BEARING FALSE WITNESS
COMMON ERRORS MADE ABOUT
EARLY JUDAISM

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There are numerous Church guidelines on how to present Jews and Judaism (e.g., "Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church" [1988]; National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching" [1988]; General Convention of the Episcopal Church, "Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations" [1988]; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations" [1988]). However, out of ignorance many pastors and religious educators strip Jesus from his Jewish context and depict that context in false and noxious stereotypes. This volume represents an effort to redress this significant problem.

There are five major reasons for this problem. First, most Christian seminaries and divinity schools do not offer detailed education about Judaism, whether at the time of Jesus or subsequently. The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, the accrediting organization for these institutions, does not as of 2011 recommend that candidates studying for the Christian ministry receive formal instruction in how to avoid anti-Jewish preaching and teaching.

Second, whereas a number of churches have guidelines on the presentation of Jews and Judaism, not all clergy know the guidelines. Even clergy who receive some education about Judaism need refresher courses; people forget what they have learned in graduate and professional schools, and these understandings change as research progresses. But too few church bodies sponsor continuing education programs on Judaism, on Jewish-Christian relations, and specifically on anti-Jewish biblical interpretation, and too few clergy attend the programs that are offered.

Third, as church demographics shift increasingly to Asia and Africa, new forms of anti-Jewish biblical interpretations develop. Christians from these areas lack direct memory of the Shoah, the Holocaust, and so may be less sensitized to the dangers of detaching of Jesus from his Jewish tradition. Any negative stereotype flourishes more easily when there are no personal contacts to combat it, when there is limited access to Jews and Jewish resources, and when the challenge to anti-Jewish teaching—such as might be raised by a Jewish Board of Deputies or the Anti-Defamation League—is not part of the culture.

Fourth, biblical studies does, appropriately, speak to contemporary issues. In the effort to deploy the biblical text for purposes of liberation, interpreters insensitive to the issue of anti-Jewish teaching sometimes present Jesus as the liberator from his social context, namely Judaism, which they depict as analogous to present-day social ills. The motivations of such politicized readings are profound and laudable: social justice, alleviation of poverty, and cessation of ethnic strife, and the like; the real difficulties arising from these interpretive strategies must be acknowledged. However, the means by which their argument is made are sometimes unintentionally anti-Jewish.

Fifth, and perhaps most pernicious, the problem of ahistorical, anti-Jewish interpretation is not always acknowledged. Fortunately, most ministers and religious educators take care in addressing the obviously difficult passages (e.g., the "blood cry" of Mt 27.25 that depicts "the blood be on us and on our children!"; Jn 8.44a, where Jesus accuses the "Jews": "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do what your father's desires"). But problems enter when homilists or teachers do not know Jewish history or theology and out of ignorance construct a negative Judaism over and against which they position Jesus, or when they presume that Jesus' numerous insightful and inspirational comments are original to him rather than part of his Jewish identity.

Anti-Jewish stereotypes remain in some Christian preaching and teaching in the following ten areas. (For additional details, see annotations to the NT passages that this essay references.)

First, as part of a broader theological view that contrasts Jewish "law" with Christian "grace," some Christians may believe that the Law (Torah) is impossible to follow, "a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear." (Acts 15.10). On Jesus, "easy yoke" (see Mt 11.29–30). In actuality, Jews, then and now, did not find Torah observance any more burdensome than citizens in most countries find their country's laws today. As Deut 30.11a states, "surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you." Furthermore, modern states have more laws than there are in all the ancient Jewish sources combined. In fact,
Jesus sometimes makes observance more stringent: To­
compass both­lust (Mt 5.28) and marriage after divorce (Mt.
19.9; Mk 10.11­12; Lk 16.18).

Jesus himself was halakhically observant: He wears
fringes (zizim—see Num 15.38­39; Deut 22.12) to remind
him of the Torah (Mt 9.20; Lk 4.44; Mt 14.30; Mk 6.50);
he honors the Sabbath and keeps it holy; he argues with
fellow Jews about appropriate observance (one does not
debate something in which one has no investment). It is
from Torah that he takes his "Great Commandment" (Mt
22.36­40: love of God (Deut 6.4) and love of neighbor
(Lev 18.19).

A second misconception, and correlate to the first, is
the view that Jews follow Torah in order to earn God's
love or a place in heaven. Therefore, Judaism is a reli­
gion of "works righteousness" rather than of grace. This
view fails to observe that the election of Israel is based on
grace, not merit or works. Jews do not follow Torah in
order to "earn" divine love or salvation; the Mishnah (m.
Sank. 10.10) states that "all Israel has a share in the world to
come"—it is part of the covenant. Divine love is already
present; it is not earned. Some texts contemporaneous
with the New Testament (e.g., the Dead Sea Scroll text
4QMMT) can be read to suggest a works­righteousness
model, but this is by no means the majority view, at least
as can be determined by the literature of the period.

A third misconception connected to Torah is the view
that purity laws were both burdensome and unjust. For
example, numerous commentators explain that the priest
and the Levites of the parable of the good Samaritan
(Lk 10.30­39) bypass a wounded traveler because they
are commanded by Jewish law to avoid touching a corpse.
The parable, however, does not give this as the rationale
for the priest and the Levite's behavior. Indeed, it could
not have been the rationale, since the priest is "going
down" from Jerusalem (Lk 10.31), not "up" to it, where pu­
ritiness in the Temple would have been an issue. Although
Lev. 21.2 forbids priests from contact with corpses save
for those near relatives, no such injunction applies to the
Levites. In rabbinic literature, the responsibility to save
a life supersedes other commandments (e.g., b. Sh'ma 84a).

Next, Samaritans had the same purity laws as did Jews.
Josephus (Ag. Ap. 2.7, 21) insists that Jews are "not to let
anyone lie unburied; the Mishnah (m. Naz. 3.7) mandates
that even a high priest must ensure an unattended corpse
receives proper burial. Consequently, Jews would have
expected the priest and Levite to provide care, and par­
cipate of the shock of the parable is that they do not. The
parable mentions priest and Levite for rhetorical, not legal
reasons: it leads listeners to expect to hear "Israelite," the
typical third member of the priest­Levite­Israelite trio, and
thus listeners are shocked again when the third per­
son revealed is a Samaritan.

Similarly, many sermons claim, incorrectly, that by
touching a woman suffering from hemorrages (Mt. 9.20­
22; Mk 5.25­34; Lk 8.43­48) and a corpse (Mt 9.23­26; Mk
5.35­33; Lk 8.49­56), Jesus violates purity laws or social
taboo. First, Jesus does not touch the woman; he touch­
es him. Second, hands do not convey mystical impurity.
The point of the healing is that Jesus restores a woman
to health (and to ritual purity), not that impurity, which
is a natural part of the world­order, is evil. Regarding the
corpses again, no law forbids touching a corpse; although
corpse convey serious ritual impurity, being in a ritual­
ly impure state is not prohibited unless one is going to the
Temple. In fact, attending a corpse is an important
mitzvah (commandment) in the book of Tobit (2.1­7), in
rabbinic literature, and in the New Testament, as we see,
for example, when the disciples of John the Baptist claim
their teacher's body (Mk 6.29; Mt 14.17), when Joseph of
Arimathea claims Jesus' body (Mt 15.43­45), and when
the women visit the tomb (Mt 16.1; Lk 24).

Women who have just given birth are ritually impure,
but Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary,
the mother of Jesus, were not marginalized or demeaned
following parturition. Ritual purity along with Sabbath
observance, avoiding certain foods such as pork, mak­
ing sure meat was slaughtered in an appropriate manner,
and tithing certain agricultural products also helped Jews
resist assimilation, served as a sign of Jewish identity, helped
support the poor, and otherwise reminded them that they
were Israel, the covenant community. For additional
details, see The "Law." p. 515.

The fourth misconception is the view that Jesus forbids
corps in order to protect women, because "the rabbi's" stated that men would divorce their wives
for the slightest of reasons (see M. Git. 19.12). This view
fails to note that the additional rabbinic divorce
commendations, we find much less stringent: one that
non­strict divorce to cases of adultery; this view also fails
to note that the Jewish wife had a marriage contract (hok
tekubah) that protected her financially in case of divorce.
Jesus' concern is not the protection of women, but theo­
logical. Mark 10.5­9 explains: "From the beginning of
creation, God made them male and female." For this rea­
son a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined
to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they
are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has
joined together, let no one separate." The sixth problem is a matter substantially of vague rhetori­
the claim that Jesus ministers to the "outcasts" and
"marginals." Many pastors and teachers do not explain
who is cast out by whom; Cast out from what? Marginal
or what? For example, that Jesus eats with "sinners
and tax collectors." (i.e., Mk 2.16) is seen as an example
of his ministering to the "cast out." Groups ranging from
the sick, the women, and the Gentiles (such as centurions)
to children and the poor are seen as "marginal." This is
historically inaccurate. Sinners and tax collectors are not
"cast out;" rather, they are people who violate the
welfare of the community and who have deliberately
removed themselves from the common good. Nor are
they "cast out" of anything; to the contrary. Luke 18.10
taxes a "lax collector" and "sinner" in the Jerusalem
Temple. Second, the majority of people suffering from
diseases in the Gospels are part of larger familial or social
groups. Women are not cast out or marginal, and chil­
ren are so loved that their parents and care­givers bring
them to Jesus for a blessing. Nor are Gentiles "cast out;"
Luke reports that a Gentile centurion built a synagogue
in Capernaum, and depicts the Jewish elders as pleading
on his behalf to Jesus (Lk 7.5­10). Gentiles were welcome
in the Jerusalem Temple and in synagogues. Judaism
of this period was not an egalitarian or universalist utopi­
a, but nor is it in general a system that "cast out" wom­
en, children, the poor and sick, and so on. It is therefore
important that pastors and teachers be more cautious when
teaching terms like "marginal" and "outcast."

The seventh misconception is the view that all Jews
wanted a militant messiah and therefore rejected Jesus
because he proclaimed love of enemies. First­Century
Judaism had no single messianic blueprint. Some Jews
expected a priestly messiah, others a shepherd, still
others thought John the Baptist was the messiah. And still
others had no such expectations. Missing from this view
of the pacific Jesus vs. militant Judaism is also contrary
evidence from the New Testament. For example, Jesus'
followers are armed, as we see in the attempts to prevent
his arrest in Gethsemane. Jesus instructs his disciples,
"The one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a
bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak
and buy one" (Lk 22.36b; disciples respond: "Lord, look,
here are two swords") (Lk 22.38).

Eighth is the view that for early Judaism, God had
become a transcendent, distant king, and that Jesus in­
vented the idea of a heavenly "Father;" connected to this
view is the still­heard claim that when Jesus addressed
God as "abba" (Mk 14.36; see also Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6) that
he used an intimate term meaning "daddy" which would
have been offensive to his fellow Jews. These claims miss
the numerous biblical and postbiblical uses of "father
for the divine, including Ps 68.8 (Heb v. 6); 89.26 (Heb
v. 27); Is 64.8; Jer 31.9; Mt 27.58; 28.19, etc. (1QH); b. Tan. 23b
(on the grandson of Ioni the Circle­Drawer); and b. Tan. 25b
(dinu malchini—"our father our king").

Ninth is the insistence that Jesus boasted about the
"temple domination system" that overtook the popula­
tion, forced upon them oppressive purity laws (see
above), and functioned as an elitist institution in coopera­
tion with Rome. Thus, we have the common stereotype
that the "money changers" were overcharging pilgrims.
Jesus never makes this charge, although there are rabbi­
nic notices that the high priests would sometimes take
the tithes due to the poverty of priests. Nor have we evidence
that the Temple oppressed the peasants or overtaxed them. The vast majority of the Jewish people loved the Temple, visited it on pilgrimage festivals, protected it from Roman profanation, and mourned its destruction. According to the book of Acts, Jesus’ followers, including Paul, continued to worship there. When in the first revolt against Rome, the Zealot factions gained control of Jerusalem, they did burn the Temple debts, but they also appointed their own high priest. To some extent, the idea of the temple domination system stems from Jesus’ comment about the “den of robbers” (Mt 21:13); however, “den of robbers” is a quotation from the Hebrew Bible, Num Jer 211, and it refers not to where people steal but where thieves go to feel safe.

Tenth is the claim that early Judaism was narrow, chauvinistic, and exclusive; and that Jesus invented universalism. For example, in Acts 10.28, Peter states, “it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile.” The claim is false, as the Gospel of Luke itself indicates (see Lk 7:13-10), as the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple proves, and as the presence of God-fearers and the conversion of pagans to Judaism in the first century all indicate. Yes, some Jews were narrow (the Qumran scroll IQM, which divides the world into the “Sons of Light” and the “Sons of Darkness” is hardly a model of numerical and ritual alliance); others were not. Universalism is important; precedents in the Hebrew Bible, especially in texts describing the ideal future (“the messianic age”); see, e.g., Isa 2.3-4, and such ideas continued in rabbinic texts as well. This common stereotype, and others are, can be addressed by reading and teaching the entire New Testament carefully within its context. The commentator and essays in this volume should provide for readers not only a greater appreciation for the Scriptures of the Christian Church but should also prevent the false teaching that deforms the “good news” of Jesus.

The New Testament between the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and Rabbinic Literature

Marc Zvi Bletter

It is impossible to read the New Testament aptly without knowledge of the Jewish Bible, the Tanakh (an acronym for Torah, Nevi'im [Prophets], and Ketuvim [Writings]), what the church calls the “Old Testament,” and what it is sometimes called the “Hebrew Bible”). Most of the books that comprise the New Testament presuppose the background of that collection of writings—usually in its Greek translation, the Septuagint (see “The Septuagint,” p. 520); they quote it, allude to it, use its thought forms and concepts, and in general rely upon it as a source of ideas, history, and religious meaning.

But such appreciation of the Hebrew Bible is not enough for a full understanding of how the New Testament discerns this earlier biblical material. Informed reading of the New Testament must also take account of the development of Jewish thought, including Jewish biblical interpretation, through the time of Jesus of Nazareth and his early followers. Of the approximately 8,000 verses in the New Testament, more than 250 quote the Tanakh, and perhaps twice as many directly allude to it; if verses with more distant allusions are included, the number is far greater. For example, in Matthew 2.2, the magi’s question—“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage”—likewise alludes to Numbers 24.17: “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”

The New Testament authors also find significant continuity between the Scriptures of Israel and the story of Jesus: Jesus is portrayed as a new Moses in Matthew 2-7 (both savior figures are rescued when the pass, take a single viewpoint, the variety of opinions on crucial ideas in the Tanakh (Is God corporeal? Are people essentially good? Is there intergenerational punishment?); anticipates the variety of ideas in the New Testament (Is the new age imminent, or has it been delayed? Should Jesus’ followers marry or live singly? Is Jesus an incarnate divine being or an adopted son of God? Does early Christianity mean to replace the law?); both the Tanakh and the New Testament do not participate in the either/or world of the twenty-first century.

And yet there is much in the New Testament that is not anticipated in the Tanakh, such as the core idea of a divine messiah who brings redemption by dying for Israel’s sins. Some of these ideas exist separately in the Hebrew Bible—a messiah (though that term is never used there in the future ideal Davidic king), a future ideal king who has some supernatural or at least hyperbolically described characteristics (see Isa 53), though he is never called divine, and a suffering servant (see esp. Isa 43). Though the identity of this servant is very unclear, and its uncertain if the Hebrew Bible intends an individual or a group, and if this servant lives in the past, present, or future.

Thus, some of what is new in the New Testament reflects a bringing together of separate ideas found in the Tanakh. Some of the New Testament’s themes draw not directly upon the Tanakh but upon Hebraic Jewish literature. For example, the concept of the many, our death by the state, whose sacrifice has salvific meaning for fellow Jews, begins to be developed in the apocalyptic book of Maccabees (a book in the Roman Catholic and English New Testament but not the Protestant versions of the Old Testament). The shift of Satan from a member of the heavenly court to a personification of evil likewise developed in this milieu.

There is also, of course, material in the New Testament that is not anticipated in the Tanakh; the examples of this are the epistles, letters written to individuals or to congregations. Does the New Testament contain “Gospels”? In the sense of a focused biography of individual, although the stories of Moses and David, a developed in detail. Furthermore, the Hebrew materials tend to point out the flaws in even the principal figures discussed; no figure in the Tanakh is depicted as perfect or sinless.

Much of what is new is found in the Jewish texts for approximately the same period of the New Testament. For example, the formula used to introduce many citations from the Scriptures of Israel in the New Testament is “as it is written” (e.g., Mt 12.1-2, Though that term is never used there of the future ideal Davidic king), a future ideal king who has some supernatural or at least hyperbolically described characteristics (see Isa 53), though he is never called divine, and a suffering servant (see esp. Isa 43). Though the identity of this servant is very unclear, and its uncertain if the Hebrew Bible intends an individual or a group, and if this servant lives in the past, present, or future.

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