What should churches do about the treatment of “the Jews” in John?

“Each of the typical approaches has problems. The best solution would be to change the lectionary.”

Steve Thorngate interviews Amy-Jill Levine

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Amy-Jill Levine. Photo © Daniel DuBois / Vanderbilt University.

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Western Christians have long read the Passion narrative from John's Gospel at Good Friday worship, a tradition that lectionary-observing churches continue today. Whatever else it is, this is a passage with some explicitly anti-Jewish elements. Can you describe the main problems that exist in this text?

John 19:12 describes how "the Jews"—*Ioudaioi* in Greek—"cried out" to Pontius Pilate, "'If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar.'" Thus, for John, "the Jews," as puppet-masters, control Pilate. John 19:38 describes Joseph of Arimathea as Jesus' disciple, but a "secret one because of his fear of the Jews." The language divorces Joseph from his Jewish community, lumps all Jews together as opponents of Jesus, and depicts the Jews as a dangerous political force.

When in John 18:35 Pilate says to Jesus, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me," he indicts all Jews. Pilate is not a Jew, but in the context of John's Gospel, where "the Jews"—the term is used 70 times—generally represent the opponents of Jesus and so of God, Pilate becomes the quintessential Jew in not accepting Jesus' messianic status.

Those churches that acknowledge this problem often seek to mitigate it: by excising parts of John's text, by editing it to more palatable language, by offering an explanatory note of some kind. How do you view these approaches?

Here are the top six approaches. Each has problems.

Excision is the most common strategy churches have used in the attempt to erase or at least minimize impressions of Jew-hatred. Already the lectionary omits many of the more problematic verses, such as John 8:44, where Jesus says to the Jews, "You are from your father the devil." Problems with excision, especially for the Passion narratives, include creating a choppy reading that lacks continuity, avoiding wrestling with texts that have done or could do damage, and confusing congregants who are following the reading in their Bibles.

Second is the move to substitute for "Jews" terms such as "Judeans," "Jewish leaders," or "religious leaders." "Judeans" is a legitimate translation of *Ioudaioi.* But this approach draws attention to itself as a failed attempt to get around the problem: the lector says "Judeans," but the congregation hears "Jews."

A consistent reading of “Judean” rather than “Jew” also strips Jesus, his family, and his disciples of their Jewish identity—especially since in John’s Gospel they are not Judeans but Galileans. Further, the translation “Judean” undercuts Jewish continuity over time and disallows the idea of speaking of Jesus and Paul as Jews. The upshot is that to replace the word “Jews” with something else is to create or construct a *judenrein* text, to use the German term, a text “purified” of Jews.

Replacing “Jews” with “Jewish leaders” and “religious leaders” is already compromised because John’s Gospel reads not “leaders” but “Jews.” Next, the literary sensibilities of the Gospels merge various Jewish groups. The Gospel of Matthew begins the process of lumping together Pharisees and Sadducees, inserts Pharisees into Mark’s template to increase their vilification, then speaks of “all the people” (27:25), and finally mentions “the Jews” (28:15) strategically to indicate those who believe the ridiculous story that Roman soldiers would have admitted to falling asleep while guarding Jesus’ tomb. John’s Gospel omits the Sadducees and morphs Pharisees and/or priests into “Jews.”

“Religious leaders” also gives an unclear impression since the high priest, appointed by Rome, does not lead a “religion” in terms of doctrine or practice, save for his oversight of the Jerusalem temple. Moreover, even if we do speak of “leaders,” it remains the case that most Jews chose not to follow the lead of Jesus and his disciples.

Third is the move to encourage the congregation to see itself as the Jewish crowd in the Passion story: it is the people in the church, in their sinful condition, who call for Jesus’ death. The approach has the benefit of recognizing the Christian view that Jesus dies for the sins of humanity. The problem is that on Easter Sunday, those sinful congregants are now redeemed Christians while “the Jews” remain guilty, unapologetic, and unforgiven.

Fourth, some clergy use biographical/psychological arguments to contextualize problematic passages. For example, they suggest that John’s Gospel reflects not what actually happened but the evangelist’s retelling based on alienation from the broader Jewish community. While this may be true, it is hard to prove. Nor does such psychological reductionism resolve the problem. Once the words are in the text, they must be addressed. Nor again do such historical arguments help those who take every word as inspired.

Similarly, fifth, some historicization functions to explain away or justify problematic texts. For example, we hear that John is writing in a context in which Jews are expelling Christ-followers from synagogues, so the Jew-hating rhetoric is reactionary. We do not have evidence of such expulsion from early Jewish (non-messianic) sources, and John's references in 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2 to followers being ousted from synagogues involve plans, not actual events. Nor were synagogues centralized, then or now. Were we to imagine such an expulsion, we would also need to imagine why. Proclaiming someone the Messiah was by no means out of bounds. Perhaps people from John's community were telling others—not only fellow Jews but also Samaritans and gentiles—that they needed to change their beliefs and practices. Such proclamation would put synagogues, especially in the diaspora, in danger.

Finally, some clergy repeat year after year, "I know this text is a problem, and I affirm that our church really does love Jews," and then read the offending text. To locate a problem, acknowledge it, and then do nothing to correct it threatens to become virtue signaling. Clergy can and should do better.

So, what's a more useful approach?

Clergy who proclaim texts whose interpretations have led to harm—whether because they sanction slavery, silence women, give people the impression that their sexual identity is an abomination, promote Jew-hatred, expel rather than welcome addicts, etc.—are responsible for providing the congregation guidance. The word "Israel" is traditionally understood to mean "wrestle with God" (Gen. 32:28): clergy would do well to wrestle, and they should model for their congregations ways of working through these harmful texts.

Not all such guidance needs to come in the sermon. Other options include placing commentary in the bulletin, adding notes to pew Bibles, and encouraging Bible study. Jews have developed midrash to provide alternative understandings of problematic passages in the Torah; Christians could do something similar with the New Testament.

If a pastor is creating a Good Friday bulletin and wants to include some brief interpretive guidance alongside John's Passion, what main points would you hope to see them include?

As I have noted, the various explanations—using "Judeans" rather than "Jews," speaking of "Jewish leaders" or "religious leaders," imagining the congregation to be

“the Jews,” reading John as speaking to a later context rather than recording what happened, hypothetical historical contextualization of synagogue expulsion—do not work particularly well. Nor does simply acknowledging a problem and then continuing as if nothing has changed.

Notes can express how the text had been, and continues to be, used to malign Jews. Prayers of repentance can be of help.

I also recognize a possible pastoral/homiletical problem with such notes: highlighting anti-Jewish rhetoric threatens to take away the focus from the Passion and death of Jesus. Attention to the cross, not the anti-Jewish fallout, should be at the heart of Good Friday.

You’ve said elsewhere that what’s really needed here is a change to the lectionary. What would you propose reading on Good Friday instead of John’s Passion?

In the Christian tradition, not every biblical text is or needs to be proclaimed to the congregation. In the case of Good Friday, the best solution would be to change the lectionary. For example, churches that read John’s Passion might do well to consider if they need to read the whole thing and to what purpose. They might also consider the “seven last words of Jesus” approach that draws from all four canonical Gospels.

No Passion narrative is without problems, but the synoptics, because they do not speak generally of “the Jews,” are less likely to promote Jew-hatred. Personally, I prefer Luke’s version, with its attention to the “daughters of Jerusalem” and its focus on forgiveness. Also, Jesus was not the only Jew crucified on Golgotha, and Luke’s Passion features the other two Jews who died that day. Luke prompts us to ask: Who stood by them as they died? Who buried their bodies? Who mourned them?

Is there a tradeoff here? I wonder about the synoptic emphasis on Jesus as victim, which John—with his focus on Jesus’ own drive for a subversive sort of glory—largely does not share. In my experience, reading the synoptic Passions often provokes questions like, *Why would they do this to him?* —with the attendant problems contained in that word *they*.

All four Gospels offer distinct narratives. In Mark’s version, followed by Matthew, the suffering Jesus quotes the first line of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Mark’s Passion, compared to John’s, is a better indication of the

horrors of betrayal and denial, of corrupt colonial systems, of capital punishment, and of the need to find hope beyond despair. Mark prompts us to read to the end of Psalm 22 and to think beyond the end of the Gospel, with its frightened women fleeing an empty tomb.

In John's account, Jesus and the Father are one (see John 10:30), so the Johannine Jesus would never voice Psalm 22:1. John's version provides comfort in the presentation of Jesus as invincible Lord. Different circumstances lead people to different Gospels; different Christologies speak to different needs.

On the question of "why would they do this to him?" it is helpful to note that according to Paul, it is God who hands over Jesus to the cross (Romans 8:32), that the creeds proclaim that Jesus suffered and died under Pontius Pilate, and that Jesus goes willingly to his death. It is also helpful to note the increasing vilification of the Jews and the concurrent exculpation of Pilate.

But yes, all four Gospels—and not only the Gospels but other biblical passages—can create negative impressions of various groups. Therefore, lectionary revision is only a start. Seminaries and divinity schools need to be proactive in helping ministerial candidates and religious educators learn how to avoid disseminating or inculcating anti-Jewish messages. Churches need continuing education for clergy as well as youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, and Bible study leaders. Hymnals and art, magazines and books, guest ministers and curricula—all require careful attention.

What else from the lectionary is high on your list for revision, along with the Gospel reading for Good Friday?

John's Passion narrative is not the New Testament's only difficult text. Matthew 27:25, part of the Liturgy of the Passion, Year A, to be read this Sunday, depicts "all the people"—*pas ho laos* in Greek—calling for the crucifixion of Jesus with the self-curse, "His blood be on us and on our children!" This verse led to the view that all Jews, whenever and wherever, are responsible for the crucifixion.

In Acts 3:15, which comes up in Eastertide, Peter accuses the "Israelites"—that is, the Jews—of having "killed the author of life." Pilate has disappeared; the Jews are fully indicted. (By the way, the Roman Catholic lectionary here rephrases to put the onus on the Sanhedrin.) In the sermon on this passage the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest years ago asked me to deliver, I stated that there was no way I could redeem this text but that it was a blessing both that the students and

faculty permitted me to wrestle with it and that the Episcopal Church, among other communions, rejected accusations of corporate and timeless Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. Then again, what will happen the next time Acts 3 is the reading? What impressions will the congregation take home?

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops' 1988 statement *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching* names several examples of lectionary Gospel texts—including Jesus' reference in Matthew to the "hypocrites . . . in the synagogue" (6:2), his conflicts with the Pharisees in Luke 15 and elsewhere, and John 2's telling of the incident in the temple—that "can give the impression that the Judaism of Jesus' day was devoid of spiritual depth and essentially at odds with Jesus' teaching." The statement adds that New Testament references to divine punishments in what the church calls the Old Testament, as in 1 Corinthians 10, "can further intensify a false image of Jews and Judaism as a people rejected by God." Changing the lectionary at least avoids these problems.

There are also problems with how texts are paired. Several lectionary Sundays set the New Testament against rather than in continuity with the Old (to use Christian terminology) and so again reinforce negative images both of the Old Testament and, by extension, of Jews and Judaism. In March of 2021, I preached the sermon for the National Cathedral for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year B. The first reading is the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20, followed by Psalm 19, the paired texts celebrating the Torah's ability to inculcate wisdom. But that Sunday's reading from 1 Corinthians 1—"the world did not know God through wisdom"—undercuts the Torah's importance for Christians. The Gospel reading is the temple incident from John 2, which can suggest that the temple—the place Jesus calls his "Father's house," the place Paul affirms in his reference to worship in Romans 9:4, and the place where the followers of Jesus continue to worship in the book of Acts—exemplifies not the Ten Commandments they just heard read but the ten sins they command against.

When I have noted to Christian clergy problems with the readings, they sometimes become defensive: the Talmud says nasty things about Jesus (true but irrelevant, nor do two wrongs make a right); Jews are oppressing the Palestinians (a conflation of the state of Israel with "the Jews" and again, irrelevant to the lectionary); other matters are more important, like racism, transphobia, and ableism (Jew-hatred is important); Jesus sounds like the prophets of Israel (indeed he does, but while Israel's prophets are preserved in the Jewish canon, the words of Jesus are

preserved in the canon of the increasingly gentile church, so that he sounds like he is condemning “Jews” and not his own followers); Jesus sounds like the Dead Sea Scrolls (indeed he does, but Jews are not reading the scrolls to inveigh against Presbyterians); the language is not antisemitic, which is a racial categorization (the language promotes Jew-hatred, whatever we call it); you’re overreacting (this claim of oversensitivity is a standard anti-Jewish trope; in any case, I don’t think I am overreacting, especially given the uptick in antisemitism); no one pays attention anyway (if true, how sad, for a variety of reasons; further, some people do listen).

As for the lectionary committee, do you give them some credit for the texts they *did* leave out for reasons of anti-Jewishness? You mentioned John 8:44 as one example. And if memory serves, some of Matthew’s harshest stories of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees are omitted, as are all of Jesus’ near-stonings in John.

The fact that you note omitted verses is itself an indication that the text requires such care. Yes, the lectionary readings could be worse. They could also be better.

The common lectionary is fundamentally about ecumenism, both Catholic-Protestant and intra-Protestant. What do you say to the argument that Christians read what we read in worship—particularly when it comes to the Gospels—to affirm our unity with other Christians, across history and across confessions?

First, not all lectionaries are the same. For example, while the Roman Catholic lectionary and the Revised Common Lectionary assign the Parable of the Wicked Tenants from Matthew 21 on the same Sunday, only the RCL includes verses 44–46: the reference to the vineyard being taken away from the “chief priests and Pharisees,” an odd combination which is part of Matthew’s move toward uniting various Jewish groups in opposition to Jesus.

Even where chapters and verses are the same, translations are not, so congregations are not hearing the same reading. Moreover, churches following the same lectionary have different hymns, ordination requirements and restrictions, forms of Eucharistic celebration, even baptisms. Thus, claiming unity as the rationale for keeping readings that have led and can lead to Jew-hatred is a weak argument, at best.

The lectionaries have not been in place since the death of the first apostles. That's why there is a *Revised* Common Lectionary—it was revised in 1992, from the Common Lectionary of 1983. A lot has happened in the past 30 years. Revision can do a lot: more attention to women, to refugees, to people who are suffering in mind and body, to poverty, to the responsibility to act with justice.

The RCL isn't a canon, but it was arrived at through extensive ecumenical discernment. Is it useful for individual churches or denominations to modify it for their own use? Or is what's needed nothing less than a major revision at an ecumenical level?

Churches over the past two millennia have changed their readings and their practices. Discernment continues. If it did not, churches would be putting the Holy Spirit out of business. If one church or denomination changes the lectionary and another does not, I doubt this will bring Christianity to a halt.

Others have proposed changing the lectionary for a very different reason: to include more or even all of the canon. Is this expansion something that should be resisted?

I see no reason to resist discussion about the lectionary, any more than there is reason to resist discussion about polity, ethics, the hymnal, or the translation, which is about to change as Roman Catholic churches use the updated New American Bible and many mainline Protestant churches will shift from the NRSV to the NRSVue. Just as we in the US have expanded our notions of the canons of the study of literature, philosophy, and art, I see no reason not to expand the lectionary to include previously unheard voices—and, perhaps, to retire others.

All houses of worship do well to consider what they promote, explicitly or implicitly, with their readings, art, music, polity, creeds, saints, fundraising, guest speakers, and so on. All do well to consider what they teach their children, their new members, their congregations, and their clergy. In all cases, we do well to determine how best to promote messages of love and compassion rather than of hate and damnation.

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