

The Paradox Of Christian Anti-Semitism

On the 22nd of November 2019, a clip that was circulated by the BBC shows a man aggressively confronting and reading Bible passages to two young Jewish boys, whilst on a busy train on the Northern Line on the London Underground.¹ It was described by a commuter who witnessed the abuse as “horrific in every sense.”²

This paper focuses on the paradox of having a faith based on and that continues to hold sacred Ancient Jewish Literature, and yet has a clear history of anti-Semitism. The New Testament demonstrates the misinterpretation of Scripture that has taken place which has contributed to this historical paradox.

Hare distinguishes between three different types of anti-Judaism sentiment within early Christian literature. The first of these is prophetic anti-Judaism. Hare states that some anti-Jewish sentiment was a factor within Christ’s teaching specifically on God’s displacement with Israel, and that its members needed to respond with faith and practice in order to reach Salvation in the Kingdom of heaven.³ Hare emphasises that prophetic anti-Judaism was an established feature of prophet religion, namely the accusations levelled at the priests and other teachers of Judaism by the prophets, and therefore preceded the teachings of Jesus.⁴

The second type of anti-Judaism Hare defines is that which he refers to as Jewish-Christian anti-Judaism. This refers to the period following the death and resurrection of Jesus, during which Judaism as a faith rejected his teachings, and eventually formally condemned those who prescribed to Christianity, as Jewish Christians and as gentile Christians.⁵ This formal condemnation came in the form of the revision made to the Birkath ha-Minim, “Benediction against Heretics.” The twelfth benediction of the weekday Amidah that dates from the Hellenistic era named ‘Nazarenes and heretics’ as enemies of Yahweh’s people. This revision was possibly the theological/liturgical response to Judeo-Christians’ interpretation of the 70 CE destruction of Jerusalem as divine retribution.⁶

The third type of anti-Judaism is referred to as gentilising anti-Judaism. This is anti-Judaism exhibited by those who were gentiles and by those Jews who renounced their Jewish identity. This

¹ “Man arrested over anti-Semitic abuse on Tube,” [bbc.co.uk, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-50533617](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-50533617)

² Ibid.

³ Douglas Hare, “The Rejection of the Jews in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” in *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 29.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

⁶ “Birkat Ha Minim” in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, eds. Geoffrey Wigoder, Fred Skolnik, and Shmuel Himelstein, 2nd ed (New York: New York University Press, 2002), https://search-credoreference-com.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/content/entry/nyupencyjud/birkat_ha_minim/0?institutionId=2454.

form eventually surpassed the latter two, adding to the persecutions that Israel is beyond salvation, and that God would designate a new Chosen People.

Langmuir directly opposes Hare in the statement that 'Jesus of Nazareth was neither anti-Jewish nor anti-Judaic,'⁷ as Hare instead highlights Jesus' opposition to Jewish religious leaders as a secondary form of prophetic anti-Judaism.⁸ In a similar vein, Langmuir insists that the Pauline movement was not anti-gentile or anti-Jewish, crucially arguing Paul did not require his followers to adopt Jewish symbolism or leave behind their Greek and Roman ties.⁹

Chazan argues that the Gospel according to Mark is not an overtly anti-Jewish gospel but contains both instances of applaudable and condemnable behaviour on the part of the Jews. Mark contains Jewish leaders accepting Jesus' mission, with the synagogue president pleading Jesus to cure his sick daughter in Mark 5, and Joseph of Arimathea, 'a respected member of the council' (Mark 15:43), who funds Jesus' burial having obtained his body with the permission of Pontus Pilate.¹⁰ This is alongside descriptions of less receptive Jewish leaders, the most blatant being Mark 11:18 'And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it [Jesus' words against the traders in the Temple at Jerusalem], they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him.' Contempt for Jesus by Jewish figures of authority is also evidenced in the deliberate questioning of the chief priests, scribes and elders who sent Pharisees and Herodians 'to trap him in what he said' (Mark 12:13). This opposition is offset by the gospel's indication of Jewish public support for Jesus: Jesus' reception at Jerusalem with the crowds laying their cloaks and leafy branches on the ground for him to walk on (Mark 11:8), and the chief priests' and scribes' hesitation to kill him due to the presence of the large crowd in support of Jesus (Mark 11:18).

The gospel according to Luke contains an interesting addition to Mark's narrative, that the crowd of spectators to Jesus' death 'returned home, beating their breasts' (Luke 23:48). Chazan interprets this as a purely Jewish audience that are remorsefully acknowledging their role in Jesus' death.¹¹ This, Chazan argues, is a replacement of Matthew's depiction of the Jewish spectators to Jesus' death as defiantly accepting their role.¹² This is made clear in Pontus Pilate's public display of distancing himself from Jesus' fate, washing his hands in sight of the crowd (Matthew 27:24), due to the warning of his wife's dream (Matthew 27:19). Declaring the crowd should decide Jesus' fate, they answer "'His blood be on us and on our children!'" (Matthew 27:25), an apparent Christian reinterpretation of events, in the enthusiasm of the crowd and their words, which drip with dramatic irony.

⁷ Gavin I. Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 276.

⁸ Hare, 29.

⁹ Langmuir, 280.

¹⁰ Robert Chazan, *From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism: Ancient and Medieval Christian Constructions of Jewish History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

Fredriksen boldly claims that the ‘gospels are no more intrinsically “anti-Jewish” than is the Bible itself.’¹³ Her justification for this is through the Gospels being termed as Jewish sectarian texts, and so are comparable to the Dead Sea Scrolls,¹⁴ becoming texts that evidence ‘intra-Jewish controversies.’¹⁵ For Fredriksen, the nature of Jewish sectarian texts, in their negative presentation of other Jews, was integral for forming what would become ‘anti-Jewish rhetoric.’¹⁶ Relating to the Gospels, Fredriksen claims that their composition after the Jewish war with Rome in 66-73 CE, specifically the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE, affected their later interpretation by those outside of the communities they were composed for and by.¹⁷ Indeed their composition as unique responses to such theologically tremendous historical events meant that their eventual circulation beyond the intended audience directly contributed ‘to the arsenal of gentile Christian anti-Jewish invective.’¹⁸ Through this analysis, Fredriksen has linked the theology behind what would become anti-Semitism to an existing Jewish theological tradition of religious factionalism. Care must be taken here in this argument as it makes Jewish literary theology responsible for established Christian anti-Semitic theology, a fine line that was previously observed in identifying who was responsible for the origins of anti-Semitism.

Other texts beyond the Gospels further complicate the notion of anti-Jewish narratives in the New Testament. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter repeatedly accuses a crowd of Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem for Pentecost of the crucifixion of Jesus, ““You that are Israelites...this man [Jesus]...you crucified and killed”” (Acts 2:22-23) , and ““this Jesus whom you crucified”” (Acts 2:36). Paul also makes such accusations of the Jews in his letter to the Thessalonians, ““for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out”” (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15). For Paul in this letter the Jews are the continued antithesis of both Jesus and his followers, as he goes on to further accuse them of hindering Paul and the Thessalonian church in speaking to the gentiles (1 Thessalonians 2:16). How can Peter and Paul be so accusatory to a people who he and none the less Jesus once counted themselves a part of?

It is possible to interpret such blatant anti-Semitic sentiment through the presence of later Christian edits of the original text and reimagining of the actual events. It is the New Testament’s ability to separate Jesus and his followers from their Jewish identity, while at the same time have the New Testament as a literal sequel to the Old Testament, that later allowed for anti-Semitic sentiment to permeate Christian scholarship. This paradox of an anti-Semitic theology being based on a foundation of Jewish Literature may therefore not be referred to as a process of reconciliation, but in fact wilful literary and historical ignorance on the part of its participants. Investigation of the possible elements of anti-Semitism and passages within the New Testament ultimately only further

¹³ Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defence of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 81.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the argument that the New Testament is a text that has been rewritten and interpreted to support various later Christian theologies.

- Anna Haynes, University of St Andrews

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