

Some Reflections on the Portrayal of Jews in the Lectionary for Holy Week
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Throughout the liturgical year, as we listen to the Scripture at Mass, we are called to receive its message personally. The Bible, in this way, is not merely a written text like any other book, but conveys a message that we must make our own: We hear the prophets' words, realizing that they are addressed not just to ancient Israel, but also to us. Like the shepherds and the magi, we kneel in adoration before Christ. With Peter and the other disciples, we sometimes follow the Lord bravely, but at other times are filled with fear and doubt. We come to Jesus for healing and forgiveness, as did the multitudes so long ago. And like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we discover Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Since we find ourselves in the Bible in this way, it is not a book that simply tells us about past events. Through its words, God speaks to us today, calling us to ever greater conversion and faithfulness. In short, God's Word is not bound by time and place, but is able to address peoples across the ages.

But the mystery and power of God's written revelation to humankind should not cause us to forget that the Bible was written by individuals. Thus, it necessarily reflects the time and place of its various human authors, even as it transcends those limitations to speak to later generations.

The danger of forgetting the historical context of Scripture is particularly acute during Lent and Holy Week, because of the circumstances in which the passion accounts were first written. Each of the evangelists penned his gospel toward the end of the first century, committing to paper the narratives passed down orally by the earliest Christians since the time of Jesus. The Gospel according to Mark, almost certainly the earliest of the four, was written *circa* 70 CE.¹ Matthew and Luke were each composed sometime in the next 15 years, with the latest, John, about a decade later. When Mark's gospel was written, the separation of Christianity from Judaism had begun, and by the time of John's gospel the relationship between Jews and Christians had become even more strained. (Relationships among siblings provide a good analogy: having a serious disagreement with a sibling is much more troubling than having that same disagreement with someone you just happened to sit next to on the local bus.)

As a result of this painful separation, all four evangelists recount conflicts that Jesus had with his fellow Jews, in part, to reassure their audiences: if Jesus, the one anointed by God to redeem the world, was at odds with the Jews, naturally his followers would experience the same hostility. Furthermore, historical evidence suggests that both Jews and pagans challenged the early Christians by arguing that the Church was mistaken and misguided in its claims about Jesus.² The gospel writers, in their portrayal of the

¹ CE stands for "Common Era," i.e., the era common to Jews and Christians. It corresponds to AD, Anno Domini, while BCE, "Before the Common Era" replaces BC, "Before Christ." The designations of BCE and CE were developed as a result of increased conversations between Jews and Christians.

² Romans generally disliked Judaism, for they considered its practices, from food laws to circumcision, bewildering at best and offensive at worst. However, they did respect Judaism because of its claim to antiquity. As long as the Jews did not entertain ideas about gaining political independence, the Romans usually allowed them to live in accord with the Torah. Some Romans even expressed admiration for the Jews' righteousness. By contrast, Christianity was viewed as despicable and subversive. Having separated from Judaism, the Church was seen as a "new religion" lacking any claim to antiquity, and its refusal to sacrifice to the emperor confirmed that it was seditious.

Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Jews in general, seek to bolster the confidence of the early Christians, many of whom were distressed by such challenges.

Each evangelist does this in a different way, tailored to the specific situation of the church for which he writes. For example, John, whose passion account is read on Good Friday, appears to have composed his gospel for a community of Christians that included many Jews who had continued attending the synagogue until they were forced out (see, e.g., Jn 9:22). To reassure them, John paints with a very broad brush and depicts Jews who do not follow Jesus as spiritually blind. Similarly, many of those for whom Matthew wrote were probably Jewish-Christians deeply troubled by Christianity's break with Judaism. Thus, Matthew not only accentuates Jesus' conflicts with the scribes and Pharisees, but also reports that when Pilate washed his hands of Jesus' death, the people responded, "His blood be upon us and upon our children" (Mt 27:25).

Because of the circumstances in which the early Christians found themselves, we can understand the evangelists' approach to Judaism, even as we acknowledge that it is not praiseworthy. But tragically, when the Church's situation was dramatically changed—it was no longer a tiny, persecuted community, but rather the dominant religion of Europe—the anti-Jewish texts in the gospels were used by some to defend oppression and violence against the Jews who were unjustly viewed by many Christians as guilty of deicide (i.e., "murdering God") and abandoned by God. This is the danger in forgetting the historical context of the New Testament: that we hear certain passages in such a way as to assume that God has turned away from the children of Abraham.

Fortunately, the New Testament itself contains a strong voice that warns us against such a judgment. In Romans 9–11, Paul struggles to understand why his fellow Jews do not share his belief in Jesus' messiahship. His anguish in these chapters is palpable, as is his love for his Jewish brothers and sisters. In the end, Paul emphatically affirms that God has not abandoned his people (Rom 11:1, 25–26). Rather, their lack of belief in Jesus is part of God's providential plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles (Rom 11:11–12, 26). Moreover, the Jews are the cultivated olive tree onto which the wild olive tree (i.e., the Gentiles) has been grafted (Rom 11:17–24).

The Vatican II declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, echoes Paul when it says that the Church can not "forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles...God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues...the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone..." Moreover, *Nostra Aetate* affirms that "what happened in [Christ's] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today" and Christians should not consider the Jews "rejected or accursed by God." Just as God repeatedly extends steadfast love and mercy to us Gentiles, so too he always offers that same steadfast love and mercy to the Jews.

As we participate in the liturgies of Holy Week, all Christians should keep these principles in mind. The sacred Scriptures we hear, together with the liturgical rituals contrasting darkness and light, mourning and joy, are intended to move us Christians to celebrate what God has done for humankind in Jesus Christ. We are called as Christians to celebrate the love God has for all people without disparagement to any other group.