

THE BIBLE, THE JEWS, AND THE DEATH OF JESUS

A Collection of
Catholic Documents

Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Washington, D.C.

Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions

Second Vatican Council

October 28, 1965

4. Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the Church, this sacred Council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the New Covenant to the stock of Abraham.

The Church of Christ acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginnings of her faith and election are to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all Christ's faithful, who as men of faith are sons of Abraham (see Gal 3:7), are included in the same patriarch's call and that the salvation of the Church is mystically prefigured in the exodus of God's chosen people from the land of bondage. On this account the Church cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (see Rom 11:17-24). The Church believes that Christ who is our peace has through his cross reconciled Jews and Gentiles and made them one in himself (see Eph 2:14, 16).

Likewise, the Church keeps ever before her mind the words of the apostle Paul about his kinsmen: "they are Israelites, and to them belong the sunship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom 9:4-5), the son of the virgin Mary. She is mindful, moreover, that the apostles, the pillars on which the Church stands, are of Jewish descent, as are many of those early disciples who proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to the world.

As holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize God's moment when it came (see Lk 19:42). Jews for the most part did not accept the Gospel; on the contrary, many opposed the spreading of it (see Rom 11:28).

Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 (October 28, 1965). In *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, OP. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1975.

Even so, the apostle Paul maintains that the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made.² Together with the prophets and that same apostle, the Church awaits the day, known to God alone, when all peoples will call on God with one voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" (Soph 3:9; see Is 66:23; Ps 65:4; Rom 11:11-32).

Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions.

Even though Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (see Jn 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture. Consequently, all must take care, lest in catechizing or in preaching the word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ.

Indeed, the Church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed. Remembering, then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplors all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews.^b

The Church always held and continues to hold that Christ out of infinite love freely underwent suffering and death because of the sins of all men, so that all might attain salvation. It is the duty of the church, therefore, in her preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's universal love and the source of all grace.

Notes

2. Cf. Rom. 11:28-29; cf. Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium* (AAS 57, 1965), 20.

b. See D. 57.

IV. THE JEWS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. The *Guidelines* already say (no. 1) that “the formula ‘the Jews’ sometimes, according to the context, means ‘the leaders of the Jews’ or ‘the adversaries of Jesus,’ terms which express better the thought of the evangelist and avoid appearing to arraign the Jewish people as such.”

An objective presentation of the role of the Jewish people in the New Testament should take account of these various facts:

A. The Gospels are the outcome of long and complicated editorial work. The dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*, following the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s Instruction *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, distinguished three stages: “The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation of their Churches, and preserving the form of proclamation, but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus” (no. 19).

Hence, it cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favorable to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus.

To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today.

All this should be taken into account when preparing catechesis and homilies for the last weeks of Lent and Holy Week (cf. *Guidelines*, II, *Sussidi per l’ecumenismo nella diocesi di Roma*, 1982, 144b).

B. It is clear on the other hand that there were conflicts between Jesus and certain categories of Jews of his time, among them Pharisees, from the beginning of his ministry (cf. Mk. 2:1-11, 24; 3:6, etc.).

C. There is moreover the sad fact that the majority of the Jewish people and its authorities did not believe in Jesus—a fact not merely of history but of theological bearing, of which St. Paul tries hard to plumb the meaning (Rm. chap. 9-11).

D. This fact, accentuated as the Christian mission developed, especially among the pagans, led inevitably to a rupture between Judaism and the young Church, now irreducibly separated and divergent in faith, and this stage of affairs is reflected in the texts of the New Testament and particularly in the Gospels. There is no question of playing down or glossing over this rupture; that could only prejudice the identity of either side.

Nevertheless it certainly does not cancel the spiritual "bond" of which the Council speaks (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4) and which we propose to dwell on here.

E. Reflecting on this in the light of Scripture, notably of the chapters cited from the epistle to the Romans, Christians should never forget that the faith is a free gift of God (cf. Rm. 9:12) and that we should never judge the consciences of others. St. Paul's exhortation "do not boast" in your attitude to "the root" (Rm. 11:18) has its full point here.

F. There is no putting the Jews who knew Jesus and did not believe in him, or those who opposed the preaching of the apostles, on the same plane with Jews who came after or those of today. If the responsibility of the former remains a mystery hidden with God (cf. Rm. 11:25), the latter are in an entirely different situation. Vatican II in the declaration on *Religious Liberty* teaches that "all men should be immune from coercion" in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs (no. 2). This is one of the bases—proclaimed by the Council—on which the Judaeo-Christian dialogue rests.

2. The delicate question of responsibility for the death of Christ must be looked at from the standpoint of the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, (no. 4) and of the *Guidelines and Suggestions* (part III): "What happened in (Christ's) passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living without distinction nor upon the Jews of today," especially since "authorities of the Jews and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ." Again, further on: "Christ in his boundless love freely underwent his passion and death because of the sins of all men, so that all might attain salvation" (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4). The *Catechism* of the Council of Trent teaches that Christian sinners are more to blame for the death of Christ than those

few Jews who brought it about—they indeed “knew not what they did” (Lk. 23:34) and we know it only too well (Pars I, caput V, Quaest. XI). In the same way and for the same reason, “the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures” (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4), even though it is true that “the Church is the new people of God (ibid.).”

4. We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah

The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews

March 16, 1998

POPE JOHN PAUL II'S INTRODUCTORY LETTER

To My Venerable Brother Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy:

On numerous occasions during my Pontificate I have recalled with a sense of deep sorrow the sufferings of the Jewish people during the Second World War. The crime which has become known as the *Shoah* remains and indelible stain on the history of the century that is coming to a close.

As we prepare for the beginning of the Third Millennium of Christianity, the Church is aware that the joy of a Jubilee is above all the joy that is based on the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God and neighbor. Therefore she encourages her sons and daughters to purify their hearts, through repentance of past errors and infidelities. She calls them to place themselves humbly before the Lord and examine themselves on the responsibility which they too have for the evils of our time.

It is my fervent hope that the document: "We Remember: A Reflection on the *Shoah*," which the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has prepared under your direction, will indeed help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices. May it enable memory to play its necessary part in the process of shaping a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the *Shoah* will never again be possible. May the Lord of history guide the efforts of Catholics and Jews and all men and women of good will as they work together for a world of true respect for the life and dignity of every human being, for all have been created in the image and likeness of God.

From the Vatican, 12 March 1998.

—Joannes Paulus II

Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church." See http://www.vatican.va/human_curia/pontifical_councils/christianism/index/index-relations-jews.htm (accessed January 27, 2004).

II. WHAT WE MUST REMEMBER

While bearing their unique witness to the Holy One of Israel and to the *Torah*, the Jewish people have suffered much at different times and in many places. But the *Shoah* was certainly the worst suffering of all. The inhumanity with which the Jews were persecuted and massacred during this century is beyond the capacity of words to convey. All this was done to them for the sole reason that they were Jews.

The very magnitude of the crime raises many questions. Historians, sociologists, political philosophers, psychologists and theologians are all trying to learn more about the reality of the *Shoah* and its causes. Much scholarly study still remains to be done. But such an event cannot be fully measured by the ordinary criteria of historical research alone. It calls for a "moral and religious memory" and, particularly among Christians, a very serious reflection on what gave rise to it.

The fact that the *Shoah* took place in Europe, that is, in countries of long-standing Christian civilization, raises the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards Jews.

V. LOOKING TOGETHER TO A COMMON FUTURE

Looking to the future of relations between Christians and Jews, in the first place we appeal to our Catholic brothers and sisters to renew the awareness of the Hebrew roots of their faith. We ask them to keep in mind that Jesus was a descendant of David; that the Virgin Mary and the Apostles belonged to the Jewish people; that the Church draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree on to which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles (Cf. Romans 11:17-24); that the Jews are our dearly beloved brothers, indeed in a certain sense they are "our elder brothers."²¹

At the end of this Millennium the Catholic Church desires to express her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age. This is an act of repentance (*teshuva*), since, as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children. The Church approaches with deep respect and great compassion the experience of extermination, the *Shoah*, suffered by the Jewish people during World War II. It is not a matter of mere words, but indeed of binding commitment. "*We would*

risk causing the victims of the most atrocious deaths to die again if we do not have an ardent desire for justice, if we do not commit ourselves to ensure that evil does not prevail over good as it did for millions of children of the Jewish people . . . Humanity cannot permit all that to happen again."²²

We pray that our sorrow for the tragedy which the Jewish people has suffered in our century will lead to a new relationship with the Jewish people. We wish to turn awareness of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews, but rather a shared mutual respect, as befits those who adore the one Creator and Lord and have a common father in faith, Abraham.

Finally, we invite all men and women of good will to reflect deeply on the significance of the *Shoah*. The victims from their graves, and the survivors through the vivid testimony of what they have suffered, have become a loud voice calling the attention of all of humanity. To remember this terrible experience is to become fully conscious of the salutary warning it entails: the spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism must never again be allowed to take root in any human heart.

Notes

21. Pope John Paul II, *Speech at the Synagogue of Rome*, 13 April 1986, 4: AAS 78 (1986), 1120.
22. Pope John Paul II, *Address on the Occasion of a Commemoration of the Shoah*, 7 April 1994, 3: *Insegnamenti* 17/1, 1994, 897 and 893.

3. Many of these negative “stock ideas,” unfortunately, can become vividly alive in passion dramatizations. It is all too easy in dramatic presentations to resort to artificial oppositions in order to heighten interest or provide sharp contrasts between the characters. Some of these erroneous oppositions, which are to be carefully avoided, are the following:

- a. Jesus must not be depicted as opposed to the Law (Torah). In fact, as the *Notes* describe in greater detail, “there is no doubt that he wished to submit himself to the law (Gal 4:4) . . . extolled respect for it (Mt 5:17-20), and invited obedience to it” (Mt 8:4) (cf. *Notes* III, 21, 22). Jesus should be portrayed clearly as a pious, observant Jew of his time (*Notes* III, 20 and 28).
- b. The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition founded on it must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear, and legalism with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18; Mt 22:34-40; cf. *Guidelines* III).
- c. Jesus and the disciples must not be set dramatically in opposition to his people, the Jews. This is to misread, for example, the technical terminology employed by John’s gospel (*Guidelines* II). It also ignores those parts of the gospel that show the Jewish populace

well disposed toward Jesus. In his life and teaching, "Jesus was and always remained a Jew" (*Notes III*, 20), as, indeed, did the apostles (*Notes III*, 22).

- d. Jews should not be portrayed as avaricious (e.g., in Temple money-changer scenes); blood thirsty (e.g., in certain depictions of Jesus' appearances before the Temple priesthood or before Pilate); or implacable enemies of Christ (e.g., by changing the small "crowd" at the governor's palace into a teeming mob). Such depictions, with their obvious "collective guilt" implications, eliminate those parts of the gospels that show that the secrecy surrounding Jesus' "trial" was motivated by the large following he had in Jerusalem and that the Jewish populace, far from wishing his death, would have opposed it had they known and, in fact, mourned his death by Roman execution (cf. Lk 23:27).
- e. Any crowd or questioning scene, therefore, should reflect the fact that some in the crowd and among the Jewish leaders (e.g., Nicodemus, Joseph) supported Jesus and that the rest were manipulated by his opponents, as is made clear in the gospels (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, n. 4, "Jewish authorities"; *Notes IV*, 30).
- f. Jesus and his teachings should not be portrayed as opposed to or by "the Pharisees" as a group (*Notes III*, 24). Jesus shared important Pharisaic doctrines (*Notes III*, 25) that set them apart from other Jewish groups of the time, such as the Sadducees. The Pharisees, in fact, are not mentioned in accounts of the passion except once in Luke, where Pharisees attempt to warn him of a plot against him by the followers of Herod (Lk 13:31). So, too, did a respected Pharisee, Gamaliel, speak out in a later time before the Sanhedrin to save the lives of the apostles (Acts 5). The Pharisees, therefore, should not be depicted as party to the proceedings against Jesus (*Notes III*, 24-27).
- g. In sum, Judaism and Jewish society in the time of Christ and the apostles were complex realities, embracing many different trends, many spiritual, religious, social, and cultural values (*Guidelines III*). Presentations of the passion should strive to reflect this spiritual

vitality, avoiding any implication that Jesus' death was a result of religious antagonism between a stereotyped "Judaism" and Christian doctrine. Many of the controversies (or "antitheses") between Jesus and his fellow Jews, as recorded in the gospels, we know today in fact reflect conflicts that took place long after the time of Christ between the early Christian communities and various Jewish communities (*Notes IV, 29 A*). To generalize from such specific and often later conflicts to an either/or opposition between Jesus and Judaism is to anachronize and, more basically, to vitiate the spirit and intent of the gospel texts (*Notes III, 28; IV, 29 F*).

- h. In the light of the above criteria, it will also be useful to undertake a careful examination of the staging and costuming aspects of particular productions where this may apply. To give just one example, it is possible to project subtly yet powerfully any or all of the above "oppositions" by costuming: arraying Jesus' enemies in dark, sinister costuming and makeup, with Jesus and his friends in lighter tones. This can be effective on the stage. But it can also be disastrous if the effect is to isolate Jesus and the apostles from "the Jews," as if all were not part of the same people. It is important to portray Jesus and his followers clearly as Jews among Jews, both in dress and in actions such as prayer.
- i. Similarly, the use of religious symbols requires careful evaluation. Displays of the menorah, tablets of the law, and other Jewish symbols should appear throughout the play and be connected with Jesus and his friends no less than with the Temple or with those opposed to Jesus. The presence of Roman soldiers should likewise be shown on the stage throughout the play, to represent the oppressive and pervasive nature of the Roman occupation.

C. DIFFICULTIES AND SENSITIVITIES IN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION BASED ON THE FOUR GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

The mixture of theological, historical, and artistic aspects mentioned above (B 1) gives rise to many difficulties in constructing an adequate presentation of the passion narratives (Mt 26-28; Mk 14-15; Lk 22-23; Jn 18-19). Below are some examples of the difficult choices facing those who would

seek to do so with faithfulness to the gospels. In each, an attempt will be made to apply to the question principles adduced in sections A and B, above, in the hope that such discussion will be of help to those charged with evaluations of the wide range of possible depictions existing today.

1. The Question of Selectivity

a. Those constructing a single narrative from the versions of the events in the four gospels are immediately aware that the texts differ in many details. To take just two examples, the famous phrase, "His Blood be upon us and on our children," exists only in the Matthean text (Mt 27:24-25), while the question of whether or not there was a full Sanhedrin trial is given widely differing interpretations in each of the gospel narratives. John, for example, has no Sanhedrin trial scene as such, but only a questioning before the two chief priests at dawn (18:19). Also in John, it is a Roman cohort, merely accompanied by Temple guards, that arrests Jesus (Jn 18:3, 12). How is one to choose between the differing versions?

b. First, it must be understood that the gospel authors did not intend to write "history" in our modern sense, but rather "sacred history" (i.e., offering "the honest truth about Jesus") (Notes IV, 29 A) in light of revelation. To attempt to utilize the four passion narratives literally by picking one passage from one gospel and the next from another gospel, and so forth, is to risk violating the integrity of the texts themselves, just as, for example, it violates the sense of Genesis 1 to reduce the magnificence of its vision of the Creation to a scientific theorem.

c. A clear and precise hermeneutic and a guiding artistic vision sensitive to historical fact and to the best biblical scholarship are obviously necessary. Just as obviously, it is not sufficient for the producers of passion dramatizations to respond to responsible criticism simply by appealing to the notion that "it's in the Bible." One must account for one's selections.

In the above instances, for example, one could take from John's gospel the phrase "the Jews" and mix it with Matthew 27:24-25, clearly implying a "blood guilt" on all Jews of all times in violation of *Nostra Aetate's* dictum that "what happened in his passion cannot be blamed on all the Jews then living without distinction nor upon the Jews of today." Hence, if the Matthean phrase is to be used (not here recommended), great care would

have to be taken throughout the presentation to ensure that such an interpretation does not prevail. Likewise, the historical and biblical questions surrounding the notion that there was a formal Sanhedrin trial argue for extreme caution and, perhaps, even abandoning the device. As a dramatic tool, it can too often lead to misunderstanding.

d. The greatest caution is advised in all cases where "it is a question of passages that seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light" (*Guidelines* II). A general principle might, therefore, be suggested that if one cannot show beyond reasonable doubt that the particular gospel element selected or paraphrased will not be offensive or have the potential for negative influence on the audience for whom the presentation is intended, that element cannot, in good conscience, be used. This, admittedly, will be a difficult principle to apply. Yet, given what has been said above, it would seem to be a necessary one.

2. Historical Knowledge and Biblical Scholarship

a. Often, what we have come to know from biblical scholarship or historical studies will place in doubt a more literalist reading of the biblical text. Here again, the hermeneutical principles of *Nostra Aetate*, the *Guidelines*, and the *Notes* should be of "overriding" concern. One such question suggests itself by way of example. This is the portrait of Pontius Pilate (cf. sec. A 3, above). It raises a very real problem of methodology in historical reconstruction of the events of Jesus' last days.

b. *The Role of Pilate*. Certain of the gospels, especially the two latest ones, Matthew and John, seem on the surface to portray Pilate as a vacillating administrator who himself found "no fault" with Jesus and sought, though in a weak way, to free him. Other data from the gospels and secular sources contemporary with the events portray Pilate as a ruthless tyrant. We know from these latter sources that Pilate ordered crucified hundreds of Jews without proper trial under Roman law, and that in the year 36 Pilate was recalled to Rome to give an account. Luke, similarly, mentions "the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices" in the Temple (Lk 13:1-4), thus corroborating the contemporary secular accounts of the unusual cruelty of Pilate's administration. John, as mentioned above, is at pains to show that Jesus' arrest and trial were essentially at Roman hands. Finally, the gospels agree that Jesus' "crime," in Roman eyes, was that of

political sedition—crucifixion being the Roman form of punishment for such charges. The threat to Roman rule is implicit in the charge: “King of the Jews,” nailed to the cross at Pilate’s order (Mt 27:37; Mk 15:26; Lk 23:38; Jn 19:19). Matthew 27:38 and Mark 15:27 identify the “criminals” crucified with Jesus on that day as “insurgents.”

There is, then, room for more than one dramatic style of portraying the character of Pilate while still being faithful to the biblical record. Again, it is suggested here that the hermeneutical insight of *Nostra Aetate* and the use of the best available biblical scholarship cannot be ignored in the creative process and provide the most prudent and secure criterion for contemporary dramatic reconstructions.

CONCLUSION

The *Notes* emphasize that because the Church and the Jewish people are “linked together at the very level of their identity,” an accurate, sensitive, and positive appreciation of Jews and Judaism “should not occupy an occasional or marginal place in Christian teaching,” but be considered “essential” to Christian proclamation (I, 2; cf. I, 8).

This principle is nowhere more true than in depictions of the central events of the Paschal mystery. It is a principle that gives renewed urgency to the evaluation of all contemporary dramatizations of the passion and a renewed norm for undertaking that delicate and vital task.