

Can the New Testament be blamed for the way Jews have been treated in Western Europe over the centuries?

Introduction

In 1543CE, Martin Luther, one of the most influential theologians in Western Europe, published a letter called *On the Jews and their Lies*.[\[1\]](#) He argued that their synagogues and schools be set on fire, prayer books destroyed, rabbis forbidden from preaching, and their property and money confiscated. To support his argument Martin Luther quotes frequently from the New Testament. And he was not alone.[\[2\]](#) This and other anti-Semitic material, it could be argued, was influential in the growth of anti-Semitism and what led to the holocaust.

The question we need to consider is whether the New Testament itself is guilty of anti-Semitism. In particular we will look at the two verses considered most guilty of anti-Semitism:

Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' (Mt 27:25)

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (Jn 8:44)

Both of these verses contain themes that have surfaced again and again in the two thousand years since they were recorded: the Jews are Christ killers, and are devil people. When Luther launched this attack, Christianity had broken off from Judaism

long before and this rhetoric seems to have been one-way and unprovoked.

The charge of anti-Semitism relies on the context. It is not anti-Semitism when one Jewish group challenges another Jewish group, especially when the latter group is being equally antagonistic. Also, one has to consider who the accusation is aimed at and whether it is historical.

Inside or Out?

Were the New Testament comments made 'within' the Jewish family? Second Temple Judaism was by no means uniform. The New Testament mentions the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Zealots, not to mention the majority of ordinary Jews who belonged to neither camp. The findings at Qumran from 1947 on have shed light on another group, the Essenes, also mentioned by Josephus.[\[3\]](#) Furthermore, Josephus differentiates between the Zealots and an even more extreme group, the Sicarii. There were significant differences in beliefs between these groups on subjects such as whether the dead rise, who the true Israel were and the validity of the oral law.

It would be hard to deny that the early Jesus movement was itself a Jewish movement: Jewish men and women, following a Jewish man, descended from King David, claiming to be the Jewish Messiah, talking about Jewish prophecy and its fulfilment.

The gospels of Matthew and John are generally considered to have been written in the period 70 – 95CE. At this time, scholars generally agree, the parting of the ways had started but was by no means complete and the early Jesus movement was still within Judaism.[\[4\]](#) What makes this hard to say for definite is that what existed of a centralized Jewish authority and leadership was destroyed in the war of 66 – 74CE.[\[5\]](#) So there was no official voice to decide on this matter. The early Jesus movement certainly would have seen

itself as being within Judaism, as they saw the death and resurrection of Jesus as bringing about the promises given to Abraham; Rabbinical Judaism did not, as can be seen by their treatment of the early Jesus movement and passages in the Talmud. However, it took quite a long time for normative Judaism to be equated with Rabbinical Judaism, and so this judgement is not official either.

One Way?

It is important to note that the Jewish leadership was very antagonistic both to Jesus and his followers. Early Jewish Christians were in effect ostracized by the community.[\[6\]](#) Rabbis told the Jews not to buy goods from them, or use their services. Scrolls written by Jewish Christians, particularly of Torah, were considered impure and would not have been used by Jews. And of course they were thrown out of the synagogues. In the Talmud, Jesus is portrayed as a sorcerer and a deceiver, who led Jews into idolatry.[\[7\]](#) His mother was viewed as an adulterer and his punishment in the afterlife is boiling in excrement.[\[8\]](#) The disciples were accused of stealing his body and deceiving the people too, by saying he had been raised. The book of Acts mentions the frequent, often violent, rejection of Christians by the Jews. The dialogues in the gospels have to be seen in the context of a two-way struggle.

Who is being attacked?

Matthew

Matthew 27:25 seems to be aimed at the Jews of Jerusalem involved in Jesus' death and the next generation of Jerusalemites. In other words, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was seen by the author of Matthew as God's punishment on those Jews for killing Jesus. Not an everlasting curse on all Jews. When curses in the Bible are directed at more than one generation, this is normally made more explicit,

e.g. Exodus 20:5; 34:7.

John

In a recent survey of the history of the Jewish people, Simon Schama says that the writer of the gospel of John has Jesus effectively saying that “he will be killed by a people whose defining characteristic is that of diabolically possessed murderers.”[\[9\]](#) Is this a fair accusation? The target of Jesus’ accusations in John’s gospel generally is “the Jews”. When studying the term “the Jews” in John, Urban von Wahlde found that of 40 hostile references aimed at “the Jews” all but two were aimed at the Jewish leadership.[\[10\]](#) The verse in John we are considering, 8:44, should not be taken as if it were a gentle devotional discussion; Jesus is facing a crowd set on lynching him – a mob. A party had already been sent to arrest Jesus (7:30-32, 44-46) and were ready to stone him (verse 59).[\[11\]](#)

Historical?

Matthew

Sayings like that found in 27:25 are to be found in the Bible, though usually in reference to the guilt being placed on someone else.[\[12\]](#) Given the fact that in the Hebrew Bible the destruction of Jerusalem was seen as punishment for breaking the law it is quite natural for a similar view to have surfaced after 70CE. Personally, I doubt that this saying was historical, but that Matthew is explaining to the reader the reason for the later destruction of Jerusalem, and the seriousness of rejecting Jesus.

John

The harsh words accusing the Jewish leadership of being demon possessed do not come out of the blue. In the Wisdom of Solomon 2:24, roughly contemporary with John’s gospel, murder is said to have originated with the Devil’s envy, and so there

was a view of associating murder, and murderers, with the Devil. Jesus uses similar words in Matthew 23 and with Peter in Matthew 16:23. John the Baptist uses similar language towards the Pharisees as well. So it is historically credible that Jesus uses these words.

Conclusion

When considering the context in which the gospels were written there are several important points to remember. Firstly, the early Jesus movement was still within Judaism. The parting of the ways had started but it was to be many decades till it completed. Secondly, while there is plenty of aggressive and harsh rhetoric towards “the Jews”, this is generally towards the Jewish leaders and certainly not all Jews everywhere for all time. Third, the Jews at and after the time of Jesus were at least as antagonistic towards Jesus and his followers. Fourthly, the way in which Jesus is portrayed as relating to ordinary Jews and the Jewish leadership seems historically credible.

Passages in the New Testament that are rather brusque towards certain Jewish groups need to be seen as part of an inter-Jewish dialogue rather than as criticism from the outside on all things Jewish. In the same way, scholars would not consider criticisms by the Pharisees of the Sadducees as being anti-Semitic. (For example, in the Talmud when discussing whether a good person could become an evil person, the example of a Pharisee who became a Sadducee was quoted as proof that anyone could become evil.[\[13\]](#)) The verbal attacks are generally against the Jewish leadership, but not always. John 8:44 seems to be aimed at the Jewish leaders and a mob set on killing him. Matthew 27:25 seems to be concerned with the Jewish leaders, those who asked for Jesus to be killed and their children. So Matthew seems to be the most widely aimed attack though even then it is not aimed at all Jews for ever.

Also, it would be unfair to describe a fight in which only the actions of one side are mentioned. The rather harsh words recorded in the Gospels have to be considered in the light of conflict. The followers of Jesus are writing out his words and deeds in the context of persecution by the Jews.

The view that Jesus was generally kind to the majority of ordinary Jews and often harsh to the religious leaders would explain his popular following among ordinary Jews and his rejection and persecution by the Jewish leadership. If Jesus had been antagonistic against all things Jewish, it would be unlikely that he would have received such a following. Furthermore, if Jesus had not been critical of the Jewish leadership it is hard to see why he would have been crucified, though perhaps his claims to be God's Son would have been enough. And so it is not anti-Semitic to portray Jesus in this way, if it seems historically credible.

Despite what is said to many Jews and Jewish leaders, both gospels affirm the Jews in ways an out and out anti-Semitic would not. From the start of Matthew the gospel writer affirms Abraham and David. Tracing Jesus' lineage from Abraham affirms God's promise to Abraham; and at the end of Matthew the great commission hints at the beginnings of the fulfilment of the promise that the nations would be blessed through his offspring. The title "Son of David", offered to Jesus, affirms God's promise to David. Also, Matthew quotes or refers to the Hebrew Scriptures frequently – nearly 70 times – thus affirming the Hebrew Bible. In the gospel of John the term "the Jews" is used in many neutral ways, e.g. describing Jewish feasts, and in positive ways, including "Salvation is from the Jews" (4:22).

If viewed in their historical context, and in the context of the many neutral and positive references to the Jews, these passages are not anti-Semitic. The problem I believe comes when the Bible is quoted selectively and is viewed in a fundamentalist way as God's word for all time and is removed

from its historical context. Then the attacks against Jewish leaders in the gospels may be read as attacks on Jews for all time and sinful behaviour of Jews at Jesus' time as typical of all Jews ever since etc.

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[1] Martin Luther, *On the Jews and their lies*, 1543

[2] For a much earlier example of anti-Semitism (386CE) see John Chrysostom's *Homilies against the Jews*

[3] Steve Mason, *Flavius Josephus: translation and commentary*, vol. 1b: Judean War (Leiden: Brill, 2008). The Jewish War, Book II, Chapter 8

[4] James D.G. Dunn, *Jews and Christians, The parting of the ways*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999

[5] *The parting of the ways*, p. 20

[6] Tosefta 2:20-21

[7] b Sanh 43a-b, Sanh 107b; Sot 47a

[8] Babylonian Shabbat 104b, b Git 56b, 57a

[9] Simon Schama, *The story of the Jews, Finding the words*, p 202, 2014.

[10] Von Wahlde, Urban C., *The witness to Jesus in John 5:31-40 and belief in the fourth gospel*, 1981, CBQ 43: 385-404.

[11] Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, London: SPCK, 2002

[\[12\]](#) Deut. 19:10; Josh. 2:19; 2 Sam. 3:28–29; I Kings 2:33;
Jer. 26:15; Ezek. 18:13

[\[13\]](#) Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 29a.