

“How Our Good News Became Bad News for the Jews” by Deborah SokoLove



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Third Sunday of Easter

Last Sunday, the Gospel reading was the familiar one from John 20, in which Thomas said that he could not believe that Jesus was risen unless he saw the mark of the nails in his hands with his own eyes, put his own finger in the mark of the

nails, and placed his own hand in the wound on Jesus's side. This week, as we have just heard, Luke 24:36b-48 also records a scene in which Jesus invites the disciples to look at and touch his hands and feet, saying "Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And then, as if to prove that he is real and not a ghost, he asks for some fish and eats it, reminding the disciples that everything written about him "in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms had to be fulfilled."

In another year, I might have examined these two texts closely, looking for something new to say about these stories that have sustained the faltering faith of countless Christians for nearly two thousand years. Today, however, I want to draw your attention not to the good news for Christians, but to the bad news for Jews that is embedded in the reading from Acts that we have just heard. Let me read it to you again from a different translation, so that you can listen for the words that make me cringe every time we say them aloud in church:

When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In

this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out. [Acts 3:12-19]

Did you hear it? Right here, in this morning's reading, Jews (ok, Israelites in this version, but maybe that's worse) are accused of not only rejecting the Holy and Righteous One, but of killing the Author of life. This is the beginning of the accusation of "Christ Killer" that has echoed down through the ages. This is the way that what eventually became the Church began to differentiate itself from the Jewish tradition.

During Lent, we were repeatedly asked to envision how to liberate the church from its captivity to a social order that elevates one group of humans over another, while paying attention mostly to the roughly 400-year history in which White supremacy has relegated all other racial groups as lesser than those who are deemed "White." And while I am grateful to those who made passing references to antisemitism in their sermons, it pained me that Seekers has never to my knowledge actively engaged the assumptions and biases that have elevated Christians over Jews for nearly the entire 2000-year history of Christianity and continue to negatively affect the lives of Jews all over the world. While this is a relatively minor theme in Acts, it shows up in all the Gospels, especially in the Gospel according to John, from which we read extensively throughout Lent.

Let me say this as baldly as I can: antisemitism is a Christian invention. Before Christianity, the people who came to be known as Jews were often oppressed by other, more powerful, groups, but no more so than any other group that had different gods and different customs than the current rulers. Hatred and fear of the Jews *because they are Jews* is something new and very different. It is grounded in the belief that Christians are the new chosen people, and therefore that Jews no longer have the right to exist. Since most Jews did not "repent" of the sin of not believing that Jesus was the

Messiah, Christians have spent enormous energy over the past 2000 years, trying to wipe out the Jews or at least make their lives as difficult as possible.

A few weeks ago, John H. lent me a copy of the book *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*, by James Carroll. Carroll lays out this history from the point of view of an Irish Catholic former seminarian who eventually became ashamed of what his church had done to the Jewish people. I've only managed to read about half of it, because every time I try, I can only manage a few pages before I break down in tears. It's not that anything that I read was a surprise to me. After all, like most Jewish kids in the aftermath of the Holocaust, I was raised with my grandmother's stories about the pogroms she experienced as a child in Poland and the litany of Christian hatred and persecution against my people.

I was taught never to forget the history of forced conversions, synagogue burnings, inflammatory preaching, and mass killings of entire Jewish communities that is so long that it would take all day to recite them. Here are just a few moments of that litany:

- In 380, St. Gregory of Nyssa called Jews "murders of the Lord, assassins of the prophets, rebels and detesters of God, companions of the devils, a race of vipers." A few years later, John Chrysostom of Antioch wrote eight homilies called *Adversus Judaeos*, meaning *Against the Judaizers*, that have influenced Christian apologetics ever since;
- In 632, the emperor Heraclius permitted the first known case of officially sanctioned forced baptism;
- In 945, Venice banned Jews from using Venetian ships;
- In the early 11th century, the Jews of Limoges were given the choice of baptism or exile and Henry II, the Holy Roman Emperor, expelled all the Jews from Mainz, in what is now Germany;

- The First Crusade, beginning in 1096, attacked Jewish communities in Europe long before they got to the Holy Land. Under the slogan, “Why fight Christ’s enemies abroad when they are living among us?” synagogues were destroyed, thousands of Jews were murdered, and others killed themselves to escape attempts at forcible conversion;
- In 1290, following an accusation of what has come to be known as the “Blood Libel” – the false allegation that Jews used the blood of non-Jewish, usually Christian children, for ritual purposes – all 3000 Jews then living in England were expelled from the country on the orders of Edward I. According to the National Archives of the UK, “It was not until 1656 that Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews back into England. In the interim, Jews were required to obtain a special license to visit the realm, though it seems very likely that some Jews remained or resettled in England while keeping their religion secret”;
- While the Inquisition was nominally about Christian heresy, it was often used against Jews. In 1242 the Inquisition condemned the Talmud, the central text of Jewish theology and religious law burning thousands of volumes. Later, more than 13,000 Conversos – Jews who had converted to Christianity for whatever reason – were accused of falsely converting and were burned at the stake. All Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492. I have heard it said, but cannot find any definitive evidence, that Christopher Columbus, or at least some of his crew, were among the “hidden Jews” who were trying to escape the Inquisition.

It is at this point in history that John Carroll suggests that hatred of Jews as Christ-killers turns towards what eventually became modern antisemitism. He writes,

Having coerced Jews to convert in large numbers, Christians

began to suspect that the conversions must have been insincere, since they were coerced. The irony was doubled and redoubled. Judaizing, the mingling of Christian and Jewish elements of faith, cult, and calendar, was defined as a heresy. The Church now began to move against it in earnest. But that meant investigating the conversos as a class, which implied that anyone with "Jewish blood," whatever his or her religious identity had become, was suspect.[\[i\]](#)

Carroll continues:

If the beginning of what we think of as modern antisemitism can be located anywhere, it is here. The shift from a religious definition of Jewishness to a racial one is perhaps the most decisive in this long narrative, and its fault lines, reaching far into the consciousness of Western civilization, will define the moral geography of the modern age. The Church's worry, for example, that its very own conversos were corrupting Christians would find a near permanent resonance in the modern European fantasy of Jews as parasites—successful and assimilated, but feeding on the host society. The ultimate example of this image would emerge in Germany, of course, but the fear that led Nazis to regard Jews as bloodsuckers to be excised was anticipated by the Iberian suspicion that Jews were more to be feared as assimilated insiders than as dissenting outsiders. Thus hatred of the other became a society's scare-driven urge to eradicate an alien part of itself.[\[ii\]](#)

This heritage of bad news for the Jews continues to this day, with shootings at synagogues, Jewish day care facilities, and community centers; harassment of Jewish students in classes, in their dorm rooms, and at Hillel centers at universities; and an insidious undercurrent of anti-Jewish rhetoric in much of the discussion about what is going on in Gaza right now.[\[iii\]](#)

As Dana Horn points out in her article, "Why the Most Educated

People in America are Falling for Anti-Semitic Lies," Jews are now expected to ritually acknowledge that not all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. This kind of statement has become the price of admission to public discourse about the current round of demonization of the Jewish people. Indeed, right now I feel that it is imperative for me to say that while this sermon is not about Gaza, nor about the news of Iranian retaliation for the Israeli attack on their consulate in Damascus, that my heart breaks as all of yours do at the savagery of the Israeli military response to the attack on Israeli Jews by Palestinian members of Hamas. Because without that disclaimer, I am afraid that you will not hear me when I say that what is happening right now in Gaza has become a pretext for people to do and say things that feed hatred and bigotry against Jews.

Whatever any of us think about what is happening in Gaza, it is also a fact that between October 7 and the end of December 2023, incidents in the US of physical attacks against Jews, vandalism, verbal or written harassment, antisemitic rhetoric, and expressions of support for terrorism against the state of Israel and/or the Jewish people grew 400% over the same period in 2022 [\[iv\]](#) I could not find data for the first few months of 2024, but I expect it is similar. This increase in anti-Jewish rhetoric and action is not an accident, but rather the result of the ways that many people are construing the current round of the ongoing Israel/Palestine conflict as solely the fault of the Jews.

However, antisemitism did not start with Gaza, and it is not the fault of anything that Jews have or have not done. It did not start in 1967, when Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and other Arab states attacked Israel, resulting in Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the subsequent annexation of much of the West Bank by illegal Jewish settlers. It did not start in 1948, with the partition that created the State of Israel as a response to deaths of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, and made refugees of 700,000

Palestinians. It did not start with the creation of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century as a response to the oppression and vilification of Jews in Europe and Russia, and which is now being cast as a colonialist effort in which light-skinned Europeans decided to take over an area inhabited by darker-skinned indigenous people. It did not start with any number of other equally fraught and complicated incidents which are now being used as weapons against both religious and secular Jews, regardless of their actual thoughts and feelings about the Gaza situation, and regardless of their religious practice or lack of one.

In case I have not been clear enough, I will say it again: systematic hatred, and lies about Jews *because they are Jews* started with the biblical text that we read this morning, and many others like it. And as Christians, it is our responsibility to do whatever we can to end it.

When I was in seminary, I learned to read the anti-Jewish passages in the Gospel according to John with compassion, understanding that it was written during an internal struggle between Jewish groups. Around the same time that I was studying this foundational text that so many of my classmates loved, Gordon Cosby was encouraging all the small Church of the Saviour (CofS) churches to separately incorporate. There was also much discussion of the fate of the building at 2025 Massachusetts Ave when Gordon would no longer be able to preach at what was then call the "ecumenical" service. Since Seekers was the only CofS church meeting at 2025 for worship, we offered to take over the management of the building while the other churches advocated selling the building and distributing the funds. My understanding of John's harsh words about "the Jews" was illuminated by the sometimes equally harsh words between Seekers and members of some of the other Church of the Saviour churches at that time. Close relatives can often say the harshest words to one another, after all.

Unlike the rift between Christians and Jews in the first century, the internal struggle between Seekers and the other CofS communities ended, and all is well amongst us. Just as we were all committed to the Church of the Saviour way, all of the immediate followers of Jesus were Jews. But the reality that the fourth Gospel began in the context of an internal struggle between Jewish groups quickly got lost. By the late 4th century, hatred of Jews became one of the important markers of Christianity as it tried to distinguish itself from the Jewish tradition while simultaneously relying on its basic texts. And the rest, as they say, is this excruciating history.

I began with the inherent problem in this morning's text from Acts. It is not, of course, the only text in the New Testament that underpins antisemitism. And it is clearly not the only text in the bible that causes many of us discomfort. The question for me is what do we do with these uncomfortable texts? Do we merely throw them out, refuse to read them aloud in church, eliminate them from our bibles, as Thomas Jefferson famously is said to have done? Or, do we go on reading them and pretending that we haven't heard what was read?

For me, the choice is clear. All the verses in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament are our heritage, even the ones that we do not like. As much as I would like to never again hear the accusation that Jews killed the Author of Life read aloud in church, I do not want us to stop reading the passages that make us squirm. Instead, I invite us to wrestle with these texts (as well as the ones that talk about animal sacrifice, divorce, and women being silent in church, for example) when they come up in the lectionary, and to find ways to talk about them responsibly and ethically in the light of our current sensibilities and knowledge. Today, as we read those problematic words about Jews, let us take them as a reminder to liberate the church and the world from the antisemitism that grew out of them, and which still stalks the

lives and the nightmares of our Jewish friends and relatives.

[i] Carroll, James. *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History* (p. 346). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

[ii] Ibid, p. 347-348

[iii] The following articles have more information about current antisemitic events, especially on college campuses:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/02/jewish-anti-semitism-harvard-claudine-gay-zionism/677454>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/03/stanford-israel-gaza-hamas/677864>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/04/us-anti-semitism-jewish-american-safety/677469>

[iv] See <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/adl-reports-unprecedented-rise-antisemitic-incidents-post-oct-7> , for a **December 11, 2023 release which says,**

Since the Hamas massacre in Israel on Oct. 7, U.S. antisemitic incidents reached the highest number of incidents during any two-month period since ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) began tracking in 1979, according to preliminary data released today.

Between Oct. 7 and Dec. 7, ADL recorded a total of **2,031 antisemitic incidents**, up from 465 incidents during the same period in 2022, representing a 337-percent increase year-over-year. This includes **40 incidents of physical assault**, 337 incidents of vandalism, 749 incidents of verbal or written harassment and 905 rallies including antisemitic rhetoric, expressions of support for terrorism against the state of Israel and/or anti-Zionism. On average, over the last 61 days,

Jews in America experienced **nearly 34 antisemitic incidents per day.**