

## **Marilyn Salmon, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities**

This course originated as a name change for an existing course. A faculty committee was discussing enrollment for our electives, and someone suggested that more engaging course titles might attract more students. Without much thought, I proposed the title "Interpreting the Bible After the Holocaust" as a replacement for "The New Testament and Anti-Semitism."

The name change has proved to be more than a marketing device. In the earlier course, the fact of the Holocaust served as a point of reference, the reinterpretation of biblical texts a response, in part, to the Holocaust. Lloyd Gaston makes the connection explicit, naming the Holocaust and the modern birth of Israel as contextual imperatives for an examination of traditional Christian readings of Galatians and Romans. In the course I now teach, I include more education about the Holocaust. But this course for seminary students focuses on the reinterpretation of Christian scriptures.

This elective is open to all students and there are no prerequisites. Students who enroll in the class reflect the diversity of the student body at United. United is affiliated with the United Church of Christ and serves several Christian denominations in the Midwest region. We also welcome students who are not Christian. Most of our students are seeking an MDiv degree or one of our MA degrees and are preparing for church leadership or specialized ministries, both lay and ordained. The seminary also attracts non-degree students who enroll for selected courses. United is also part of a consortium of seminaries in the Twin Cities and has a partnership with a small university. This course has attracted students from these institutions, too.

Whatever their reasons for enrolling in this course, all participants have inherited deeply-ingrained patterns of reading the Christian scriptures, (both testaments), in relationship to Judaism. A long tradition of Christian interpretation reinforces Christian supersessionism over an inferior and misguided Judaism in overt and subtle ways. Even if the students have not been influenced by any particular Christian church, the dominant Western culture reflects these same attitudes and suppositions. There are two primary objectives for this course. The first is consciousness-raising with respect to the anti-Jewish bias in Christian biblical interpretation and its role in legitimating the Final Solution. The second is to propose strategies for reinterpretation of Christian scriptures, the New Testament in particular, which address the problem of Christian supersessionism.

We begin consciousness-raising with evidence from contemporary contexts to demonstrate that the problem of anti-Jewish biblical interpretation is a current issue, not only a historical matter. Last year, we watched segments of the video *The Longest Hatred*, which traces the history of Christian anti-Judaism and concludes with current neo-Nazi movements in Germany. This video makes explicit connections between Christian anti-Judaism and the persecution of Jews that led to the Holocaust. Obviously, students disassociate themselves from the extremists, yet it is not difficult to see the connection with a familiar Christian tradition. We also studied a medieval painting which had hung above a drinking fountain in a busy hallway at the seminary until it was pointed out that the painting depicts several people with stereotypical Semitic features in the foreground. Their eyes are large, black circles, indicating blindness, and the first few, faces distorted in agony, are falling into a pit, the others obviously following blindly. In the background is a pastoral scene with a white church and cross. None of the students saw anything disturbing about the painting, even with coaxing, until it was pointed out. A cartoon mocking circumcision, and an excerpt from a local rabbi's sermon about an incident on Good Friday effectively impressed upon class members the seriousness and insidiousness of the problem. I have no doubt that there will be sufficient teaching objects to make the same point next time I teach the course.

The good news is that by midterm, most students have developed an awareness of the negative stereotypes of Jews and Judaism prevalent in Christian biblical interpretation. For example, they read the entry on the Pharisees in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1984) with attention toward discerning anti-Jewish bias. Most recognize the Christian partiality at the conclusion of Matthew Black's historical description of the Pharisees. He describes Pharisaism as the antecedent of rabbinic Judaism, "the largely arid religion of the Jews." He continues with such descriptives as "a sterile religion" and "entrenched in its own conservatism." Some miss it, though, because it sounds so familiar and true. They do see it when they hear the response of a Jewish reader: "I am personally a descendant of the rabbinic religion, the sterility of which was not so complete as to prevent my being born. Black's article is not only unreliable, it is disgraceful that it should have appeared in the same dictionary to which I and some dozen other Jews contributed."

Students are also able to identify some of the more subtle aspects of Christian supersessionism in some of the prefaces found in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1965). For example, in the preface to Galatians we read, "Here are set forth, with impassioned eloquence the true function of the Mosaic Law..." (emphasis mine). And what is the implied *false* function? Further on we read, "The declaration of the principles reiterated in these six chapters made Christianity a world religion instead of a Jewish sect." The separation of Christianity and Judaism was, of course, far more complex, and Christianity's status as a world religion is far into the future when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. Students recognize this as a prime example of retrojecting later historical developments into the biblical texts. These introductory prefaces were not revised when the NRSV version of the

*Oxford Annotated Study Bible* was published. (We use the *HarperCollins Study Bible* for this course.)

We return to the subject of the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in visual art toward the end of the course. Through much of Christian history, visual art was the primary means of biblical teaching. Here, too, students show their heightened sensitivity to negative Jewish stereotypes and the succession of Christianity over inferior Judaism. By the end of the course, students recognize the deeply ingrained biases about which they were mostly unaware and how these are perpetuated, particularly through biblical interpretation. Students begin to grasp the insidious prejudices that create a climate for violence, for genocide, for a Holocaust.

Negative caricatures of Judaism in Christian biblical interpretation are not solely responsible for the Holocaust, but a course on the Holocaust in a Christian seminary appropriately responds with a rigorous examination of the biblical tradition. Many of our students will be ordained church leaders, charged with the task of biblical preaching and teaching. Others will be, or are already church educators, directors of children's and youth ministries, chaplains, and in other specialized ministries. In these roles, they will be regular interpreters of the scriptures, in formal and informal ways. So we devote the greater portion of the course to strategies for reinterpretation.

We begin with the New Testament and the question, "Is the New Testament anti-Jewish?" How we answer has enormous implications for Christians. Lloyd Gaston sums it up well: "A Christian church with an *anti-Semitic* New Testament is abominable, but a Christian church without a New Testament is inconceivable." Many scholars believe that the New Testament is anti-Jewish, that the writers of the Gospels and even Paul were opposed to Judaism and defined Christianity over against Judaism. In this case, the primary strategy is to name what they see, call attention to the problematic texts, and distance the modern interpreter from the sentiments expressed in the biblical texts. The problem is the text itself.

Other scholars argue that the problem is one of interpretation. The New Testament is not anti-Jewish. Paul and the Gospel writers identified themselves within Israel; they were part of an intra-Jewish conflict over the identity and the future of Israel. In the first century, there was no Christianity separate from a normative Judaism. The process of self-definition resulted in a schism in the second century, but Paul's letters and the Gospels are preschism documents, belonging to the formative process of the definition of Israel, competing with other Jewish groups with the same concerns. Anti-Jewish readings of the New Testament result when the

reader retrojects post-schism realities, such as the separation of Christianity from Judaism, into the first century world.

I believe that the challenge is a matter of interpretation, so we take on the task of reconstructing the first century context, using literary and material evidence for the diversity of early Judaism. We place Paul's letters and the Gospels within the spectrum of the many expressions of Judaism in the first century. We see that the New Testament writers were interpreters of Israel's scriptures, addressing audiences who knew and assumed the authority of these scriptures. We see that they were occupied with Torah observance, particularly its relevance for gentile believers, because it was central to Jewish identity. New Testament writers engaged the questions critical to defining Israel, such as who belongs and how, who legitimately claims the promises of God for Israel, and what is God's future for the people Israel. From their perspective, the hermeneutical key was the belief in the messiahship of Jesus. Other Jews interpreted the same scriptures and traditions differently. The critical point is that the New Testament writers did not interpret the scriptures and traditions nor consider the destiny of Israel in a vacuum.

In this course, we ask what difference it makes to read Paul's letters and the Gospels from the perspective of the diversity of Judaism and competing definitions of the identity of Israel, rather than supposing a developed Christianity separate from Judaism. For example, the students read one of Paul's "anti-law" passages from Romans or Galatians first through a traditional Protestant Reformation lens, supposing Luther's burden of working out his own salvation and his quest for a gracious God. From this perspective, Paul rejects the burden of Mosaic Law as a means of salvation, (this, attributed to Judaism), over against the universal freedom of salvation by faith offered by Christianity. The same passage reads differently when we consider Paul's self-defined mission specifically to non-Jews, making them, in Krister Stendahl's words, "honorary Jews." Paul's question was not Luther's personal quest for a gracious God, but rather concerns the salvation of gentiles in light of the coming Parousia. The Law itself is not the problem; "justification by grace through faith" is the means for including gentiles in Israel's salvation, given the imminent end of history.

Our study of the Gospels and Acts focuses on the late first century context and authors who shape the Jesus story in relationship to their own communities in the generation following the destruction of the Temple. The most visible of the other Jewish groups are of course, the Pharisees. Constructing a reliable historical definition of the Pharisees as a corrective to the stereotype of legalistic, hypocritical defenders of the letter of the law, or as representing the opposite of what Jesus stood for, is necessary for addressing anti-Jewish readings of the Gospels. The strong polemic against the Pharisees reflects a familial conflict, and perhaps the posture of a minority group seeking legitimacy in relationship with another, more established group, claiming to speak for Israel. From this point of view, we see the success and the viability

of the Pharisees rather than a caricature of shortcomings that also define Judaism.

Reading the Pauline letters and the Gospels and Acts within the context of diverse expressions of Judaism in the first century is only the first step toward addressing the problem of anti-Jewish interpretation. We gain an understanding of what these writings might have meant historically. Christians do not read them primarily as historical documents, however. The critical issue is how we interpret Christian scriptures faithfully in contemporary contexts.

Current literary methods of interpretation are helpful here, because they do not limit the text to its "original" or historical meaning, and because they encourage engagement with audiences who hear and read the text, or story, in the present. When students think in terms of contemporary contexts and multiple meanings, the paradigm of intra-familial controversies lends itself well to biblical interpretations for their audiences. Selected parables serve as good examples to demonstrate the difference between reading the text as a support for Christianity over against Judaism, and a self-critical encounter that challenges a false sense of security and certainty.

The main objectives in our limited work with the Christian Old Testament and Tanakh, (the use of both terms is intentional), is to foster an awareness that there are two faith communities interpreting the same scriptures, and that there is a relationship between faith community and interpretation. We use as a paradigm text the Akedah/Sacrifice of Isaac. The acknowledgement of different designations for the same text provides a means for *recognizing* that the same text functions differently for Christians and Jews. We look at the liturgical function of the text, i.e., when the respective faith communities read the text and how that affects interpretation. Selected contemporary midrashic-style exegesis, poetry, and narrative give students some exposure to contemporary Jewish methods of biblical interpretation.

The first named objective for this course, consciousness-raising with respect to the anti-Jewish bias in Christian biblical interpretation, is measurable. By the end of the course, students are able to recognize the Christian bias in common terms, such as "BC and AD," "Late Judaism," "Intertestamental," "Old Testament, and titles such as Emil Schurer's *A History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (T. and T. Clark Publishers, 1998). They are quite perceptive in identifying anti-Jewish bias in secondary literature and negative portrayals in visual art.

Concerning the second objective, learning strategies for reinterpretation of Christian scriptures

which address the problem of Christian supersessionism, we make a beginning. Familiar and cherished ways of reading the scriptures inform Christian faith and identity, and there is understandably a sense of loss in adopting new methods of interpretation. And the art of biblical interpretation takes practice. Students who complete the course are at least committed to the objective of developing methods for reinterpretation and sharing what they have learned.

Although the emphasis of the course is on biblical interpretation, education about the Holocaust is an essential component. The means for teaching about the Holocaust in this course is primarily through visual arts. In the spring term, 1999, this part of the course centered around a day-trip to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., with other college and seminary students in the area. Several assigned readings helped prepare students for the event. The readings included a selection of articles designed to place this experience within the context of what they are learning about Christian anti-Judaism and the part it played before and during the Holocaust, and contemporary Christian responses to the Holocaust. In addition to the Holocaust Museum trip, students visited a local gallery exhibit on genocide that featured Holocaust art in a variety of mediums.

I anticipate that the incomparable experience of visiting the Holocaust Museum will be available when this course is offered again. Even if it is not, opportunities typically exist to attend exhibits in the community, and there are frequently local theatre productions. And, of course, there are several excellent films.

"Interpreting the Bible After the Holocaust" has evolved with its name change. Education about the Holocaust provides the concrete and contextual frame of reference throughout the course. The reality of the Holocaust is the ethical imperative for the examination of Christian anti-Jewish bias perpetuated through biblical interpretation, and for adopting strategies for alternative interpretations.