

The essential challenge of anti-Judaism in the Bible

Do antisemitic appeals to the Bible always constitute an abuse of scripture? Would that it were so simple.

by [Greg Carey](#)

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The Poway, California, synagogue shooting made plain something a lot of us didn't want to admit: the Pittsburgh massacre was no one-off. Amidst resurgent white nationalism, Jews in America feel unsafe, and justifiably so.

In the aftermath of the shooting, [an article](#) by *Washington Post* religion reporter Julie Zauzmer drew widespread attention. The Poway shooter is a Christian, a member of an Orthodox Presbyterian Church congregation. He composed a manifesto for the shooting that stood out for its appeal to Christian theology as legitimation for murdering Jews. Among other accusations, the shooter rehearsed the ancient slander that Jews killed Jesus.

Zauzmer reported a social media debate among some evangelical Christians: is Christian theology complicit in contemporary anti-Semitism? The question applies just as directly to those of us in mainline churches.

The *Post* article quotes [Duke Kwon](#), a Presbyterian Church in America pastor, who worries that Christian theology can serve evil ends. According to Kwon, in the synagogue shooter's manifesto

you actually hear a frighteningly clear articulation of Christian theology in certain sentences and paragraphs. He has, in some ways, been well taught in the church.

The article quotes pastors who share Kwon's concern regarding the potential connection between church teaching and hate. It also quotes others who disagree, who see no connection. In their view, the shooter and his ilk simply pervert the gospel. A statement from the OPC claims that anti-Semitism has "no place within our system of doctrine."

It's easy for us Christians to decry anti-Semitism and racism. What's harder—and now painfully, obviously necessary—is to come to terms with the hostility that's inherent in our own sacred resources. The New Testament stands first among these.

We would rather say that Christian anti-Semitism is an oxymoron, that anti-Semitic appeals to the Bible by definition constitute an abuse of scripture. Would that it were so simple. The four Gospels, each in its own way, all reflect a combination of disappointment, disillusionment, and outright hostility in response to the resistance Jesus encountered from some of his coreligionists—sometimes reflecting ongoing tension between Jews who follow Jesus and those who do not.

In Matthew the people of Jerusalem accept the responsibility for Jesus' death: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25). The Jewish leaders even concoct a false narrative that the disciples stole Jesus' body from the tomb (28:11-15).

In Mark the scribes and Pharisees are out to kill Jesus almost from the beginning (3:6).

In Luke Jesus laments that Jerusalem faces judgment for rejecting his message and for his death (13:33-35; 19:41-44).

John insists that "the Jews" determined to expel from the synagogue everyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). No credible scholar believes such a thing occurred during Jesus' lifetime.

We could say lots more about the Gospels. Acts is even more problematic, providing material some Christians might use to blame Jews for Jesus' death. Although only the Romans crucified their victims, Peter indicts the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "you crucified and killed [him] by the hands of those outside the law" (2:23). Acts acknowledges that it was the Romans who killed Jesus yet slides the blame onto Jews anyway.

Do we need to discuss Revelation's two references to the synagogue of Satan (2:9; 3:9)? Yes, these verses have sparked lots of controversy among Bible scholars, but the language can't be avoided.

In short, the Bible is a big part of our problem. Ads for a Christian party game called [Pharisees](#) pit "Pharisees" who stone Christians against "disciples" who must excommunicate the Pharisees. As wicked as the game is, we can understand how someone who takes, say, Matthew 23 literally could reduce Pharisees to cartoonish villains. Likewise, we understand that people who read the New Testament perceive Jews as some sort of enemy.

What's required is not blithe denial of the problem but robust education throughout the church, starting with adults. As a seminary professor, I hear the church's problematic teachings in the words of my students.

Jesus was inclusive, they say, while Judaism was not. ([How](#) did Jesus, a Jew, learn to be inclusive?) Jews were trying to earn their salvation, while Paul brought a gospel of grace. (Have we not read the Psalms?) Jesus put an end to the law of Moses. (Paul again: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" [Rom 3:31].)

As much time as it takes to rectify these distortions, that is our call today. Like lead in the water supply, there's no safe level of anti-Semitic discourse. And Christian leaders must also go public as allies of our Jewish neighbors. That means showing up with our bodies in synagogues and with our voices in pulpits and behind lecterns.

When it comes to Jesus, Christians and Jews will certainly disagree. Paul, himself both a persecutor of Jesus followers and a victim of violence by other Jews, claims "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" that most Israelites have not received the gospel (Rom 9:2). Indeed, Christians confess Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, while Jews remain unconvinced. Nor can Christians avoid the conflict: when we abandon our roots in Israel's story we become monsters. But when we claim Israel's story is all about Jesus we get the same ogreish result. We Christians have to find a way to venerate Jesus without diminishing or slandering Jews and Judaism.

As I entered a local synagogue last week for Holocaust Remembrance Day, I noted that guests were diverted to a side door, where armed security stood watch. *How sad*, I thought. Then I heard two rabbis talking about how Jews are now targeted in our society, and I reconsidered my initial response. Sad it may be, but eminently

reasonable.