

PREACHING: AVOIDING UNINTENDED ANTI-JUDAISM/ANTI-SEMITISM

We've just finished celebrating the Triduum. We heard some of the most powerful texts in our tradition—and some that, sadly, have been used to promote Christian anti-Semitism for centuries. As preachers, we must be aware that our words have power: power to form for good as well as deform for evil. The *Shoah* could not have occurred in Germany had not the seeds of Nazi-fueled anti-Semitism found ground already made fertile by Christian preaching.

The relationship between Judaism and Christianity is complex—historically, theologically, and liturgically; there is more than we could ever cover in columns like this one. Let me just mention a key resource, and encourage all of us to make this crucial topic part of our ongoing reading and formation.

In 2001, the Pontifical Biblical Commission gave us *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (JPSSCB). Unfortunately, it is not a well-known document and its length can seem overwhelming. While it is not perfect, it is well worth the read. The JPSSCB begins by raising this question: What relations does the Christian Bible establish between Christians and the Jewish people (#1)? This question is placed in the context of life after the *Shoah*. After an introduction, the document itself is divided into three major sections (or chapters) and a conclusion.

The first section of JPSSCB places nascent Christianity squarely in the context of early Judaism: Jesus and his early followers were Jewish, and the early Church simply saw itself in continuity with Judaism, including the Jewish Scriptures. The texts that would eventually make up the NT acknowledge the authority of these Scriptures both implicitly and explicitly. Jewish exegetical methods and modes of rabbinic argumentation are evident in the way these early Christian writers use the Scriptures. The development of the canon is also covered in this section.

In the second section, the PBC specifically repudiates the solution offered by Marcion. Instead, it affirms that it is only in light of the Jewish Scriptures that Jesus can be adequately understood (#19). The PBC affirms that Christianity “re-reads” what we call the OT through the lens of Christ. Such a retrospective reading does not negate the original (in fact, the PBC says we have much to learn from Jewish exegesis); nor does it mean that the Jews “missed” what was there. Rather, it acknowledges that all classical texts contain a “surplus of meaning” and that Jewish and Christian readings of these texts are therefore both legitimate. The next part of this section traces a number of common themes through the OT and NT. The conclusion to this section argues that “[s]uch a fullness of meaning establishes a threefold connection between the New Testament and the Old: continuity, discontinuity, and progression” (#64).

The third section examines the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in the NT. The history of post-exilic Judaism and the development of various groups within first-century Judaism are explained, as is the relationship of emerging Christianity and developing rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. The document then surveys the ways that Jews and Judaism are portrayed in the various NT texts. For example, we cannot take “the Jews” in John to necessarily mean all Jews at the time of Jesus; nor can we take that phrase to mean all Jews for all time.

The conclusions remind us the NT cannot be used to foster anti-Jewish sentiments (as they have in the past). Those texts that express disagreement with Judaism are historically conditioned and thus cannot be applied to all Jews at all times [historical-critical method]; in addition, they use language that is consonant with first-century polemic [social-scientific and literary criticism] and thus descriptions of

those who “oppose” Jesus should not be taken as literal or historically accurate (we are, after all, missing their side of the story).

In summary, this document presents great gains in our understanding of the relationship between the OT and NT, between Jews and Christians. Specific gains include:

- A rejection of supersessionist readings of the OT (and a supersessionist approach to Judaism);
- An acknowledgment that the Christian interpretation of the OT is retrospective;
- A similar acknowledgment that Jewish interpretation of the OT is legitimate and that Christians can learn from Jewish exegesis; and
- A recognition that first-century Judaism was more complex than the NT often suggests, and that Jesus and emerging Christianity need to be viewed as part of that context.

The JPSSCB must be read in light of the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*. We are reminded there that in regards to the Passion narratives that we have just heard, what is crucial for preaching is that, from a historical perspective, “what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today” (*Nostra Aetate*, #4). From a theological perspective, “Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation” (#4).

Resources:

Salmon, Marilyn J. *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*. Fortress Resources for Preaching. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006.

Church Documents

Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*.

Vatican II. *Nostra Aetate*.

Links to these and other web resources can be found on our preaching website:

<http://www.davenportdiocese.org/lit/litpreach.htm#AntiJudaism>

Translations of Scripture – with Commentary from a Jewish Perspective

Berlin, Adele and Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Levine, Amy-Jill and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Textbooks

Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library, ed. David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Brown, Raymond E. *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

Brown, Raymond E. & Moloney, Francis. J. *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

Articles

Levine, Amy-Jill. "A Jewish Reading of the Document." *The Bible Today* 41.3 (2003): 167-172.
[this issue of *The Bible Today* had multiple articles on JPSSCB]

Pawlikowski, John T. "The Jews in the New Testament." *The Bible Today* 41.3 (2003): 160-166.

Ramshaw, Gail. "The First Testament in Christian Lectionaries." *Worship* 64:6 (1990): 494-510.

Stokey, Laurence Hall. "Marcion, Typology, and Lectionary Preaching." *Worship* 66:3 (1992): 251-262.