative statistics and should prompt the question: Where is the huge critical mass of *Jewish*-Christians necessary to sustain the theory that the anti-Judaism of the post-70 gospels was only "in-house squabbling"? After 70 C.E., Christianity was no longer "in" the Jewish house at all—the "church" had severed itself from the "synagogue," with the Jewish revolt of 66–70 C.E. playing a crucial role in culminating this process (see below). Since the reality is that only relatively few Jews had become Christian at *any* time, surely the truth to be stressed is "not that some [Jews] accepted [the gospel], but that many rejected it," and that to "overemphasise the references to the conversion of the Jews . . . [is to get] hold of the wrong end of the stick."¹⁸ The "in-house squabbling" argument, therefore, convenient and even comforting as it may be, is in my view simply not soundly-based.¹⁹

AVENUE #3—THE NEW TESTAMENT'S ANTI-JEWISHNESS IS RECOGNIZED AS A SERIOUS PROBLEM REQUIRING FULL CONFRONTATION

I personally not only espouse this third, remaining avenue of approach, but also believe the other approaches have now, regrettably, become part of our dilemma—for their orientation actually impedes our understanding of *why* the New Testament came to be anti-Jewish and our determination of how best to *cope* with this problem today. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to these two questions.

VI. WHY THE NEW TESTAMENT CAME TO BE ANTI-JEWISH

A GENERAL DYNAMIC

The New Testament may have *had* to be anti-Jewish. A new religion (Christianity), developing from its mother (Judaism) and wishing to establish a viable separate-ness, needed to justify its existence, and such self-justification actually necessitated expressions of negativity toward the parent. Especially since Christianity drew so heavily upon Judaism in terms of its ethics, scripture, and liturgy, as well as some of its theological teachings, would not the question naturally have surfaced: given Judaism, why Christianity?

One response by early Christians was a claim that *they* had supplanted the Jews in God's favor, that they had become the "new" Israel. Accordingly, for Christianity now to justify its worth, Judaism somehow had to be shown as possessing *less* value, and whatever value it was granted had to be explained as only a function of God's plan in preparing the world for *Christianity*. Since such a natural dynamic actually *required* Christian writers to express anti-Jewish sentiments, we should interpret many New Testament passages as precisely what they *appear* to be: namely, anti-Jewish. To deny the problem (Avenue #1) or even mitigate it (Avenue #2) thus becomes misleading, or at the least counter-productive.

SOME SPECIFIC DYNAMICS

*I would add:
very few Jews knew much about
Jesus or the early church.*

We may surmise, as well, three more specific reasons why the New Testament came to be anti-Jewish:

(a) By insisting not only that Jesus was the messiah or "Christ," but also that others should agree, Christians inevitably became embroiled in acrimonious debate with Jewish adversaries, especially Pharisees, whose objections to the Christian message were sufficiently disconcerting to necessitate point-by-point refutations. As a vehicle for conveying and preserving these Christian rebuttals, stories arose of alleged controversies between Jesus and various Jewish leaders ("Pharisees," "scribes," "Sadducees," etc.), traditions which eventually achieved incorporation into the gospels themselves.

What is striking to realize, however, is that the early Christians mistakenly came to assume that their own immediate problems with Jewish opponents, for the most part *first* arising only in the decades *subsequent* to Jesus' death, had instead actually originated *during* his ministry itself, and that the answers to these problems were therefore discoverable in *his* words. That is to say, Christians naturally imagined that their omniscient Christ had anticipated all possible objections potentially confronting his followers after his death, and had therefore bequeathed to these followers the very responses they should emulate in disarming their critics. This explains why, later on in the gospels themselves, we find that harsh words silencing Jewish opponents—first surfacing only with the developing Christian tradition—are instead now attributed to *Jesus personally*, even though the issues being argued arose only after he died, and concerning them, in my view, the historical Jesus had no advance awareness.

By thus gaining inclusion in the gospels themselves, such depictions of Jesus vanquishing Jewish opponents generated the ineradicable image of his aversion to fellow Jews, and in this fashion markedly contributed to the New Testament's anti-Judaism. For centuries of later Christians, having no reason to question the authenticity of these gospel confrontations, naturally accepted what were heavily fictionalized²⁰ exchanges at face value instead. Thereby, they grew to dislike not only those Jews who had allegedly harassed Jesus himself, but also those who continued to vex generations of his later followers down to their own day.

What were these objections that Jews lodged against Christianity? In the main, they were attempts to refute claims of Jesus' messianic identity, and included the following: that Jesus had in no way resembled the *triumphant* messiah expected to overthrow Rome—his crucifixion therefore only *disconfirmed* his credentials (cf. Mk 15:29ff);²¹ that Elijah, the herald of the Christ's coming, had yet to appear (cf. Mk 9:11);²² that the messiah was not expected to come from *Galilee* (cf. Jn 7:41, 52), as did Jesus, who was neither born in Bethlehem of Judea, King David's birthplace,²³ nor was himself a Davidic descendant (cf. Jn 7:41–43; Mk 12:35–37); and that Jesus himself²⁴ had broken with the law of Moses, thereby abandoning the very essence of Judaism (cf. Mk 7:19; Jn 9:16; Acts 6:13ff). As for Jesus' resurrection, crucial to Christianity, Jews denied its occurrence, and dismissed the claim of the empty tomb as a hoax (cf. Mt 28:13–15).²⁵

Naturally, given the Christian authorship, each gospel debate was resolved in favor of the Christian viewpoint (just as, in the writings of the pro-Pharisee and

pro-Hillel rabbis, Pharisees out-debated Sadducees and the school of Hillel that of Shammai). But the net effect of the controversy traditions, as far as centuries of later Christian readers and churchgoers were concerned, was an overwhelming impression of a relentless anti-Judaism on the part of Jesus himself.

(b) A second factor productive of the New Testament's anti-Judaism was the emergence of severe tension between Christianity and Rome, a problem which the church found it most expedient to address by assuming an *anti-Jewish* stance. In 64 C.E., Emperor Nero had initiated a brutal persecution of Christians, whom he made scapegoats for a fire in Rome. Shortly thereafter, in 66 C.E., Jews in Judea launched a major revolt. This extraordinary act of sedition raised the ominous specter of Roman vengeance not only against Jews but against *Christians* as well. For in the eyes of Rome, the two were often confused since Christianity, arising from Judaism, perpetuated so many of its beliefs, teachings and practices. When the Jews revolted, therefore, it became imperative for Christians to distinguish themselves from Jews in such a way that Christians would also appear to be the allies of Rome, and in this fashion be able to deter any further persecution of Christians at Roman hands.

The major hurdle, however, was that Jesus had been *crucified*, a Roman punishment meted out notably to subversives. A crucified Jesus inevitably invited speculation that not only had Christianity's founder and Lord been himself a seditionist,²⁶ but that this same stigma adhered to his later followers as well.

Faced, then, with the urgency of establishing Jesus' loyalty, Christian tradition could hardly depict Rome as culpable in Jesus' execution. Responsibility had to be shifted, assigned to some other party. In view of the later antipathy being directed at Christianity by the Jewish community, it is not surprising that Jewish leaders (and, ultimately, "the Jews") became saddled with the blame in *substitution* for Rome—especially since Jewish opposition to later Christians was easily assumed to have originated as opposition to Jesus himself. This replacement of Rome by "the Jews" was accomplished through a literary device—a fictional trial of Jesus before the Roman governor—wherein the normally ruthless Pontius Pilate (symbolizing Roman officialdom) was now presented as actually desiring Jesus' exoneration but forced instead to yield to pressure by the Jews to crucify him.²⁷ Complementing this picture was the introduction of various other traditions suggesting harmony, or at least compatibility, between Jesus and Rome,²⁸ along with the story of another fictional, but earlier, trial in which Jesus had been condemned by judges of a specifically Jewish sanhedrin.²⁹ When viewed against the backdrop of the great Jewish revolt (66–70 C.E.), the sum effect of all these factors was to ally Christians with Rome, and to present the Jews as the enemies of both. Thus, paradoxically, did a Jew put to death by Romans become, instead, a Christian put to death by Jews.

(c) As previously mentioned in another connection, prejudice against Jews had already existed in *pagan* circles even prior to Christianity's emergence; accordingly, Gentiles entering Christian ranks may naturally have brought this antecedent bias into Christianity along with them. The reasons for such prejudice were varied: Jews in the Diaspora (lands outside Palestine) understandably tended to settle together, set apart from, rather than interspersed among, Gentiles;

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this apparent unsociability intensified xenophobia, fear or dislike of foreigners (both of Jews, by Gentiles; and of Gentiles, by Jews). Not to go unmentioned, of course, was the Jews' refusal to worship the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon, even though the God of Israel had received hospitable welcome. In addition, Jews observed what struck others as bizarre customs: circumcision, for example, and seemingly curious dietary laws; these only alienated them further in the eyes of some outsiders. One can well imagine, moreover, that whatever preferential treatment Jews received from Rome³⁰ only aggravated Gentile resentment.

The Jewish revolt of 66–70 C.E. must itself have played a profound role in intensifying this antipathy and thereby in stimulating anti-Judaism in gospel traditions. The auxiliary forces Rome drafted to crush the revolt in Judea were drawn from neighboring regions, particularly Syria. Many Gentile recruits died in putting down what their families probably considered only a needless disturbance by a fanatic upstart people. The casualties sustained fanned hatred of Jews especially by natives of Antioch, Syria's major city, which had a large Jewish population.³¹ Josephus informs us that Jews in Antioch were harassed, even murdered, by Gentiles, who libeled them, spread rumors of Jewish plots, and asked the Roman general Titus to expel Jews, or at least revoke their privileges.³²

With Gentile passions in Antioch now so inflamed against anyone Jewish, whether Jews per se or Christians of Jewish extraction, the latter must have realized how precarious it was to be viewed by others as still having Jewish ties. They may therefore have sensed it expedient to shed Jewish associations and instead to submerge their identity within Antioch's Gentile-Christian Church—whose members no doubt harbored some of the same anti-Jewish biases then typifying Antioch's wider Gentile community. These considerations may largely explain the extreme anti-Jewish bitterness permeating the gospel of Matthew, produced, I believe, in Antioch's Gentile-Christian community in the 80s.³³

VII. COPING WITH THIS PROBLEM TODAY

It was Nazi exploitation of Christian anti-Judaism which first drove home to many modern Christians the critical need to confront their scripture, stimulating in turn not only a large number of church declarations disavowing anti-Semitism, but also hundreds of books and essays on the problem. Several noteworthy contributions deserve special mention, even within the confines of this brief chapter.

The Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions* in 1965 delineated specific dimensions of biblical and theological study requiring revision, with the particular end in view of enhancing of Catholic-Jewish relations. Roman Catholics (and, by extension, all Christians) were now urged to recognize the Jewish ancestry of Jesus, his mother, and closest followers; to understand Christian faith in terms of its continuity with Judaism rather than its displacement of it; to realize that Jesus' death, as recorded in the gospels, should not be blamed upon all Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon Jews of today;³⁴ to view Jewish scripture in such a way that it not seem to espouse only legalism, fear, and justice devoid of love of God and humanity; and generally to achieve familiarity

with how Jews themselves understand their own Bible and religion.

Rosemary Ruether's seminal volume, *Faith and Fratricide*,³⁵ published in 1974, is still considered by many the most important impetus in bringing Christians and Jews to their current state of progress in Christian-Jewish dialogue. Ruether argued that the presence of anti-Jewish bias in the New Testament is blatant and undeniable, and asked us to believe, moreover, that this bitter dialectic of christology and anti-Judaism is rooted not simply in the period of the gospels' composition (after 70 C.E.), but rather far earlier, in the days of Christianity's very emergence. (Also controversial was her conjecture that Jesus' disciples, mortified by their abandonment of him, had compensated for their sense of guilt by projecting blame upon the Jewish authorities instead.)

*** Christians view the New Testament as sacred, but does this sanctity inhere in the texts themselves or rather with the interpreters thereof? Some religious outlooks profess to root their sole authority in what their scriptures say: yet in practice they rely additionally on a tradition of interpretation that clarifies how these texts are to be understood, and prioritizes them in terms of importance. What has often resulted in the history of religions is that sacred written texts do not actually command in practice the degree of authority laid claim to by the texts themselves. As applied to the topic at hand, the *influence* of New Testament passages biased against Jews could well be more a function of what modern Christian interpreters will allow than of the scriptural texts in and of themselves.

Many Christians recognize that the Bible ("Old" and New Testament together) expresses some attitudes that, in the modern day, seem quite objectionable—e.g. passages endorsing animal sacrifices, condoning slavery, maligning homosexuals, or demeaning women. Yet despite their genuine presence in the Bible itself, such views are usually routinely ignored by many Christians who, not feeling constrained by *these* attitudes, could likewise be induced to dispense with the New Testament's anti-Judaism as well.

Posing the matter differently, what should be done when we encounter a conflict between sacred literature and religious *values*? Many interpreters of Matthew, for example, have asserted that included among the sacred values of Christianity are the mandates to turn the other cheek and to love one's enemies (5:39, 44). What, then, do we do with the text, found in the same gospel, which presents Jesus assailing the Pharisees as children of hell (cf. Mt 23:15)? A sacred image in Christianity is often said to be a "God of love": how is this to maintain itself alongside a prophecy that a wrathful God will destroy Jerusalem to avenge the Jews' rejection of Jesus (Mt 22:7)? Does there not devolve upon interpreters of Christian values a responsibility to declare anti-Jewish passages devalued? **

Undoubtedly, the most formidable obstacle we face is unawareness on the part of the Christian laity of the role of *historical conditioning* in the formation of the New Testament's anti-Jewish passages. I have consistently argued that developments reflecting decades well after Jesus' death were stimuli of anti-Judaism erroneously attributed to Jesus personally. *The anti-Jewish Jesus who emerges from the gospels is thus the product of writers who conceptualized him in the light of what had become their own anti-Jewish orientation, often a function in turn of whatever such views were current among their own constituencies.* In this fashion, emphases and

attitudes in no way congenial to Jesus came to be associated with him. And it was to this retrojected gospel image of Jesus that Jews of later generations inevitably responded in kind, feeding a spiral of negative interchange between Christian and Jew over the centuries. This is why it is vital that modern readers of the gospels come to understand that the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the gospels are simply not one and the same. Reminiscent of a painting overlaid by later retouchings, or of two movie projectors showing simultaneously on the same screen, what we have in the gospels is one Jesus-image superimposed upon another.

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VIII. CONCLUSION

It is important for Christians to recognize that while Jews today may urge changes³⁶ and new understandings, Jews cannot themselves do anything by way of actual implementation other than appeal to Christians of good will. For anti-Judaism, as much as it has affected Jews, is, in one major sense, not a Jewish problem but a Christian problem: only Christians, not Jews, can genuinely undertake the measures necessary to resolve it.

Nor will devising these means be easy. Several years ago, for example, I was invited to participate with a group of well-meaning Christians who intended to retranslate the New Testament so as to delete its anti-Jewish elements. Since I sensed this should be a Christian enterprise only, I felt it inappropriate for me personally to participate. But I also expressed my doubts about the wisdom of attempting erasures from what is deemed by most Christians sacred scripture.

Most assuredly, the scratches marring the history of Jew and Christian with one another can never be erased, regardless of how well-meaning the intent. Our task, rather, seizing the opportunity, accepting history for what it has been, is to fashion from our scars something redemptive. It is my hope that the foregoing analysis may contribute in some way to the transformation of our wounds into a positive resolve—a commitment, from now on, for joint endeavor in hastening the day when "the Lord shall be one and the Lord's name one" (Zec 14:9).

Notes

1. Scriptural citations follow *The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).
2. Even though Jesus may well have been a Pharisee himself; cf. my essay, "Jesus and the Pharisees: The Problem As It Stands Today," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 15 (1978): 441–60.
3. Cf. Wolfgang Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1970).
4. Cf. R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
5. Cf. Dennis Prager, "Is There Such a Thing as a 'Jew for Jesus'?" *Ultimate Issues* 5 (1989): 6–7; also my article, "Anti-Judaism in the New Testament," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 38 (1983): 135, n.2.
6. Quoted from Luke Johnson's insightful essay, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108(1989): 441. He suggests (pp. 434–35) the examples cited below, nn. 7–9.
7. *Against Apion* 1.25 §225–6; trans. by Henry St. John Thackeray, *Josephus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).
8. *Ibid.* 2.7 §86.
9. *Embassy to Gaius* 26.166.

10. An apparently arrogant teacher whose views were criticized later in the literature of rabbinic Judaism itself, where he is often contrasted with his contemporary, Hillel, reputed to have personified patience and loving-kindness.

11. These elicited the scorn of some fellow Christians for insisting that Gentiles accepting Christianity should nonetheless "live like Jews," as, e.g., by accepting the Mosaic law as binding and incorporating Jewish observances into the practice of their Christian faith.

12. "Myriads" literally means "tens of thousands," but some scholars understand the term as "thousands" only. Cf. Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 21:20.

13. Church tradition considers Mark to have been Peter's (Jewish) interpreter and associate in Rome, and locates Matthew within Jesus' inner circle of twelve Jewish followers. *John is also often identified as among the twelve.*

14. "C.E." ("common era") is a more inclusive formulation than "A.D." (*anno Domini*, "in the year of our Lord"), a Christian theological term.

15. Luke is usually identified as Paul's (Gentile) physician.

16. Cf. Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p.x: "All the [gospels] were written and circulated anonymously. Names were attributed to them only in later ecclesiastical tradition."

17. This could have been the case even with the author of Matthew, the gospel most frequently cited as "Jewish"; cf. my article, "Interpreting 'Pro-Jewish' Passages in Matthew," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1983): 135-47.

18. Stephen Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1973), pp. 232-33.

19. Why then does Acts exaggerate the number of Jews joining early Christianity? The author was disturbed by the anomaly that, while Jesus' preaching naturally extended the essence of Judaism, Jews affirming Christianity in the author's day (ca. the late 80s) were embarrassingly few. How explain that Christianity's intuitively obvious truths had been rejected by those most expected to have intuited them? His explanation: while Christianity's truths were not perceived by Jews in his own late day, by no means had they been lost on Jews of a bygone age; for when Christianity had first emerged, Jewish entrants had numbered even in the (tens of) thousands! Only subsequently, upon beginning to experience rebuffs by Jews, did Christian missionaries turn to Gentiles instead; and it was their phenomenal success among Gentiles that accounted for the disconcertingly high percentage of Gentile-Christians in the church of the author's own day. Cf. my chapter, "The Mission to the Jews in Acts: Unraveling Luke's 'Myth of the 'Myriads,'" in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives*, edited by Joseph Tyson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), pp. 102-03, 152-58.

20. I am not denying that Jesus engaged in controversies with religious opponents, only that the gospels can be confidently used to confirm specific disputations during his ministry, reconstruct their exact substance, or even identify precise disputants. See my volume, *Mark's Treatment of the Jewish Leaders* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 15-28.

21. Rejoinders by the church, attesting that Jews lodged this objection, include: Jesus expected execution (Mk 10:33f); he could have prevented it but chose not to (Mt 26:53); he died to fulfill scripture (Mt 26:54). Stated in more modern terms, the objection would be that Jesus died without bringing the messianic age, typified by an end to war, oppression, and ill-will.

22. The church's attempted solution: cf. 9:13; Mt 17:13.

23. His birth was later assigned to Bethlehem to neutralize this Jewish objection. Cf. Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 412ff., and Appendices 3 and 7; Howard Teeple, "The Historical Beginnings of the Resurrection Faith," *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Allen P. Wikgren*, edited by David Aune (Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 109.

24. Jews did not realize that it was developing Christianity (not Jesus) which broke with the law and then attributed the break to Jesus. The oft-cited, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law . . ." (Mt 5:17ff), is not relevant here; this reflects not words of Jesus but rather of Matthew, who casts Jesus as a lawgiver modeled on Moses.

25. They alleged that the disciples had stolen the body and proclaimed it resurrected. Matthew's reaction was to insist that a stone had been sealed and a guard set (27:66; cf. 28:11ff.), so an undetected theft was impossible. John responded by having the resurrected Jesus standing near the tomb (20:14ff). The empty tomb tradition is unmentioned and, I submit, unknown by Paul. Since the author of Mark (unlike that of Matthew) seems unaware of Jewish rebuttals, the story must have first surfaced either with Mark himself (ca. 70), or only shortly before him. This means that, while early Christians believed in Jesus' resurrection, they did not do so initially on the basis of any empty tomb tradition, which only originated as a Christian response to Jews and possibly others denying Jesus' bodily resurrection.

26. The gospels themselves may inadvertently preserve tell-tale clues of Jesus' possible subversive image: his "cleansing" of the temple (which must have involved *some* militancy); his followers' possession of weapons (on a holiday, no less; cf. Lk 22:36ff); his crucifixion between seditionists (the Greek, *lestes*, meaning, in this context, "seditionist," not "thief"); the title atop the cross: "king of the Jews" (worded from Rome's perspective and indicating that sedition, not "blasphemy" [Mk 14:64], was the actual reason for Jesus' arrest).

27. That this trial is fictional is accepted by many scholars today, especially after their recourse to Tacitus, Josephus, and Philo, ancient sources attesting to Pilate's ruthlessness and to his execution of opponents without trials.

28. E.g. Jesus' dicta, "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mk 12:17) and "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52)—whether originating with Jesus or not—became useful in persuading Rome of Jesus' harmlessness and in downplaying any suggestion of his incompatibility with Roman interests.

29. Such sanhedrins could be legally convened by Jewish leaders only with the Roman governor's express consent (Josephus, *Antiq.* 20:197–203). The gospels present us with a fiction that the Jewish leaders, here in the case of Jesus, acted *independently*. The intent of this tradition was at least threefold: to show that the Jews arrested and tried Jesus without Rome's direction; to demonstrate that Jesus was formally condemned only by a specifically *Jewish* body; and to substitute "blasphemy," a non-significant offense in Roman eyes, for "sedition," the actual reason for Jesus' crucifixion (by Rome).

30. Jews were excused from participation in the cult of the emperor and could both administer their own funds (including export of dues to the Jerusalem temple) and settle their own legal affairs in civil suits involving one Jew against another. Some correctional authority may also have been conceded their communal leaders. Additionally, Jews were exempted from military service and court appearances on the sabbath. Cf. my article, "Judaism, Hellenistic," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* Suppl. Vol. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 505–06.

31. Conjectured today at having been anywhere between 22,000 and 45,000.

32. *The Jewish War* 2 & 7.

33. Cf. "Interpreting 'Pro-Jewish' Passages."

34. Even this much-heralded statement, however, leaves gospel depictions essentially unchallenged since Roman involvement still goes unmentioned and Jesus' death remains solely the responsibility of Jews (only *fewer* of them).

35. Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

36. I myself would urge the following: scriptural selections read in church should not contain anti-Jewish verses, and sermons vilifying Pharisees should no longer be preached; publishers of Christian textbooks should: (1) strip their texts of anti-Jewish material; (2) introduce positive treatments about aspects of Judaism mentioned in the gospels (e.g. Jewish holidays such as Passover, institutions such as the synagogue, and teachings such as the *Shema* [Mk 12:29]); (3) introduce positive statements about Judaism of no particular relevance to Christianity (treating, e.g., Judaism's ongoing vitality in the modern world); and (4) indicate the role Christian teachings have played in unsavory periods of Jewish history (e.g. the crusades, pogroms, the Spanish inquisition, expulsions of Jews, the holocaust, etc.).