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No Holds Barred: Is the New Testament antisemitic?

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THE PARTING of the Red Sea during the Jewish nation's escape from Egypt, an illustration from a Bible card published 1907 by the Providence Lithograph Company
(photo credit: Wikimedia Commons)

By SHMULEY BOTEACH

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The debate I'll be having this Thursday in New York City with my friend and public antagonist, Dr. Michael Brown, has stirred considerable controversy among both Jews and Christians. The debate will center on whether the New Testament contains blatant antisemitic statements.

Anyone who has read Christian Bible will no doubt be alarmed by the demonization of the Jewish people that served for many centuries to enforce antisemitic acts and attitudes practiced throughout Christendom. Historically, countless Christian massacres, persecutions and the omnipotent antisemitic attitudes purveyed by preachers and popes alike were defended as following naturally from Christian scripture that, above all else, blamed the Jews for murdering Jesus.

And yet in our time, Christian Evangelicals have emerged as the foremost allies of the Jewish people in general and the State of Israel in particular. To the contrary, the political Left, many of whom denigrate Christianity, espouse an irrational hatred of Israel that is utterly out of step with their liberal values.

How can this be? Because Christians and Catholics today are reinterpreting Scripture away from a literal interpretation of Jews as the enemies of Christ. They are going even further in stating that one can only understand Jesus through the lens of his Jewishness. It was to bolster this movement that I published my 2012 book, *Kosher Jesus*, that fostered heated debate throughout the world.

Still, many in the Jewish community have questioned the efficacy of making even sound arguments to those they assume won't accept them, especially if by doing so we provide a platform to those who seek openly, as Brown errantly does, to bring Jews to Jesus. Others have pointed toward the history of such exchanges: Jewish-Christian debates like these, *The Jerusalem Post* pointed out, were instigated by the Church to confirm Christian doctrine and disgrace that of the Jews, often to the peril of Jewish communities during the Middle Ages.

I disagree with these assertions. The Enlightenment took us out of the Dark Ages, where the Church ruled, antisemitism reigned, and Jews lived in constant terror. Today, there is a global movement on the part of our Christian brothers to discover the Jewishness of Jesus, and we in the Jewish community should be leading the way. And I say to my friend Mike Brown, respectfully, that his ongoing desire to convert Jews to a belief in Jesus makes him a dinosaur in the Christian community.

I believe Jews should make the case for our God, our values, our state and our people. We must state these truths and defend our people even among our closest friends, as Christians are today, and even when those ideas are cradled in their most sacred books.

Our Christian brothers and sisters are beginning to address antisemitic attitudes and verses that are a part of the New Testament. In his *Removing Anti-Jewish Polemic from our Christian Lectionaries: A Proposal*, Norman A. Beck lists about 450 examples of explicitly antisemitic verses throughout the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and the Acts of the Apostles. Jews are referred to as vipers and poisonous snakes, hard-hearted and hypocrites, thieves and robbers, and the blind guiding the blind. We are told that they reject the commandments, reject God's purpose, and plotted on multiple occasions to kill Jesus, which the New Testament says they eventually did. The Gospel according to John makes these assertions: God's word and God's love are not with the Jews; none of the Jews do what is written in the Torah; they know neither Jesus nor the father; and they are descendants of their own father, who is not God but Satan.

WHENEVER UNNAMED Jews appear in the New Testament, they do so almost always as villains. When unnamed gentiles appear, they almost always heed the words of the Gospels and say random things like, "Truly this was the son of God!" as one Roman centurion exclaims at the crucifixion as Jewish crowds revel in Jesus's pain. Romans, known by historians for their unfettered willingness to kill, are shown repeatedly in the New Testament as trying to save Jesus and his followers, notably Paul. Even in cases where the gentiles ignore the apostles or try to kill them, as occurs in Iconium and Antioch, we are told on both occasions that the Jews had first "stirred up the other gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers."

The Jews in Christian scripture represent in reality and in metaphor the shadows in the contrast between good and evil. The righteousness of Jesus and his followers is held against the backdrop of Jews who seek to stifle his message and kill him if need be. In the words of Jonah Daniel Goldhagen, in his book, *A Moral Reckoning*, "The antisemitism of the Christian Bible is not



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goodness." The scholar William Nicholls put it more plainly: "No uncritical reader of the New Testament could easily come away with any but the most negative opinion of Jews."

Just about all of the Gospels directly or indirectly accuse the Jews of killing actual God, which would seem ridiculous if it hadn't visited so much actual death and persecution on Jewish communities across Europe over the past 2,000 years. Mark depicts Jesus being condemned before the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin, on the night of the Passover Seder – though they would never convene for a capital case on a night or on a holiday – before being sentenced to death for blasphemy and handed over to the Romans. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate tries repeatedly to have Jesus spared, but the Jewish crowds beg for his execution.

Matthew adds that Pilate, whom historians tell us was a monster recalled to Rome for murdering unarmed Samaritan demonstrators, tried to save Jesus's life and physically washed his hands of his blood as the braying Jewish crowds screamed that the Messiah's innocent blood "be upon our heads and upon our children's." Luke does away with both the Jewish and Roman trials entirely – mentioning no crime, witnesses or formal condemnation – which, Nicholls points out, converts the Roman crucifixion into a Jewish lynching of Jesus.

Worse than killing God once, the Jews are accused of being something like serial killers, but for prophets. Jesus repeatedly refers to the historical Jewish crimes of killing divine messengers such as Zachariah; and Luke, Matthew and John each mention a separate Jewish attempt at Jesus's life even before the crucifixion. The most damning target of the Jewish prophet-killing obsession isn't even Jesus; it's Paul. While the Jews try to kill Jesus no more than four times, they try to kill Paul no less than nine – in Damascus, Jerusalem, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonika, Corinth, twice again in Jerusalem and on the road from Caesarea (the Romans, of course, were there to save him). Those aside, the New Testament depicts the Jews killing Stephen, approving Herod's killing of James, and instigating plots to kill Lazarus and Peter.

AS BAD as what the New Testament has to say about Jews is what it has to say about Judaism, which is depicted throughout as old and defunct and in need of replacement. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the Jews, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you [Jews] and given to a people that will produce its fruit [the Christians]." John takes the metaphor terrifyingly further, calling the Jewish people a fruitless tree waiting to be axed, "cut down and thrown into the fire."

Given this narrative in the New Testament, how can Christians today be Israel's greatest friends? Because we understand the written verses of any Bible through their oral interpretation. And Christians today, guided by the Hebrew Bible's assertion that all nations are blessed through the Jews and Israel, reject any demonization of the Jewish people. They are reinterpreting New Testament verses in their more realistic light, either as later interpolations added to distance Christianity from Judaism and Jesus from the Jewish people, or that the Jews in the time of Christ were mostly righteous except for a few bad apples.

In Judaism, the Torah, or written law, cannot exist without the Talmud, the oral law. Both were given at Sinai. In our faith, we've been taught that the "Torah is not in the heavens" but is here on Earth in the interpretation of authorized Jewish scholars who trace the tradition in an unbroken chain back to Moses. It's a key Jewish concept, not only because it involves man as God's partner in the understanding of Judaism but also because it makes the interpretation of faith man's distinct moral responsibility. No longer can we or any others blame God when evil sprouts and flourishes. Rather, it's because we, as people, have allowed it to through fraudulent interpretations of our faith.

Ultimately, the question of whether the New Testament is or is not antisemitic is itself a game of interpretation. But that fact does liberate modern Christians from their responsibility to both recognize and theologically disarm those parts of the Christian Bible that – either directly or by implication – look negatively upon the Jews.

It's not much to ask. After all, the Vatican did so in Vatican II, and went even further in an officially sanctioned 1985 statement that said, amazingly, "Some [New Testament] references hostile or less than favorable to Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus."

It might not seem significant, but the Vatican's statement found all of the New Testament's antisemitic verses to be late elaborations and not original truths. They essentially admitted that many of these verses were read into the story long after the death of Jesus and therefore are entirely irrelevant to the original and the modern Christian faiths.

The Catholic Church, in particular, has a lot more to answer for. However, it's high time Christian leaders outside the Catholic camp begin to do the same. With antisemitism resurgent in America and across the globe and with our Evangelical brothers especially joining in its condemnation, the Jewish community should work with our Christian brothers to ensure that any antisemitic verses in one of the most widely read bibles on earth be formally repudiated and be re-interpreted clearly, securely and anew.

The writer's book *Kosher Jesus* is widely regarded as one of the most influential works on the Jewishness of Jesus. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram @RabbiShmuley.

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