

# 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.

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# John's portrayal of Jesus

## 1. Introduction

In this essay I will consider whether the Gospel of John is historical. First I will consider what certain scholars, who doubt its historicity, have said. I will then propose an argument advocating historicity. Then I will propose a reason for the differences and finish with a conclusion.

2. The Problem After reading Matthew, Mark and Luke a first-time reader of the New Testament is presented with a bit of a problem when reading John. John is different to the synoptics in both content and style. There are no parables, which frequent the synoptics, while there are seven distinct "I am" statements. Certain events in John are placed in a different order, such as the cleansing of the temple which appears close to the beginning of the Gospel of John, but is placed after the triumphal entry in the synoptics. In John, Jesus has a long debate with Pilate at his trial, whereas in the synoptics he is quiet. John contains no exorcisms but John also contains many talks about eternal life. His discussions on the Holy Spirit have no parallels in the synoptics.

3. Criticism Clement of Alexandria<sup>1</sup> was the first to comment on this difference with his famous statement that John was a "Spiritual Gospel". More recently scholars have made harsher judgements: Casey<sup>2</sup> attacks more conservative studies saying that John 'is profoundly untrue. It consists to a large extent

of inaccurate stories and words wrongly attributed to people.' Funk and Hoover<sup>3</sup>, part of the Jesus Seminar, asserted that all but three of Jesus' sayings in John bear no resemblance to his authentic teaching. Hanson<sup>4</sup>, more politely, yet nevertheless sceptical, says that John has an independent historical tradition that is "inferior" to that of the synoptics. J. D. G. Dunn<sup>5</sup> commenting on historical Jesus scholarship says, "Few scholars would regard John as a source for information regarding Jesus' life and ministry in any degree comparable to the synoptics."

4. Three Possibilities Deciding whether John is historical is quite a complex question. There are four broad possibilities: the synoptics are accurate and John is inaccurate, the synoptics are inaccurate and John is accurate, the synoptics and John complement each other (cover different material), or that both are

inaccurate. On top of that, one could consider the grey areas between each easy to define possibility. It should be considered that it is not exactly three against one. Most scholars consider that Matthew and Luke are built on Mark and so there is only one independent structure/basic style (not source) as far as the synoptics are concerned.<sup>6</sup> In this essay I will consider the conservative position that both the synoptics and John are accurate.

To bring a little simplicity to a complex situation I want to consider a simple, logical approach similar to that used by the Professor in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*<sup>7</sup>. In the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lucy, a kind honest little girl enters a wardrobe and discovers a magical land with mythological creatures. She claims that her brother Edmund (an occasional liar), has been there too. Peter and Susan her elder siblings are puzzled. What Lucy describes seems so different from what they know that they side with Edmund, who is generally unreliable. In conversation the Professor asks them whether Lucy or Edmund is the most reliable. Then using

logic, he proposes that there are only three possibilities: Lucy is lying, she is mad or she is telling the truth. Since she is not a liar, they can rule out lying, and since she is not mad they can rule out the second option. Thus they are left with the third option – she is telling the truth. As the existence of a magical land did not fit with what Peter and Susan knew, so the Gospel of John is different in many respects to what a reader of Matthew, Mark and Luke knows about Jesus. Many from Clement of Alexandria to this day, have explained this difference by dismissing John. However, the writer of John insists that what he is telling is based on what he has seen and is true (John 21:24). Thus I suggest we consider whether the writer is lying, mad or telling the truth.

4.1 Lying Is John lying? The book seems to be addressed to Christians, with the purpose of encouraging them to keep believing in Christ (20:31). As we cannot compare John with video footage of what happened let us consider any motivation he may have for lying. It may help to think of the basic carnal drives of men: money, sex and power. Those who are out for themselves usually pursue one or more of these. If a person's revelation benefits them significantly then one must consider whether this is a genuine revelation or rather has been devised to benefit the spurious prophet. Many of those who have claimed to have received messages from heaven have done quite well out of their revelations. Take Muhammad for example. Through his revelations he gets money (Sura 8:41) which makes him rich (Sahih al-Bukhari, Volume 3, Book 37, Number 495). His marriage to a fifth wife, who was previously married to his adopted Son is justified (Sura 33:37), and on top of that his revelations say that he is the most important human being that ever existed – the last prophet (Sura 33:40). Though the number of wives is permitted to be four, Muhammad has 11. Muhammad profited very well from his position and revelations. At the very least this looks suspicious. This type of profiting is not uncommon however: The selling of

indulgences was essentially false prophecy designed to give the Catholic Church more money. In his early life Joseph Smith made money as a

seer who could see treasure through the ground. He never found anything, but collected plenty of money.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is no obvious motivation present in the gospel of John. Does John profit financially from this book? No. There is no hint that believers should offer money to him. Does he acquire women? No. What about power? Not really. There are references to John but he is very much in the background. He is given the title "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and is shown as one who was in the inner ring of disciples, but this was already made clear in the synoptics. Is the motivation to make Jesus look divine when the synoptics do not? In John Jesus is portrayed as being divine more explicitly than in the synoptics, but the claims are definitely there in the synoptics.<sup>9</sup> Is John trying to propose a new way to be saved? No. In brief, there is no obvious benefit that John receives from this book, which he would not have had through the synoptics. Thus there seems no reason for believing he is lying to obtain benefits for himself or any particular cause.

4.2 Madness If a mad man or woman was to write a book then you should see some of the following characteristics present: lack of structure (confused thinking), extreme tones reflecting aggression or depression, monomania in some form, or similarly conspiracy theories, and possibly fantasy.<sup>10</sup> In contrast the book of John is beautifully structured with, for example, seven 'I am' statements, mention of precisely seven disciples and the signs carefully arranged around discussions, very deliberately. Even critics of the historicity of the gospel are clear that this book has a serene tone.<sup>11</sup> (In fact they believe that if this was written by one of the 'Sons of Thunder' it would be a lot more aggressive.) There are key themes that come up again and again but not monomania. Regarding conspiracy theories it is clear that Jesus was not

popular with the Jews but this is nothing different than what is found in the synoptics. Regarding fantasy, all of the miracles in John have similar parallels in the synoptics. Thus there is no reason for believing that John is mad.

4.3 Truth If John is not lying and seems perfectly sane then the most likely option is that he is telling the truth. For a comprehensive in-depth discussion arguing for the truth of each part of the gospel I would recommend Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*.<sup>12</sup>

5. A Proposal In this section I will consider a possible reason for the differences between John and the Synoptics. It is possible that Jesus used a different teaching style while conversing with the learned Jewish leaders. This is not implausible as can be seen with Paul. In Athens Paul uses a different style in reaching the intellectuals than he does with the more ordinary folk (Acts 17). The style of teaching Jesus uses in John was not mentioned in the synoptics. Perhaps after the fall of Jerusalem, the synoptic writers felt that this was not relevant, or would not produce results. Paul's change in style

did not yield much fruit, and he went back to his normal style after Athens. However, some may have been aware that Jesus said things that were not recorded by the synoptics. With the birth of early Gnosticism, some may have thought that Jesus had said things in line with Gnostic beliefs – the sort of things that later appear in the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>13</sup> (There are many examples of people guessing as to what Jesus said and did. Take for example the infant gospel of Thomas,<sup>14</sup> where a 2nd Century writer has tried to guess what Jesus was like as a child.) To counter this, John, or his disciples, who were aware of this extra teaching/style, though perhaps had not proclaimed it loudly, set the record straight by clarifying the untold story of what Jesus said and did. Thus the gospel seeks to complement the synoptics, not to challenge or replace. I am by no means certain that this is true but

propose it as a credible possibility.

## 6. Conclusion

In this essay, rather than consider all the many complex possibilities, I have gone to the key issue. Is John giving an accurate testimony as he claims or not? By considering three more simple alternatives I have argued that he is. This essay is not intended to be water tight, but rather a more simple heuristic proof of historicity in a complex situation.

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# The importance of the Exodus to Israel

## The importance of the Exodus to Israel and the revelation of God as a Father

This essay explains and elucidates the following statement: 'The Exodus is such a significant event in Israel's history, that it serves as more than just an account of the wandering in the desert. It is a paradigm, a pattern of how God deals with his people, signifying the formation of relationship'. In this essay it will be shown that the Exodus was of great importance to Israel, that in the Exodus God reveals himself as a father and that this intimate relationship carries on into the future.

"Exodus" is a Latin word that is derived from "Exodos" which appears in the Septuagint.[\[1\]](#) It means "exit" and is used to refer to both the Biblical book and similarly the exit of Israel from Egypt, the wandering in the desert and the giving of the law. In this essay, the term Exodus is used to refer to the events surrounding the exit of Israel from Egypt rather than the book itself.

Before looking at why the Exodus was so important to Israel it is worth considering how ordinary people before and after the time of the Exodus viewed the supernatural, in particular the ancient myths from Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Akkadian myths coming from Mesopotamia were known throughout the near East from the mid-second to mid-first millennium BC.[\[2\]](#) These tales would have been told in Sumerian, Hittite, Hurrian and Hebrew, so would have been familiar to the Israelites. Similarly, Egypt was a powerful nation that had been united since 3000

BC.<sup>[3]</sup> As the dominant force in the near East, and the place where Israel itself had spent several hundred years, the beliefs of the Egyptians would also have been well known to Israel.

In the Akkadian tale Atrahasis,<sup>[4]</sup> typical of many creation accounts, man was created as a slave. The lesser gods were tired of the much work they had to do and there was a rebellion. To solve the problem man was created to do the work. Later man is considered a pain because of the noise he creates, and the gods send a flood to wipe man from the face of the earth. There were many gods and they were all far from perfect and certainly not good or loving. In Egypt the gods were responsible for everything.<sup>[5]</sup> Many people of the time would have logically concluded that the reason Egypt was stronger than any other nation was because its gods were stronger.

Into this background Yahweh shows up and, unlike the gods of Egypt, reveals his name to Moses.<sup>[6]</sup> It must have been a remarkable shock when a new god turned up in town and overturned the long known and trusted gods. The god of the sun Aton-Ra, credited with creating the world,<sup>[7]</sup> is put out of action (Exodus 10:22). The Nile, the basic source of life for Egypt, considered to be divine<sup>[8]</sup> is turned to blood (Exodus 7:20). Also the Pharaoh, considered a god,<sup>[9]</sup> meets his match and against his wishes has to let the Israelites go. In contrast to the Akkadian tales, rather than creating slaves, God delivers the people from slavery. Also He cares for his people, providing food and water for them, and brings them into a new land, flowing with milk and honey.

The fact that the Exodus is important to Israel can be seen in many ways. The first obvious way is through the sheer number of times it is referred to in the Old Testament. The term "out of Egypt" appears 142 times in the NIV Bible. Only a handful of these are either from the New Testament or refer to other events such as the return of Joseph's brothers to Jacob. After



the North-South split during the time of Rehoboam, Jeroboam wanted to keep the Northern tribes from worshipping in Jerusalem. To achieve this end he produced two golden calf idols and appealed to the tribes saying that these were the gods that had brought them out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:28). This scheme, which worked, owes its success to the fact that the Exodus was of great importance to these people. (Ironically, the practice of worshipping golden calves seems to have had its origin in the Apis calf cult of Egypt.[\[10\]](#)) When the temple was completed we are told that this happened 480 years after the Exodus. When dating an event it is always customary to measure it relative to another very important event. Also from Jeremiah we learn that even in his time it was common to mention that God had brought his people out of Egypt: "So then, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when people will no longer say, 'As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt' (Jeremiah 23:7).

In the Exodus God becomes a father to Israel. Explicit mentions of this are in Exodus 4:23: "and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.'" Hosea 11:1 says, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

One of the first qualities of God that the Exodus reveals is that he responds to hurt:[\[11\]](#) "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7). God reveals himself as a father who cares for his hurting people and actively seeks to deliver and save them.

That God became a father to Israel can be seen in many other ways. Like a father, God leads Israel – through the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21). God provides for their basic needs. He gives them food to eat in the form of manna and quail (Exodus 16:4; Numbers 11:31), and water – even

out of a rock (Exodus 17:6).

God also goes to great lengths to teach Israel what is right and what is wrong. There is a continual mention that obedience leads to being blessed and disobedience to being cursed. A striking example of this comes in Deuteronomy 11:29 when the priests are commanded to stand on Mount Ebal and pronounce the curses that will come for those who disobey, and then to stand on Mount Gerizim and pronounce the blessings for those that obey God's law.

When God dealt with Abraham and the patriarchs the reader gets the impression of one-off meetings, for example in Genesis 18:1 the LORD "appears" to Abraham. In the Exodus God comes to dwell with his people. Israel knows that God is with them all the time through his presence in the pillar of fire and pillar of cloud, and then in the tabernacle: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34).

Like a father God gives Israel good things. As well as providing food and water, He leads them into a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). He wants his people to be joyful and appoints festivals: specific times where they are to stop working, remember what God has done for them, enjoy fellowship and celebrate (Exodus 23:14).

As God was a father to Israel during the Exodus, so he continued to be a father to them in the future. There are many explicit references to God as a father in the rest of the Old Testament: for example, in the Psalms (Psalm 68:5, Psalm 89:26), and in the Prophets (Malachi 2:10).

God continues to make a clear distinction between what is right and wrong, continuing to punish those who do wrong. God used Israel's wanderings in the desert as an example to teach those born long after. The Apostle Paul interprets the fact that "their bodies were scattered in the wilderness" as a warning to Israel of what would happen to them if they set

their hearts on evil things (1 Corinthians 10:5). In Numbers 26:10 we learn that Korah and his family were destroyed as a warning. We are told that as God scattered the bodies of the Israelites in the desert, so he would scatter Israel among the nations because of their disobedience (Ezekiel 6:8).

We are also told that as God brought Israel out of Egypt so he will deliver them again. As He delivered Israel from Egypt so he would bring back his people from the lands of the North – Babylon: “but they will say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ Then they will live in their own land” (Jeremiah 23:8).

Like a father God continues to provide for his people as he did in the desert: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it” (Psalm 81:10). As God gave Israel the law during their wanderings in the desert he later promises that he will write his laws on their hearts: He will help them to keep his commands (Jeremiah 31:33). He also promises to establish Israel and bring an anointed one who will bring this about (Isaiah 9:6-7).

In conclusion, it has been shown that the Exodus was considered by Israel to be of great importance in her history. How God acted in the Exodus has been contrasted with how other nations viewed the supernatural and the “superiority” of Israel’s God seen. It has been shown that in the Exodus God became a father to Israel and that this relationship continued into the future, to the exile and beyond.

Word Count: 1,818

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[2] Dally, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p.xviii

[3] *Lion Handbook of the Bible* p. 154

[4] Dally, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 1 – 35

[5] Cunningham and Reich, *Culture and Values* p. 12

[6] Traunecker, *The Gods of Egypt* p. 31; Exodus 3:14

[7] Cunningham and Reich, *Culture and Values* p. 11

[8] Cunningham, *Culture and Values* p. 12

[9] Cunningham, *Culture and Values* p. 11

[10] Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* p. 1963

[11] Rogerson, Davies and Carrol, *The Bible in Ethics*, p. 122

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# Personal Evaluation

This essay looks at one way in which this module has challenged my thinking, two new spiritual disciplines I have found beneficial and three ways in which my inner life has been edified. I also make a small comment about possible changes to the module.

This module challenged my view that certain denominations have little true spiritual life in them. After reading chapter nine of the course notes, I was greatly impressed with the Eastern Orthodox Church and appreciate their Bible centred and holistic approach in seeking after God. I have had very little to do with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Based on brief exposures to it I surmised that it was empty and ritualistic, possibly because of seeing a great emphasis on icons and orthodox priests looking rather serious with long robes and beards. The fact that they place such an importance on the Bible greatly impressed me. They place the Bible on the altar during the service, read through the whole New Testament in a year and sing the beatitudes.[\[1\]](#) I also respect the way they seek after intimacy with God through many different spiritual disciplines including repetition of the Jesus prayer.[\[2\]](#)

A practical method of meditation I found useful was lectio divina.[\[3\]](#) I particularly found the meditatio step helpful and refreshing. Connecting biblical texts with past memories is not something I have tried much. For me, this discipline makes spiritual truths seem more real. For instance, if I read that God is love (1 John 4:8) yet cannot bring to mind any instance in my life where God has demonstrated his love to me then I find it hard to believe. The same holds for all other spiritual truths. Connecting the Bible with past experience in a way proves to me that the Bible is true and helps me believe

it. The course notes recommend following a pattern of biblical readings that are progressive and ordered. I now practise lectio divina on a daily basis by taking a small verse or phrase from the lectionary readings. I also use calligraphy to help absorb the chosen phrase.

Another method of meditation I found helpful was the Ignatian meditation in front of a crucifix where we consider what we have done for God, what we are currently doing for him, and what we will do for him in the future.[\[4\]](#) I have found looking back over what I have done for God helpful. I am often very hard on myself and if I can detect any pride or apathy in any of my actions then I consider that whatever I did counted for nothing. In this way I often feel that I have done little of value in my life and feel dejected and weary. If nothing I do is of value, what is the point of trying? Looking back over my life and realising that, despite having many faults, God has used me in many situations is encouraging, and helps me to face the future with confidence. Looking back at what I have done for God also gives me a realistic picture of where I am so I can aim higher. Looking forward to what I will do for God encourages me to be more like St Paul who said "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care" (1 Corinthians 3:10). This exercise really helps me see the bigger picture for my life and build deliberately and with care.

A subject I would like to see introduced into this module is the holiness of God. It would be interesting to look at how Christians down the centuries have approached God's perfection, his infinite wisdom, power and strength, and the coming judgement and renewal of all things. When the focus is just on love it is sometimes hard to think of God clearly. Many different people claim to have found the way of love, each by following mutually exclusive paths. The subject of God's holiness would help to draw a clear line between God's

love and the 'love' of others. It may also be interesting to look at various believer's confrontations with the holiness of God, for example, Daniel (Daniel 10:4-9), the Apostle John (Revelation 1:10-18) and Pascal.[\[5\]](#) It may also be good to add a week's retreat to the module with suggestions of how to spend one hour a day for a week, where each day's meditation builds on what went before.

This module has helped my spiritual life by giving me new tools to aid in meditation, introducing me to new friends and giving me a better vision of the church. The different methods of meditation in this module have given me a set of tools with which I can spend time with God in a more focussed and fulfilling way. I have become familiar with lectio divina, which I now use on a daily basis. I also appreciate the instruction in lesson 16 on practising Ignatian contemplation, though I find visualising events quite difficult – this is something I need to practise. The reading of the Prodigal Son[\[6\]](#) has given me a deeper insight into that parable so that I can spend much time meditating on it, considering the many different aspects to it. I can also look at other parables and use a similar approach to draw out deeper meanings.

This module has introduced me to a lot of new friends throughout history who have followed hard after God like the merchant looking for fine pearls (Matthew 13:45-46). I have discovered a lot of new people that I want to find out more about and read their work: Augustine, Crysostom, Nouwen, Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross and many others.

Finally this module has given me a better vision of the church. Rather than focusing on arguments and divisions between denominations this module has given a view of a church with members from across the centuries and across the denominations united in seeking hard after God. This vision helps me to think of the Church as truly being a body – with a focus, and united, every part working together.

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[\[1\]](#) Dewerse, R., *Christian Spirituality*, p. 35.

[\[2\]](#) Dewerse, R., *Christian Spirituality*, p. 35, 36.

[\[3\]](#) Dewerse, R., *Christian Spirituality*, p. 57.

[\[4\]](#) Maas, R. and G. O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, p. 177.

[\[5\]](#) Byrne, J.M., *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant*, p. 78.

[\[6\]](#) Nouwen, H.J.M., *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.



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# Review of The Return of The Prodigal Son

Review of “The Return of The Prodigal Son” by Henri J.M. Nouwen  
Caleb O’Loan



## 1. Summary

The book centers on the painting ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son’ by Rembrandt and a time of transition in the life of the author Henri Nouwen. The book starts with a viewing of a copy of the painting by Nouwen while a lecturer at Harvard University and finishes with Nouwen working with mentally handicapped people in Toronto. In between we learn of the spiritual journey of Nouwen, his viewing of the painting in Russia and how it gave him a greater understanding of God, himself and what God was calling him to. The main theme of the book is the love of God and our response to God’s love. Nouwen analyzes, in considerable depth, the three main characters in the painting: the younger son, the elder son and the father. Nouwen looks at the unconditional nature of God’s love and the difficulty that we have in accepting it.

I would like to consider the contribution of this book to

Christian Spirituality, in particular the originality of approach and the testimony of the author. Finally I would like to mention how this book has helped me.

## **2. Contribution to Christian Spirituality**

### **2.1 Originality**

One of the major contributions this book makes to Christian Spirituality is freshness and originality. There are very few books in Christian Spirituality that revolve around a painting. Not many of the key points made are new. However, with a copy of the painting I was able to engage with the book visually which helped bring simple yet vital truths alive. I am part of the United Reformed Church. We have no pictures or even symbols in our church, except for a single cross on the altar. In reading this book I have been making a connection between visual images and Christian Spirituality. Using sight for the first time in this way is quite an amazing experience.

### **2.2 Testimony**

Testimony is a powerful medium for communication. Nearly all humans, whether highly educated or not, find it easier to relate to the experiences of other men and women rather than to abstract principles. In this book significant emphasis is placed on Nouwen's struggle with God. We hear about his discovery of secret jealousies and pride; we hear about his uncertainty about where it is that God wants him to be. Then, towards the end of the book, we hear about his arrival into the place where God wants him to be, and knowing his place. Despite his imperfections, he can see that God has worked in his life and has brought him to a place where he can in turn be a blessing to others. C.S. Lewis wrote, "We read to know that we are not alone" (quoted in Barton, p. 11). It is wonderfully encouraging to be reminded that others struggle with the same things that we do. Also, that despite the weaknesses that we know in ourselves, God has a plan and purpose for our lives and can use us to be a great blessing.

## **3. Personal thoughts**

I left academia only two years ago after completing a PhD and lecturing for a short while in the Mathematics department at the University of St Andrews. In that environment information is highly thought of. Academics, just like the Ancient Athenians, are interested in learning about, and contributing to, all the latest ideas. More recently, after reading this book, I have been spending time on a weekly basis with a friend who had a mental breakdown and can barely communicate. What has surprised me in my relationship with him is that the lack of verbal communication between us is not that important. The relationship is primarily about being together and being content in each other's presence. In the academic world one would disbelieve that one could possibly live in this way. I am reminded of Richard E. Byrd, who after months alone in the barren Arctic wrote, "I was learning... that a man can live profoundly without masses of things" (Byrd, p.120). *The Return of the Prodigal Son* prepared me well for this relationship, its focus on an embrace rather than spiritual principles, guided me away from trying to find a "quick fix" for my friend and know that by just being there for him, like the Father in the painting, I can be a great blessing to him.

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