

Turn It and Turn It Again: Interpreting the Passion Narratives in our Time¹

“Turn it [Torah] and turn it again, for everything is in it, and contemplate it and grow grey and old over it and stir not from it, for thou canst have no better rule.”

Ethics of the Fathers 5.25

As I work on this essay eleven days after the inauguration, statements protesting President Trump’s Executive Order forbidding entry to refugees and from seven Muslim majority nations flood my inbox. I am heartened by the many articulations of distress and a summons to the administration to rescind the order. And yet, I wonder about the effects of such statements—even as I believe in the importance of articulating the principles by which we live.

The Episcopal Church made a bold statement in October 1964, which reads:

Whereas Within the Church, throughout the centuries, loveless attitudes including the charge of deicide, have frequently resulted in persecution of the Jewish people and a concomitant revulsion on the part of the Jewish people towards the un-Christ-like witness thus made; and

Whereas, Obedience to the Lord of the Church requires an honest and clear expression of love for our neighbour; and

Whereas, Persecution of the Jews has been recently intensified in certain areas of the world; and

Whereas, Lack of communication between Christians and Jews, and the resulting ignorance and suspicion of each other, has been a barrier to Christian obedience of the Law of Love; be it

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, meeting in

¹ This paper was written at the request of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission of the Episcopal Diocese of New York for the Clergy Study Day Preaching the Just Word: New Perspectives on the Lections of Holy Week,” on February 16, 2017 at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, New York City.

St. Louis in October, 1964, reject the charge of deicide against the Jews and condemn anti-Semitism; and be it further

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That the General Convention condemn unchristian accusations against the Jews; and that this Church seek positive dialogue with appropriate representative bodies of the Jewish Faith; and be it further

Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That the substance of this Resolution be referred to the Joint Commission on Ecumenical Relations for continuing study and suggested implementation. ²

Further resolutions followed in 1979, and then in 1988, Guidelines were issued, including the assertion: “Antisemitism is sin against God and human life.”³

And yet, what are such words over against the powerful texts of the lectionary, most particularly in Holy Week:

Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25)

Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people (John 18:14).

He [Pontius Pilate] said to the Jews, “Here is your King!” They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him! Pilate asked them, “Should I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor. Then he handed him over to be crucified” (John 19:14b15).

Then there are speeches in Acts of the Apostles, read on Sundays in the Easter season that reiterate and reinforce Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus (e.g., (Acts 2:14-23).

In part because these texts are proclaimed in Christian worship, they have a sacred and normative character. They cannot merely be set aside. Further, the fundamental plot

² “Deicide and the Jews,” <http://bit.ly/2kOyEg7> Emphasis added. This statement preceded by a year the decree “Nostra Aetate,” promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on October 28, 1965.

³ “Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for Use in the Episcopal Church,” <http://bit.ly/2jAS0Dn>

line of these texts is widely known, even among those largely unschooled in the Christian tradition. While its underlying argument is the more abstract claim that Jews “rejected” Jesus, this allegation comes alive through a drama of good versus evil, of innocent suffering and ultimate vindication. The characters are memorable, especially the villainous ones (e.g., Judas, Caiaphas, the chief priests and elders of the people, “the Jews”). Scenes from the various passion narratives have dominated Christian art, been enacted in passion plays and films, and been a staple of sacred music. One need never have picked up a New Testament to know the basic contours of the story of the crucifixion of Jesus and the events leading to it.

Yet, while familiar with the plot of the passion story, relatively few Christians are cognizant of its consequences for Jews. In part, this stems from the demographic reality that most Christians in the world do not encounter Jews in their daily lives. As a result, the church’s relationship with Judaism seems tangential to their practice of Christianity. In some respects, this is understandable, particularly in communities overwhelmed by poverty and violence. Their degree of dislocation is already so severe that further immersion in the shadow side of the tradition could be paralyzing. Yet it is also likely that Christians in such communities, typically lacking the resources and opportunities for knowledge of the history, will therefore continue in the inadequate view of Judaism that has seems to be the “default” mode of the Christian tradition. Still others prefer to look away from our tradition’s shadow side, lest it give credence to contemporary secular critics who revile theism, claiming that “religion poisons everything.”⁴

⁴ See Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2009).

But whether or not Christians encounter Jews in their daily lives, we are obliged to honor the commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16 and Deut 5:20). To put it plainly: Christians have used texts to bear false witness against Jews, albeit often because they assumed that the texts were factual. In this graced moment, however, we have *both the resources to read ancient texts in new ways* and the *ethical obligation* to do so. This is not a matter of rewriting but of rereading and reinterpreting sacred texts.

Thus, the challenge for Christians: **What do we do with biblical texts that are both vital to the life of the church and harmful to another religious tradition—and to our relationship to that tradition?**

To put it another way, how do we unleash the power in the story of the passion and death of Jesus while acknowledging that this story has also served as raw material for harsh depictions of Jews as enemies of Christ, and thus of Christianity?

In short, how do we teach sacred texts that have been used sacrilegiously? How do we expose the shadow side without blocking the light? And how do we bring these questions to the fore in our time?

Reading Ancient Texts in New Ways: Five Recommendations

It is vital that those with responsibility to teach and preach in the church draw from the immense richness of biblical studies and of the dialogue of the past fifty years. I offer five recommendations:

We must, first, be more attentive to our vocabulary so that it mirrors the complexity of the situations from which it arose.

Professor Chilton has illumined just how complex *Ioudaios* (turning and turning and turning again...). On the pastoral front, I am struck by how casually homilists speak of Jesus' followers as "Christians," as if with his death and resurrection the ways between Judaism and Christianity had parted like the waters of the Red Sea. It is so important to recognize that "Jews" and "Christians" are complex and capacious terms, both historically *and in the present*. "Jewish" and "Christian" identities were fluid in the early centuries, and "Jew" encompassed people in starkly different social, economic, political and geographic realities. In speaking about New Testament texts, we more accurately might speak of "Jesus-following Jews" and Torah-following Jews," mindful that even these distinctions deserve further nuance. Granted, this is linguistically awkward, but it does help to deconstruct the conventional understanding of Jesus and his followers as over against "the Jews."

Instead of implying rigid boundaries, it is more accurate and pastorally responsible to present "Christians" and "Jews" in in the first three centuries of the Common Era more as dialects of a single language than as separate languages—and with many gradations.⁵ As the second century C.E. developed, "Jesus-following Gentiles" came to outnumber "Jesus-following Jews." "Christians" gradually became separate from "Jews" as a religious entity but only over a lengthy period of time. There was no single

⁵ See Daniel Boyarin, "Semantic Differences; or 'Judaism/Christianity,'" in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christian in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 65-85.

turning point of separation: the “dialects” became the “separate languages” at different times, under different circumstances, and in different locations.

By the fourth century, the separation seemed in most places to have taken place, but what it meant to the religious authorities may have not been identical with ways the Christian populace regarded the Jewish “other.” As John Gager notes, people in positions of power tend to “define defend themselves by emphasizing the differences between us and them.”⁶ Whatever the dynamics of this separation, it has affected how the New Testament was (and is) understood. As Gentiles increasingly constituted the *ekklesia*, the Jewish matrix of Jesus’ life and ministry was obscured; what the gospels attributed to him saying to (other) Jews “became perceived by the church as well as the synagogue as comments spoken *against* Jews.”⁷

Second, theological reflection on the death of Jesus must take account of the historical context of crucifixion in the Roman Empire.

Jesus was crucified by the authority of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, likely in collaboration with the Jewish high priesthood. Together they formed the “power class,” though the power was not equal, since the Roman governor controlled the high priests. Although the precise charge cannot be established with absolute confidence, it is likely that Pilate viewed Jesus as guilty of sedition for having preached about the counter-kingdom, that is, the Reign of God. It may be that Luke has a historical kernel of such an

⁶ John G. Gager, “The Parting of the Ways: A View from the Perspective of Early Christianity: ‘A Christian Perspective,’” in *Interwoven Destinies: Jews and Christians Through the Ages*, ed. Eugene J. Fisher (New York: Paulist, 1993), 62-73; citation, 71-72.

⁷ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (HarperOne, 2007), 111.

accusation in claiming: “Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king’” (23:1-2).

In my own Catholic community, I think we have for so long viewed crucifixes on the walls of our homes and churches that we see only Jesus of Nazareth as the crucified one. Yet in the Roman Empire, crucifixion was a widespread mode of torture and murder, imposed on thousands of Jews and other groups over whom the Empire ruled. Crucifixion, moreover, had a chilling deterrent effect. It was “highly organized, massive state terrorism, intended to intimidate the vast peasant and slave populations of the [Roman] empire into passivity.”⁸ It was a “spectacle for the edification of those watching”⁹

Perhaps we might better understand the effect of crucifixion upon the populace through the lens of a contemporary analogy. A day after the death of the Libyan leader Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi on October 20, 2011, *The New York Times* published a lengthy analysis of his regime, including a graphic description of the violence he fomented in order to control the Libyan people:

In the late 1970s and early ‘80s, he [Qaddafi] eliminated even mild critics through public trials and executions. Kangaroo courts were staged on soccer fields or basketball courts, where the accused were interrogated, often urinating in fear as they begged for their lives. The events were televised to make sure that no Libyan missed the point.

⁸ Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 9.

⁹ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 233.

The bodies of one group of students hanged in downtown Tripoli's main square were left there to rot for a week, opposition figures said, and traffic was rerouted to force cars to pass by.¹⁰

Colonel Qaddafi, according to the Libyan writer Hisham Matar, "deliberately tried to create a campaign that would terrorize the population, that would traumatize them to such an extent that they would never think of expressing their thoughts politically or socially."¹¹ Similarly, the Romans used crucifixion to terrorize the populace into submission.

Situating the death of Jesus in its historical context provides the "teachable moment" for countering dominant reading of the gospels and their passion narratives, i.e., the attribution of responsibility for the crucifixion to Jews.

Jesus stands not in primary opposition to Judaism but to the Empire over which Caesar rules as lord and savior. Responsibility for his death falls not to "the Jews" but to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, in alliance with the power class. Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, suffers the excruciating death by crucifixion not as the lone victim of Jewish hostility to the Son of God, but as one of thousands of Jews (and others) whom the Empire tortured as a deterrent, lest they resist its rule.

Third, another historical dimension arises here, one that is more difficult to teach and preach, yet critical: *acknowledging that Christian interpretations of the death of Jesus that blamed Jews have done grave harm to Jews—and to the church's moral integrity.* It is mortifying to discover the depth and breadth of the violence against Jews, both rhetorical and physical, that has shadowed preaching and teaching about the death of

¹⁰ Neil MacFarquhar, "Muammar el-Qaddafi, 69, an Erratic, Brutal and Defiant Leader," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2011, A16-17; citation, A16.

¹¹ Ibid.

Jesus. The “dominant readings” of the passion and death of Jesus weigh heavily on the spirit. The bitter offerings we Christians have brought to the banquet of biblical interpretation haunt us, requiring us to fast from triumphalism.¹²

We have an ethical obligation to face this history, and that in turn requires us to theologize differently about the New Testament texts that have had such a tragic effect upon Jews.¹³ This requires clarity about the nature of the Bible as the word of God in human language, that is, as a text that *mediates* divine revelation but is not to be equated with it. This means situating texts in their contexts as artifacts of human culture, and being attentive to literary genre and structure, to the customs of ancient cultures, to issues of language and translation. It also implies reading biblical texts in a discerning manner because they bear the limitations and wounds of human finitude.

But more than that: We must pursue the consequences of our interpretation of texts. In the realm of biblical scholarship, this has given rise to a method known as *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the history of the effect produced by a book or a passage of Scripture, or the history of a text’s influence over time. In Dorothee Sölle’s terms, this is a “hermeneutic of consequences.”¹⁴ Attentiveness to the consequences of how the Bible has been used by real people in concrete circumstances grounds the church in space and time. It involves searching for the “fruits” of the text in the course of history as a criterion

¹² For numerous examples of the rhetorical and physical violence, see my *Redeeming our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians*, A Stimulus Book (New York: Paulist, 2013), 45-156.

¹³ The passion narratives are not the only problematic texts in the NT’s portrayal of Jews and Judaism. The depiction of the Pharisees, particularly in the synoptic gospels, has contributed (and continues to contribute) to disparagement of Judaism as legalistic. See the 1988 Guidelines, <http://bit.ly/2jAS0Dn>

¹⁴ Dorothee Sölle, cited in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 91.

for truth. The interpretational process is deficient if it involves only “Lord, Lord,” but bears no fruit. In the case of the passion narratives, the history of effects makes for a potent cautionary tale. Interpreting our sacred texts must necessarily include acknowledgment of the violence—whether rhetorical or physical, or both—they have helped to inspire, sustain, or justify.¹⁵ Christians in particular are myopic about ways their tradition has been a source of lethal violence.¹⁶ As Leo D. Lefebure claims, “... The concrete, violent content of some scriptural demands and the later history of violence of the Christian tradition itself demand that we scrutinize carefully what is claimed to be revelatory of God’s will.”¹⁷

Thus, *grieving* is one essential dimension of transforming Christian interpretations of the passion and death of Jesus. To take responsibility for the consequences of how we have used biblical texts involves more than intellectual knowledge—although it certainly requires careful thought.¹⁸ It necessitates the courage to *be affected by the wounds of*

¹⁵ See Adrian Thatcher terms biblical texts used to marginalize or persecute or victimize people “savage texts.” He is clear that “the savage text is not the Bible. It is what Christians have made of the Bible when they have used its pages to endorse cruelty, hatred, murder, oppression and condemnation.... The savage text makes hatred holy.” *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2008) 4.

¹⁶ Gabriel Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanel Sivan, *Strong Religion: the Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁷ Leo D. Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions and Violence* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000), 202.

¹⁸ The 1988 Guidelines include the following: “Teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism in certain traditions have proved a spawning ground for such evils as the Nazi Holocaust. It has, in this country, helped to spawn the extremist activities of the Ku Klux Klan and the defacement of synagogues, and stimulates the more socially acceptable but often more pernicious discriminatory practices seen in housing patterns and in private clubs. The Church must learn to proclaim the Gospel without generating contempt for Judaism or the Jewish people. A

history that Christianity has inflicted and to be responsive to disturbing truths about one's own tradition.

Fourth, it is vital to connect the death of Jesus to his ministry—in contrast to the formulation of the creeds in which his becoming human leads immediately his to being crucified under Pontius Pilate “for our sake.”

The impression that Jesus became incarnate principally in order to be crucified for us is an unintended consequence of the creeds. A simplistic and crude interpretation expresses it: “For Jesus, dying was his reason for living. He died for you so that you might live forgiven.... If there were another way to God, Jesus’ death would have been unnecessary.... Our problem is our sin that separates us from God, and Jesus’ death is our only cure.”¹⁹

In the educational realm, we speak of the “null curriculum,” that is, what is taught by virtue of not being taught.²⁰ In many respects, the link between the ministry of Jesus and his crucifixion is the church’s null curriculum.

Christian response to the Holocaust is a resolve that it will never happen again.”
<http://bit.ly/2jAS0Dn>

¹⁹ Brian Mavis, “The Passion of the Christ: True or False?” (Vista, CA: Outreach, Inc, 2003), 5.

²⁰ The term originated with Elliott Eisner: “It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. Ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problems. The absence of a set of considerations or perspectives or the inability to use certain processes for appraising a context biases, the evidence one is able to take into account. A parochial perspective or simplistic analysis is the inevitable progeny of ignorance (Elliott W. Eisner, *Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* [New York: MacMillan, 1984], 97)].

Fifth, we need to reclaim the power of the story. Jesus died as a consequence of what he lived for and how he embodied God’s merciful justice. Jesus was a *victim* of imperial Rome, a threat to the cult of the emperor and to the theology of empire. His utopian teaching suggested another order of things, that those who were “expendables” in the Roman Empire were important in God’s eyes. Jesus imagined another kind of imperial order: that of God’s reign. As Stephen Patterson writes: “His death as a victim might hold meaning for us still, if we have the courage to face it—and to face the consequences of realizing how inhospitable the world remains to Jesus’ vision of God’s empire.”²¹

There are important theological ramifications of this connection between Jesus’ ministry and mode of death. That Jesus was crucified is important because it reminds us that he, 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 following of Christ obligates us to respond to the sufferings of people in our time. We “deny his death when we turn our backs to the death on our streets.”²²

Contemplating Jesus’ prophetic witness enables us to make connections to our broken world in which people at the margins of society suffer. We know people in our own day who, despite opposition and danger, nevertheless carry on their advocacy for a more just society, even if they suffer death because of it. Their memory inspires and sustains us because, like Jesus, they were willing to carry on for a cause greater than

²¹ Patterson, *Beyond the Passion*, 37.

²² Diana Hayes, *Were You There? Stations of the Cross* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 88.

themselves, a cause furthering God's reign on earth. In their passionate commitment to counter evil in its varied and powerful manifestations, they mediate the divine care for creation. These "saints" exemplify God's desire for the flourishing of all, human and non-human. They are participants in the divine work of "redemption of this unredeemed world."²³

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²³ The phrase is that of Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1990), 37. Moltmann writes that the "*christologia viae* is *theologia crucis*, and nothing else. The coming One is in the process of his coming and can be grasped only in that light: as on the road and walking with us. But for that very reason every confession of Christ in the history of this unredeemed world has to be understood as a reaching out, an anticipation of the new creation in which every tongue will confess him in the glory of the Father (Phil. 2.11). Every confession of Christ leads to the way, and along the way, and is not yet in itself the goal" (33).