

Seton Hall University

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Jew and Christian in the New Testament

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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Before focusing on German literature, where anti-Jewish sentiment is present in abundance, we ask whether such sentiment dates from the New Testament itself. Does Germany create her own anti-Jewish stance, or does she inherit a pre-existent bias present at the birth of Christianity?

In general, anti-Jewish bias in the Christian community does not go back to the New Testament itself (since its authors were Jews) but arises shortly afterward through misreadings of ambiguous passages written by these Jews. What often passes for anti-Jewish sentiment in the New Testament is excerpted from a dispute within the Jewish community as to what it means to be a good Jew. When cited later by non-Jews, Paul's and John's passionate wording leant itself easily to anti-Jewish interpretation.

The issues in Jewish-Christian relations from 30–100 C.E. are complex for several reasons. Our purpose is to sketch aspects of these questions that have an impact on the centuries covered in the subsequent essays, and to point out how errors led to misunderstandings, alienation and, at times, persecution of the Jewish majority. We will do this by looking at five passages which typify the controversy.

The Synoptic Gospels

The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke (the so-called "Synoptic" Gospels because they see "as with one eye") represent a theological synthesis of the public ministry, the trial, death and resurrection of Jesus. From the texts, with their similarities and contrasts, scholars try to discern how Christian

communities functioned in the first generations after Jesus departed. For more than half of the past century, influential German scholars despaired of learning much about the real life conditions, or *Sitz im Leben*, of Jesus and his disciples. More recently, contemporary Jewish materials and traditions have become known, and – alongside a new “quest for the historical Jesus” – have provided many insights into the New Testament milieu.

The Prophetic Model

Both John the Baptist and Jesus used an ancient teaching technique of the prophets of Israel. They would address their peers, especially the Sadducee and Pharisee teachers, with a challenge, to examine their conscience with regard to their responsibilities. This took the form of an admonition, a sharp criticism, which condemned their failings.¹ In reality, this was a call to see God and divine commandments from a fresh angle. When such debates, with their unflattering labels and names, were read by people who did not know the culture, Jesus was all too often taken to be totally alienated from his contemporaries.

Thus, many failed to realize how close the teachings of Jesus were to positions of the Pharisees. They should have realized that the sharpest controversies may arise between groups which share many positions in common. Moreover, many forgot about distinctions concerning faith and practice between the Sadducees, who adhered to priestly authority in all matters, and the Pharisees, who depended on oral tradition to provide insights accessible to all educated Jews. Unfortunately, the evangelists themselves saw no need to highlight what was obvious to them – that there were schools (“houses”) among the Pharisees with contrasting interpretations of certain commandments.

Five Controversial Passages

As Jules Isaac discussed traditional "teaching of contempt," he listed three major themes: the decide charge, the accusation that Jews are of the devil and do the devil's work, and that they are rejected by God.² Here are five passages which are sometimes taken as examples of such bias: Jesus excoriating the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1–39); "His blood be upon us" (Matthew 27:24–25); the "cleansing" of the Temple (John 2:13–15); "Your father the devil" (John 8:44); Paul's invective against Christian and Jew alike (Philippians 3:2 alongside Thessalonians 2:14–16).

Jesus excoriates the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1–39)

As Rabbi Asher Finkel has demonstrated, Matthew's record of Jesus' woes against "the Pharisees" (23:1–39) is an attack on positions of the House of Shammai. How many Christians throughout the centuries developed the stereotype that all Pharisees were legalistic, addicted to showy demonstrations of piety and inconsistent or hypocritical in their moral life – when Jesus, like Paul the Pharisee after him, was assuming exactly the opposite for most Pharisees?

During the late Second Temple period (after 100 B.C.E.), there were several approaches to the interpretation of the Torah or "instruction" preserved in the five books of Moses. Under priestly leadership, the Sadducees (who claimed to descend from Zadok, high priest in King Solomon's time) maintained that teaching was their prerogative. The Pharisees were educated laymen who considered themselves heirs of the prophetic tradition, since God had given Moses an oral Torah to complement the written Pentateuch. The Pharisee Paul, like Jesus and the early disciples, recognized the legitimacy of Sadducean priestly leadership in the Temple; he held that earnest study under proper guidance would provide insights showing how to live

according to the commandments. The priests were respected as mediators of cult but were not thought to have an exclusive right to interpret the written Torah.

Although Paul does not give details about his education, Luke credits him with a statement that he was a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia but brought up in Jerusalem.³ "At the feet of Gamaliel was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God, just as all of you are today" (Acts 22:3). Although exegetes a generation ago were often skeptical about the historicity of material in Acts,⁴ this point about Paul's education is taken seriously by several noted scholars.⁵ Gamaliel was a great teacher who flourished in Jerusalem from approximately 20–50 C.E.⁶ The wonderfully irenic plea to let the early Christians practice their faith because "if this activity is of human origin it will destroy itself" is attributed to him (Acts 5:38–39). Some have objected that the intolerant young man named Saul could not have studied under such a tolerant master.⁷ However, Western philosophy is sometimes defined in terms of the differing world views of Plato and Aristotle, teacher and pupil.

"His blood be upon us" (Matthew 27:24–25)

Each Gospel contains a lengthy narrative of the Last Supper, the trial and death of Jesus. The historical situation caused by a Roman occupation of Judah and surrounding areas meant that the power structure was a mix of local and outside figures. Occupying Roman and local Jewish leaders collaborated in most activities, and so also in arresting and trying the "troublemaker" from Galilee. However, as the written record was compiled, the tendency increased to blame Jewish leaders and to minimize Roman involvement. Each of the Gospels has details of the Passion not recorded elsewhere. One of the most devastating for the Jewish people is found in Matthew.

[Pilate] took water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying: "I am innocent of this man's blood. Look to it yourselves." And

the whole people said in reply, "His blood be upon us and upon our children" (Matthew 27:24-25).

Rabbi Finkel has asked: what could be the background to this passage? He draws attention to the text in Deuteronomy concerning a murder without witness.

All the elders of that city which is nearest the corpse shall wash their hands ... and declare: "Our hands did not shed this blood, and our eyes did not see the deed. Absolve, O Lord, your people Israel ... and let not the guilt of shedding innocent blood remain in the midst of your people Israel" (Deuteronomy 21:6-9)

Over the course of history, this text has been interpreted as a devastating self-indictment not only of those present but of all Jews, taking a corporate responsibility for the death of Jesus. On countless occasions such an accusation has been the excuse for Christian persecution. Among the minority who opposed this trend,⁸ Peter Abelard did not feel that Jews involved in the death of Jesus had sinned. For this exoneration, he may have been drawing on John 16:2-3 and Acts 3:17. The first refers to an erroneous conscience and the second to ignorance (see 1 Corinthians 2:8).

The Synoptic Gospels record that at the time Jesus died "the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51; see Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Often this has been interpreted to mean that sacrificial worship in the Temple ended. However, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Jewish followers of Jesus continued to frequent the Temple. With reference to Jewish tradition, the best way to understand the statement is to consider God rending his garment in mourning.

The "cleansing" of the Temple (John 2:13-15)

The "cleansing" of the Temple is recounted in each of the canonical Gospels. Because the Synoptic tradition describes only one pilgrimage of Jesus to Jerusalem during his adult ministry,

the episode comes just prior to his Passion (Matthew 21:12–16; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48). The Fourth Gospel places this narrative in the context of Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem (John 2:13–25). Scholarly debate focuses on the relation between this event and the trial of Jesus before Jewish authorities. Could such a disruption of activities related to the Temple have been tolerated for long?

The second question is the intention of Jesus. Did he mean this action to be a sign that sacrificial offerings would come to an end? Who were the money-changers? Adult Jewish men were commanded to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the three great feasts of Passover, Weeks (Pentecost) and Booths. As travelers came from a distance, sometimes from abroad, it became practical to purchase the animals and pigeons for sacrifice in the outer courtyards around the Temple. Adult males were to pay an annual half-shekel tax to the Temple; this had to be in old coins without any image. The function of money-changers was to serve these pilgrims. There is no basis for an extension of their role to money-lending.

This passage found its way into German literature in the ninth century. The *Heliand*, a version of the New Testament (ca. 830), expressed a value of the Anglo-Saxon culture – munificence – which could be taken into the synthesis of Christian faith.⁹ Unfortunately, the episode of the moneylenders being expelled from the Temple is distorted from its meaning and put to the services of the canard that Jews as moneylenders were invariably guilty of usury. In the biblical world, the term (*hesed*) describing devotion or loyalty of an individual or the community as a whole is almost invariably situated within a covenant framework (see the phrase “grace and truth” in John 1:14).

The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus' explanation of his actions by a quotation from the prophets (Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11). Describing the openness of Jewish leaders to a future gentile presence at worship, the disciple of Isaiah proclaimed a divine oracle: “My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples” (see Isaiah 2:2–5). Jeremiah criticized the inconsistency in the life-style of many Jews of his time. They were guilty of

injustice and other social crimes in everyday life, but they came to the Temple as a place of safety because they were "God's people" (Jeremiah 7:1–23; 26:2–6). This is not an accusation of extortion or usury in the Temple but, like Zane Grey's "Robbers' Roost," a place of refuge safe from counter-attack. Probably a misinterpretation of this quotation led Christian readers to think of usury as a crime being perpetrated in God's very presence.

Although Jesus does not quote the prophet Zechariah, he may have regarded the last prophecy in this book as background for his "cleansing" of the Temple. After the final battle,¹⁰ the nations who survive will come to Jerusalem for the feast of Booths (Zechariah 14:16–19). In the final age, there shall no longer be a distinction between sacred and secular, as in the pervasive Jewish evaluation of both time and space as a foundation for many commandments. Everything in Jerusalem will be considered holy (i.e., consecrated to divine service). "On that day, there shall no longer be any Canaanite (i.e., merchant) in the House of the Lord of Hosts" (14:21) – one of the major themes in the letters of Paul, and perhaps the one that most people have in mind when they charge him with being anti-Jewish.

Along with a critique of any inconsistency between contemporary practices in daily life and the ideals of worship, Jesus may well have pointed to the future consummation of God's reign, when Gentiles would be welcome to join the descendants of Abraham in the service of God – again, a Jewish concept (rather than an attack on Judaism).

"Your father is the devil" (John 8:44)

Perhaps the single most devastating statement about "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel is the accusatory dictum summarized as "Your father is the devil" (John 8:44). Is this text (or the tradition behind it) the background for the phrase "assembly of Satan" *synagoge tou satana* (Apocalypse 2:9; 3:9)?¹¹ Rather than using this passage to show appreciation for the Jewish heritage of Jesus and his Gospel (see next paragraph), Church Fathers

(especially Ambrose and John Chrysostom) and later generations of Christian teachers applied this image of the diabolical to the synagogue and Jewish prayer in their own times.

These preachers and writers did not realize that the intense pitting of life against death, truth against falsehood, God against Satan in John was a literary approach that derived from polemics between Jewish teachers of the age.¹² They must have understood that the reprimand of Jesus to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23) was an admonition rather than definitive rejection. Unfortunately, it suited their purpose to construe this debate about Jews being the children of God and of Abraham in such a way that Jesus seemed to be making an eternally valid condemnation of all Jews in all periods of post-biblical history, except those who converted to Christianity.

Like the prophets of earlier times, John the Baptist and Jesus exercised the function of "admonisher" (*mokeah*) to their peers as teachers of the ordinary people. Name-calling was a method commonly used to shake presumably complacent leaders into a realization of the effect of their instruction. A title such as "guides of the blind" might be reversed (see Romans 2:19; Matthew 15:14; 23:16, 19, 24) to startle opponents into a reflection on their work. Because misinterpretation of Scripture could be attributed to the devil (see Matthew 4:6), erroneous teachings might be wittingly or unwittingly diabolical (see 2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Scandals or obstacles to the faith of the "little ones" must be avoided at all costs (see Matthew 18:6-10). But, on the other hand, in situations of conflict or disagreement, people should hearken to the advice of Gamaliel: "Any group of human origin will break up of its own accord, but if a movement comes from God you will not be able to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:39).

Rudolf Bultmann declared John 4:22 to be a gloss because it did not seem to be consistent with other uses of "the Jews." However, with Moloney, we would note: "The Johannine Jesus speaks in coherence with the rest of the early Church, which was never ashamed of the fact that its origins lay within the story of the Jewish people."¹³ Otto Betz¹⁴ has shown how the statement

"Salvation is from the Jews" is rooted in Jacob's blessing of Judah: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until *Shiloh* comes, and to him shall be the obedience of peoples" (Genesis 49:13).

Only by considering the background of the Jerusalem Temple and its liturgy can the Johannine vision of God's gift of salvation be appreciated.¹⁵ Knowing God's plan as celebrated in the feasts and fasts of the Jewish people, beginning with Passover but also including Hannukkah (10:22), the evangelist prepares his community to understand Christian worship in relation to the "hour" of Jesus. For Christians in any age to grasp the message of John is to become imbued with a deep appreciation of Jewish worship in the Second Temple Period.

Paul the Pharisee (Thessalonians 2:14-16)

"In zeal I persecuted the church..." (Philippians 3:6). Although Paul was not a "Zealot" (i.e. a member of the group committed to expulsion of the Roman presence from Judaea), he did belong to a long tradition of total adherence to the God of Israel. "Zeal was more than just a fervent commitment to the Torah; it denoted a willingness to use violence against any – Jews, Gentiles, or the wicked in general – who were contravening, opposing, or subverting the Torah. Further, a zealot was willing to suffer and die for the sake of the Torah..."¹⁶ The description in Acts 8:3; 9:1, 14; and 26:9-12 implies that Saul was very active and commissioned by the chief priests to persecute followers of Jesus far and wide.

As a Christian, Paul on occasion manifested a fiery temper against Christian and Jew alike. Reacting against other Christian teachers, possibly converts from gentile background, who call Gentiles to full observance of the Torah, Paul calls these Christians dogs (Philippians 3:2) and hopes that they will mutilate themselves (Galatians 5:12). The invective against "the Jews" (perhaps to be rendered "Judaeans" in the geographical sense of dwellers in Judaea) in the first letter to the Thessalonians

(2:14–16) is not only extremely violent but includes a gentile accusation that “Jews oppose all men,” an unjustified general statement that Jews were obnoxious and intolerant. Some have argued that this is an interpolation by a scribe of gentile origin, but every manuscript contains the passage.¹⁷

It is common in many cultures for a person who feels he has grown in some important way to speak pejoratively of his own previous self, or, if addressing a member of his own group in anger, to use labels and “racist” statements not permissible to an outsider. Paul exhibited a Mediterranean temper on occasion and perhaps is to be credited with the sage advice: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger!” (Ephesians 4:26) In any case, since passages like 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 are part of the canon of the New Testament, Christians must grapple with them. In no case can they be a basis for an anti-Jewish theology;¹⁸ there are other more detailed texts (such as Romans 9–11) which provide elements for a balanced synthesis.

Where did Paul stand in relation to the other apostles in education? Would he have been the equivalent of a graduate student under Gamaliel, while the others were in high school? One should not underestimate their exposure to the Jewish heritage, biblical and liturgical, in the synagogue service and classroom (*beth-midrash*). Moreover, they were in the company of Jesus for a considerable length of time. Gospel traditions show that he used the Bible in its liturgical context as the foundation for many of his teachings and debates. He is presented as having precise methods for interpreting the scriptures.¹⁹ Already the House of Hillel in the Pharisee tradition is credited with having hermeneutical principles for grappling with problems in the biblical text.²⁰ If one accepts the statement of Acts 22:3 that Saul studied under Gamaliel, even for a brief period, and if the master was the grandson of the famous Hillel the Elder, then one may look for examples of the seven rules (*middot*) of Hillel in the epistles of the mature Paul.²¹

The love commandment is the nucleus of the early Christian interpretation of the law, just as it was stressed in Judaism, so the comprehensive commandment is not Paul's unique

application of a Jewish principle. Nor was use of such principles to develop an argument unique to Hillel and his school. Perhaps the young Saul belonged to the House of Shammai, which was strict and conservative on most issues where it differed from Hillel.²²

Although some scholars doubt that young Saul would have learned a trade while studying with Gamaliel, he could well have acquired his skill as a tentmaker from his father. "Whoever does not teach his son a trade teaches him to be a robber" (*Tosefta Qiddushin* 1, 11).²³ The point is not where he learned his craft, but why he practiced it: to avoid being a burden on the communities where he taught (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 9:1-5). Of course, the workshop would be a place for Paul to meet a wide range of people and an appropriate setting for discussion.²⁴

As a pious Jew, Saul would have cultivated the habit of praying at certain times of the day. He would have recited the *Shema'* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, etc.) in the evening and morning; no doubt he linked his prayer with the offering of sacrifices in the Temple at the appropriate hours. He would have developed a deep appreciation for the sabbath and the annual cycle of feasts and fast days. Both in daily prayers and on the feasts he would have sensed a union with Temple worship. The history of Israel's movement from Egyptian servitude to the covenant in Mount Sinai and the gift of the land would have been experienced in the three great pilgrimage feasts (Deuteronomy 16). Since Paul's use of the rules does not seem as refined as that of the rabbis, he has at times been called an amateur. On that point it might be noted that he was dictating letters destined for his congregation, not his peers. Moreover, the rabbinic examples were honed during a long period of oral transmission, wherein it is likely that only the most polished gems survived.

In the synagogue and probably in daily life the psalms would have been an inspiration to the young Pharisee; he would have blessed God in gratitude and praise, both in formal benedictions and spontaneous acts of praise. A century later Rabbi Meir would declare that each person should utter a hundred

spontaneous blessings each day. No doubt the practice of expressing gratitude to God, not only at meals but on many other occasions, would have been taught already in Saul's time. He would have fasted on Mondays (half way between the previous and coming sabbath) and Thursdays (half way between last week's sabbath and next week's sabbath), and so prepared for the celebration of God's gift of sabbath peace.

The mature missionary, dictating letters required by his absence from communities he had founded, manifests both his Jewish heritage and his commitment to Jesus as the Christ. He must have instructed his communities in the use of Jewish Scriptures, in their Greek garb known as the Septuagint, especially the Psalms. He would have taught them that all prayers of petition must be in the plural and placed within the framework of the blessing (eucharist) for gifts already received. Everything in life must be submitted to the divine will.

Joachim Jeremias begins his study of Paul as follows:

The Pauline letters show that their author not only lived his Bible but also possessed the contemporary tools for its interpretation. He knew midrashim (developments of the text to apply it to current needs of the community – Gal 3:19; 4:29; 1 Cor 10:1–4; 2 Cor 11:3) ... He linked key words of different passages and joined a Torah passage with a text from the prophets or writings (Rom 4:1f; 9:12f; 10:6f, 19, 21; 11:8; 12:19f; 15:9–12; 2 Cor 6:16–18) ... While he is indebted to Hellenistic allegory in 1 Corinthians 9:9f, Paul's spiritual home is Palestinian exegesis, as shown by his preference for typology which sees the events of salvation history as portrayals of the end-time (1 Cor 10:1f; Gal 4:21–31; Rom 9:13).²⁵

Paul's style of writing is saturated by prayerful language, shaped and formed by his awareness of divine presence and activity in the world.²⁶ His greetings typically include both Greek and Hebrew elements (grace and peace), each imbued with the spiritual meaning of the biblical heritage.²⁷ Every letter (even the one to the Galatians, which does not have an initial greeting) concludes with a prayer-filled petition or doxology (Romans 16:25–27). The mention of a divine title is completed with a blessing (Romans 1:25; 9:5; 2 Corinthians 11:31). A

doxology will complete a major reflection (Romans 11:33–36; 16:27; Philippians 1:11).

For many Christians and Christian scholars, the letters of Paul have constituted the center of the New Testament. An unfortunate aspect of the Lutheran tendency to pit law against grace, works against faith, was that this (“antinomian”) emphasis came to be associated with Paul, rather than with Luther. Current scholarship favors a nuanced and positive presentation of the Pharisees.

Conclusion

Christians of the first generation were Jews, or non-Jews (Gentiles), attracted to the spiritual and moral ideals of Judaism (proselytes and “God-fearers”). However, as Saul of Tarsus (Paul the Apostle) promoted a Judaism which did not require circumcision, soon the majority of believers came from the non-Jewish world. The Gospel (“Good News”) was proclaimed orally for several decades before the message was incorporated into a flowing narrative. Memories of the teaching and deeds of Jesus had been transmitted orally, usually within a context of worship or instruction; this context kept the message vibrant, with applications to the needs of a given community of believers. Therefore, aspects of later debates between Christians and Jewish leaders came to be incorporated into the text about Jesus and his disciples.