

## TROUBLING TRADITION: WRESTLING WITH PROBLEMATIC PASSAGES

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### Redeeming Sacred Texts from their Sacrilegious Uses

It is difficult for religiously committed persons to acknowledge that their sacred texts are prone to sacrilegious uses. Learning that narratives that inspire and sustain can be—and indeed have been—used as weapons often evokes resistance and denial; to encounter the shadow side of one’s religious tradition brings both sorrow and shame. Thus, how we “trouble tradition” in wrestling with “problem passages” requires educational wisdom and pastoral sensitivity

The Bible, of course, is full of problematic passages that appear to sanction violence, demean women, condone slavery, and discriminate against particular groups. Frederick Buechner, well known writer and Presbyterian minister, playfully describes the Bible as a

... disorderly collection of books which are often tedious, barbaric, obscure and teem with contradictions and inconsistencies. It is a swarming compost of a book, an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda, law and legalism, myth and murk, history and hysteria . . . hopelessly associated with tub-thumping evangelism and dreary piety, superannuated superstition and blue-nosed moralizing; with ecclesiastical authoritarianism and crippling literalism.<sup>1</sup>

So my initial dilemma was which of the many texts with which to wrestle in your presence. I decided—perhaps unwisely—to choose a set of texts that are sacred to Christians: texts that deal with the suffering (passion) and death of Jesus. These texts give rise to a narrative that is fundamental to Christian identity; collectively, they give rise to a story as elemental to Christianity as the Exodus is to Judaism. Yet have been used in ways that I can only call sacrilegious in their disparagement and vilification of Jews and Judaism. The charge, initially leveled in the New Testament, developed with considerable rhetorical effect in early church writings, and a common staple of church teaching for nearly two millennia, constitutes the theological core of anti-Judaism. In short, the passion narratives seem to be a case study in problem texts precisely because they are both deadly and life-giving. All depends on the telling.

Accordingly, I have organized my remarks in a fivefold rubric of “tellings”:

- A Trembling Telling
- A Troubling Telling
- A Tragic Telling
- A Transformed Telling.
- A Transforming Telling

I hope the adjectives will become clear over the course of my lecture, but first a word about “telling.”

Tell is a simple word—more widely accessible than “interpretation” and “hermeneutics,” terms we who make our living in the “academy” tend to use. But its simplicity may be deceptive: To tell a story involves more than might initially meet the eye (or ear). Even if we are merely reading aloud what is already in writing, we reveal what we think is significant in emphasizing certain words or phrases. And when the church “tells” the story of the passion and death of Jesus, it does so in elaborate and complex ways: in

<sup>111</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 8-9.

the Gospel proclaimed in liturgical solemnity, in its prayers, in the symbols of cross and crucifix that mark our churches (and delineate Protestants and Catholics), in hymnody and art—and in the retelling that is the sermon.

Let us consider five tellings of this story as it has been told and retold over the course of time.

### I. A Trembling Telling

Stories of Jesus' death are lodged in the core of Christian identity. They offer an encounter with the way Jesus experienced the human condition, including betrayals by those closest to him, his own fear of death, uncertainty about God's will, and the endurance of terrible suffering and an ignominious death.

These stories cause us, in the words of that magnificent spiritual, to "tremble, tremble, tremble."<sup>2</sup>

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
 Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
 Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
 Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?  
 Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?  
 Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
 Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?  
 Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?  
 Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
 Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?  
 Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?  
 Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
 Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?

This spiritual offers us a glimpse into the power of the passion stories. An enslaved people could identify with the suffering Jesus; in some way, he had taken on their pain as well. The passion stories are especially revelatory for marginalized peoples: Jesus, through whom we Christians see God revealed, is one with the marginal peoples of this world—all those whom brutal rulers, whether Pontius Pilate or Hitler or Pol Pot considered expendable, of non-human status.

The death-resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of the church's liturgical life and spirituality, as well as in its creeds and doctrines. It has evoked centuries of reflection, given rise to powerful rituals, inspired beautiful art and music, stimulated tomes of theology, motivated persons to sacrifice themselves for a

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<sup>2</sup> In his commentary on this spiritual, James Cone writes: "Because black slaves knew the significance of the pain and shame of Jesus' death on the cross, they found themselves by his side. [...] Through the blood of slavery, they transcended the limitations of space and time. Jesus' time became their time, and they encountered a new historical existence. Through the experience of being slaves, they encountered the theological significance of Jesus' death: through the crucifixion, Jesus makes an unqualified identification with the poor and the helpless and takes their pain upon himself." *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 53-54.

cause greater than they, and sustained persons through times of horrifying suffering. The stories of Jesus' death symbolize all that is sacred in Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

The story has also been told in ways that have glorified suffering, condoned passivity in the face of violence, and constricted the meaning of salvation by associating it only with the death of Jesus, as if his life and teaching had little meaning. These are troubling tellings, but there is another even more troubling telling: We know from history that misinterpretations of the passion narratives have rationalized hostility to and violence against Jews. As Gerard Sloyan, a respected New Testament scholar (and Catholic priest) lays out the charge: "The chief actual sufferers from Jesus' death by crucifixion have been, paradoxically, not Christians but Jesus' fellow Jews."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In my own Catholic tradition, we speak of the passion-death and resurrection as the "paschal mystery," (from the Greek, *pascha*, derived from Hebrew *pesach*)—that is, Jesus' "passing over" from death to life. In a sense, the Eucharist is the Haggadah from which we retell this story and enact it ritually.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard S. Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) p. 2.



## II. A Troubling Telling

The writers of the gospels differ from one another in the way they tell the story of Jesus' passion (arrest, beating, trial[s]) and death. But common to all their accounts is this: Jews are primarily responsible for the death of Jesus. Two texts in particular have been especially troubling. The Gospel of Matthew (27:25) has a scene in which Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, acclaims his innocence before an unruly crowd. He washes his hands in their presence, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves. Then the people as a whole answered: 'His blood be on us and our children!'" The Gospel of John (19:14-16) puts this accusation in sharpest relief in the scene in which "the Jews" demand of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, "Crucify him, crucify him."

This is troubling because Imperial Rome had far more to do with the death of Jesus than the gospels reflect. I will return to this later. Even more troubling is the way in which early Christian teachers built upon this charge as the rivalry with Judaism widened and deepened.

Early Christian writers, functioning as apologists, had to justify Christianity, a minority religion without legal status in the Roman Empire, vis-à-vis Judaism, which was well established and respected, and undergoing its own process of transformation as it adapted to the loss of the Temple and Jerusalem. They believed a new era had arrived, and that Judaism would, therefore, give way to Christianity. After all, the Jews no longer had a Temple since the Romans destroyed it in 70, and after 135 Jerusalem had become a Roman city, *Aelia Capitolina*. So history seemed to confirm what their theology suggested—Judaism had been unfaithful to the covenant, and now its time was over.<sup>5</sup>

Justin Martyr (mid 2<sup>nd</sup> c.), in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, accused Trypho: "He was pierced by you."

Origen (ca. 185-254) made this explicit: The Jews had committed "the most impious crime of all when they conspired against the Savior" of humankind in the "city where they performed to God the customary rites" that symbolized profound mysteries. "Therefore," he concluded, "that city where Jesus suffered these indignities had to be utterly destroyed. The Jewish nation had to be overthrown, and God's invitation to blessedness transferred to others, I mean the Christians, to whom came the teaching about the simple and pure worship of God." (*Against Celsus* 4.2.3.)

In late second century, the bishop of Sardis (in modern Turkey), Melito, (d. ca. 190), preached an eloquent sermon articulating what became the leitmotif of anti-Judaism: in killing Jesus, the Jews had murdered God.

Major Christian figures of the fourth and fifth centuries, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and John Chrysostom (347-407), intensified the separation. Augustine argued that the Jews, though responsible for the death of Son of God, were ignorant of his true identity because they misread their own scriptures. They preserved faithfully the books of Scripture, but Jews read them "as the face of a blind man appears in a mirror—by others it is seen, but by himself it is not seen." (*City of God* 18.46) Because the Jews had rejected Jesus, they were cursed to wander in exile as reprobates. Yet they must not be killed so that the world will see the consequences of rejecting the Christ.

Chrysostom authored some of the most vitriolic denunciations of Jews: "Where Christ-killers gather, the cross is ridiculed, God blasphemed, The Father unacknowledged, the Son insulted, the grace of the Spirit

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<sup>5</sup> See Robert L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (New Haven and London, 1971: Yale University Press, 1971, pp. 1-38; 222-230.

rejected." (*Homily One Against the Judaizers* 1.6). (We understand something of the rhetorical style of this period when we see how Chrysostom recycled some of the same vitriol in attacking Arian Christians, whom he regarded as heretics.)

How can we not be troubled by a telling of the passion and death of Jesus that portrays Jews as blind to the ways of God, unfaithful, cursed, a deicide people. Yet as troubling as this telling is, it eventuated in tragedy.

### III. A Tragic Telling

In this section, I can only adumbrate developments in Christian life that are a source of enormous shame: ways in which accusations of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus become theological hate speech legitimizing, even at times inspiring, violence against Jews.

Once Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire ca. 379 C.E., the church had greater capacity to exercise its theology in the political and cultural sphere. Jews became subject in many areas to decrees that restricted their rights and effectively reduced them to second-class citizens. Yet Augustine's dictum that Jews not be killed held force; Christian society tolerated the presence of Jews in *their* society.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a tragic turn to violence against Jews. The Crusaders (so called because the crosses that marked their tunics) set out to destroy the infidel Muslims, but found other infidels—Jews—en route. The church became more preoccupied with rooting out heretics, and as Christians began to learn more about rabbinic Judaism (in part through the infamous disputations), they realized that contemporary Judaism was shaped by the Talmud; Jews were no longer merely blind to the Christ whom their Scriptures prophesied, but practitioners of a heretical religion.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in theological circles, most notably in the work of Thomas Aquinas, the Jews who killed Christ were not so much ignorant as they were guilty of "voluntary ignorance," that is an express desire to be ignorant; voluntary ignorance increases the degree of sinfulness.<sup>7</sup>

All this led to the conviction among many that contemporary Jews no longer deserved the protection of the church. Popular legends about Jews as ritual murderers became widespread in this period. During the thirteenth century, Christians charged Jews with desecrating the host so as to reenact their original

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<sup>6</sup> The church "had awakened to the reality that Judaism did not cease to develop on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, on that day when the New Testament presumably replaced the old. If this New Testament charted the only legitimate direction in which the religion of biblical Israel could develop, and if the Jews had survived solely to testify to that Old Testament which had given birth to Christianity, then a postbiblical or talmudic Judaism was an impossibility. [ . . . ] The value of the Jews in a Christian world depended on their blindness, their ignorance of Christian truth, their testifying to that very truth unknowingly, despite themselves" Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)88-89.

<sup>7</sup> It must, however, be understood that their ignorance did not excuse them from crime, because it was, as it were, affected ignorance. For they saw manifest signs of His Godhead; yet they perverted them out of hatred and envy of Christ; neither would they believe His words, whereby He avowed that He was the Son of God. Hence He Himself says of them (John 15:22): "If I had not come, and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin." And afterwards He adds (John 15:24): "If I had not done among them the works that no other man hath done, they would not have sin." And so the expression employed by Job (21:14) can be accepted on their behalf: "(Who) said to God: depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways." (*Summa theologica* 3.47.5, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4047.htm>)

decide. They accused them of blood libel—using the blood of Christians, preferably children, for their Passover rituals. Preachers spread tales based on such fabrications and vilified Jews in passionate sermons. The violence against Jews—both verbal and physical—suggests that anti-Judaism had come to resemble what the modern world calls antisemitism. It had, however, one major difference: Christianity provided no sanction for genocide.

What role did these tragic tellings of the passion story play in the Shoah? This is not a question I have sufficiently researched, but Irving Greenberg reports a particularly disturbing incident. In 1942 a Slovakian rabbi called upon the local archbishop and pleaded for Catholic help in resisting the Nazi policy of deporting his town's Jews:

Since the rebbe did not yet know of the gas chambers, he stressed the dangers of hunger and disease, especially for women, old people, and children. The archbishop replied: "It is not just a matter of deportation. You will not die there of hunger and disease. They will slaughter all of you there, old and young alike, women and children, at once—it is the punishment that you deserve for the death of our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ—you have only one solution. Come over to our religion and I will work to annul this decree."<sup>8</sup>

I do not believe that this utterly immoral "telling" of the story by this archbishop was typical—but even once such example is shocking.

#### IV. A Transformed Telling

In the wake of the Shoah, a group of Christians and Jews in 1946 formed the International Council of Christians and Jews. A year later they gathered in Seelisberg, Switzerland; the Christian participants issued a document, "Ten Points of Seelisberg: An Address to the Churches." Five of their ten points involved interpretation of the death of Jesus:

6. Avoid using the word *Jews* in the exclusive sense of the enemies of Jesus and the words *The Enemies of Jesus* to designate the whole Jewish people.
7. Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon all Jews or upon Jews alone. It was only a section of the Jews in Jerusalem who demanded the death of Jesus, and the Christian message has always been that it was the sins of mankind which were exemplified by those Jews and the sins in which all men share that brought Christ to the Cross.
8. Avoid referring to the scriptural curses, or the cry of a raging mob: *His Blood be Upon Us and Our Children*, without remembering that this cry should not count against the infinitely more weighty words of our Lord: *Father Forgive Them, for They Know not What They Do*.

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<sup>8</sup> Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust," in Eva Fleishner, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV, 1977), pp. 11-12.

9. Avoid promoting the superstitious notion that the Jewish people are reprobate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering.

10. Avoid speaking of the Jews as if the first members of the Church had not been Jews.<sup>9</sup>

These points anticipated later statements from various churches, most famous of which is the Second Vatican Council 1965 *Nostra Aetate* in section 4 that “what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.”

The story of the development of this statement is both fascinating and dramatic, but not one we can trace this evening. *Nostra Aetate* is indeed a flawed document, not nearly as forceful as many had hoped, but, most importantly, it inaugurated a serious reassessment of Christian teaching in many churches. The charge of “Christ-killer” lingers, but it no longer has the same force in most of Christianity. For this we have two related factors: the churches’ reassessment of their relationship with Judaism in the wake of the Shoah, and developments in biblical scholarship.

While I have spoken in the plural about the churches, at this juncture I am going to restrict my comments to developments in the Catholic Church, since it has a well developed set of interpretational principles that provides substantial tools for a transformed telling of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let me start with the scholarship. It is well known that Catholicism struggled initially with historical criticism, that is, methods that situate biblical texts in their literary cultural and historical contexts. “Struggle” is in fact too kind—historical criticism was condemned in official church teaching around the turn of the twentieth century in the so-called “Modernist” crisis. Yet beginning in the 1940s a more open attitude became evident. Today, an official Vatican document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), calls historical criticism “indispensable.”

Indeed, historical criticism is indispensable in understanding the crucifixion of Jesus. For the sake of clarity, let me outline the principal findings:

1. Second Temple Judaism was heterogeneous, and the proper matrix in which we must situate the teachings of Jesus. As a consequence, to generalize about “the Jews,” and especially to make claims that Jesus taught “x” while the Jews taught “y” falsifies the picture (e.g., Jesus taught love, but Jews the law.)
2. From the 60s of the first century B.C.E., Second Temple Judaism existed under the vise of Imperial Rome. There is now a wealth of scholarship attesting to the way in which Rome enforced its rule by violence. Crucifixion was an especially effective deterrent to any who might challenge the Empire. It was “highly organized, massive state terrorism, intended to intimidate the vast peasant and slave populations of the empire into passivity.”<sup>10</sup> Thousands of Jews met their death this way.

<sup>9</sup> In *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations: An Unabridged Collection of Christian Documents 1975-1983*, Helga Croner, ed. (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), 32-33. Also available <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/interreligious/Seelisberg.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Fortress, 2004), 8.

3. There is a consensus among biblical scholars that Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea from 26-36, appointed (and later removed for excessive cruelty by the Roman Empire) alone had the authority to impose the sentence of crucifixion, though it is likely that some Jewish authorities, likely members of the temple priesthood, may have been involved. Philo wrote that under Pilate there were “executions without trial constantly repeated” (*On the Embassy to Gaius*, 302). The likely charge against Jesus was sedition: a threat to the order of the state.
4. The gospels, composed some thirty to forty years (or more) after the death of Jesus, were shaped by the devastation unleashed by Rome’s destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in the wake of the Jewish War. The evangelists seem to have interpreted this devastation as divine punishment.
5. The period of gospel composition likely witnessed rivalry and disagreement between the Jewish followers of Jesus and other Jews. It is probable that these tensions fueled a sense of betrayal because of the memory that some Jewish authorities were complicit in the death of Jesus.
6. Gerard Sloyan says about the evangelists: “As modern reporters, they were a flat failure. As ancient dramatists, they were more than a little successful; in assigning human responsibility for Jesus’ death, in light of subsequent history they were tragically successful.”<sup>11</sup>

Taking these six factors into account, we may rightly conclude that the accounts in the Gospels, shaped by the experience of the evangelists and their communities in the latter third of the first century C.E., downplay Roman imperial power, especially as exercised by Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea, and assign greater culpability to Judean Jews (Matthew) or to “the Jews” (John).

Such scholarship plays an elemental role in how the Catholic Church at official levels now teaches about the death of Jesus. For example, the 1993 *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*

Clearly to be rejected also is every attempt at actualization set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity, such as, for example, the use of the Bible to justify racial segregation, anti-Semitism or sexism whether on the part of men or of women. Particular attention is necessary, according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (*Nostra Aetate*, 4), to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes to the Jewish people. The tragic events of the past must, on the contrary, impel all to keep unceasingly in mind that, according to the New Testament, the Jews remain “beloved” of God, “since the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:28-29).

Since *Nostra Aetate* various Catholic agencies at the international, national, and local levels have issued various of documents that refine and extend the interpretative moves made in that foundational text regarding the death of Jesus. The most important have even been collected in a small book, *The Bible, the Jews, and the Death of Jesus*. This is an important collection, indicative of the possibilities of transforming the tradition.

But the messiah has not yet come (whether for the first or second time). There is far too little education about interpreting Scripture. The average person has few, if any, tools for reading biblical texts in

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<sup>11</sup> Gerard S. Sloyan, *the Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 42.

context. The great wave of enthusiasm for Scripture study that followed Vatican II seems diminished. Too often the sermon retells the Gospel narrative for the day without attention to context, thereby losing one of the key teachable moments. Moreover, the passion narratives are proclaimed on the Sunday inaugurating Holy Week and on Good Friday, all too often without sufficient commentary.

Catholicism is a commentary tradition—but we must make commentary more accessible, both in its readings of texts and in its approaches. We need our own version *Etz Chayim* (the Torah and commentary of the Rabbinic Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism). We must make a major educational commitment to helping persons learn to interpret our texts, most especially those problematic passages.

## V. Transforming Telling

By way of a brief conclusion, I believe it absolutely crucial that we Christians learn to tell our story in ways that do justice to its complex history. By history here I mean not simply the “back story” of the crucifixion—particularly the iron grip of Imperial Rome—but the long history of how our ancestors in faith used it against Jews. This is a matter of justice in the relationship of our two peoples, and it is also requisite if we are to tell our story accurately.

Ultimately, we seek a telling of this story that will be transforming, inviting us to new depths of commitment. In particular, we need to connect the stories of his death to the ministry of Jesus so that we might model our lives on the “decisive dispositions of Jesus”—commitment to self-transcending love and service to others, surrender to Holy One, gratitude. It is the challenge to take up in our own lives those paradigmatic actions of Jesus: foot washing and table service, love of enemies, nonviolence, outreach to the marginal. It is to enter into the spirit of his utopian teaching in parables and sayings and about God’s reign. It is in Paul’s great metaphor, the call to buried with him, to die to sin in order that the God of life might raised us as he did Jesus.<sup>12</sup> And finally, we need to connect the stories of his death to those of his resurrection, that we might live in hope that our God is indeed the God of the living.

Mary C. Boys, S.N.J.M.

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<sup>12</sup> This paragraph follows closely John A. Coleman, “The Two Pedagogies: Citizenship and Discipleship,” in Mary C. Boys, ed., *Educating for Citizenship and Discipleship* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), p45. (full article, pp. 35–75).