

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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John's Passion account is always read on Good Friday, and that tradition is bolstered by its being the *only* appointed reading of the Passion account in the Book of Common Prayer for that holy day because we follow the Revised Common Lectionary, the guide used by most mainline Protestant churches. The continued use of John's account in the Good Friday liturgy reflects "centuries of prominence." But it has become a "perennial liturgical dilemma because of John's problematic references to 'the Jews.'" Some common translations of John's Gospel still use the phrase "the Jews" dozens of times, as opposed to more neutral language such as "the crowd" or "the Judeans" or even "the religious leaders."

There are other passages in the New Testament which are also problematic, but none of them compare with chapters 18 and 19 of the Gospel according to St. John. The language used there propagates the idea that the Jews bear responsibility for the death of Jesus. Using another gospel account or changing the language in John's passage have been proposed, but none of the variants on these ideas enjoys enough support to warrant making a major change. In religion, perhaps more than in most areas of life, when leaders advocate altering familiar language, it can become a reason to leave one's parish or even to break with an entire denomination. It has happened frequently enough in the Episcopal Church to present an ongoing challenge to making changes of any kind, no matter how justified.

Here are a number of proposals for avoiding the problematic language in John's Passion account:

1. Condense John 18 and 19 to avoid these problems.
2. Assemble a thematic series of John's readings that isn't focused solely on the Passion.
3. Read the Passion narrative from one of the other three Gospels, instead of John.
4. Read John 18-19 in full, eliminating certain words or finding substitutes for them.

You can probably imagine the objections. How can you re-write scripture? How can you overlook the massive amount of work that went into creating the Common Lectionary when doing so might lead to less cooperation among Christians and more confusion among believers? If you use substitute language, how can you be sure you are correctly conveying the meaning of the evangelist? When you start making these kinds of changes, isn't that a "slippery slope" leading to an unravelling of all meaning?

Nevertheless, the fact that this particular version of the Passion narrative has promoted anti-Semitism is very disturbing. Particularly after Christianity became the state religion in the Eastern Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, anti-Semitism grew up alongside of various doctrines that were agreed upon in order to define belief. This led to the placing of people in one of two categories: orthodox or approved vs. heretical or blasphemous. When that happens, persecution of the offending minority group soon

follows. So, the Jews came to be blamed for the crucifixion and were thus regarded as enemies of the church and therefore expendable. There followed literally hundreds of years of prejudice, persecution and violence which divided Jews and Christians into two warring camps. This result was precisely the one Jesus would most have condemned. And that is just the beginning of the ironies. How can anti-Semitism have any validity at all when Jesus, all of the original disciples and nearly every other actor in the drama that unfolded in Jerusalem on that Passover so long ago was Jewish?! Jesus remained so his entire life.

At the time that John's gospel was composed, there were no Christians as we understand that term. There were Jews of many persuasions, including those who were very faithful to Jesus of Nazareth. But even St. Paul would not have understood the expression "Christian." The animosity that grew up among different varieties of Jews resulted from differences of opinion on theological matters. In the case of John's community, they were expelled from the synagogues because of their emphasis on the divinity of Jesus, an idea that was repugnant to practicing Jews.

Nearly all scholars believe that John's terminology can only be correctly understood in context. That is, if his account of the Passion presents a negative view of the Jews, it is because it was composed by those who had been expelled from the synagogue. There are parts of John's account that read more like an example of 1<sup>st</sup> century political propaganda than a text purporting to be neutral. If John is unclear what he means by the term "the Jews," then that absence of clarity means that someone is going to be misunderstood. And misunderstandings of important issues can only lead to hurt feelings, growing animosity, and a desire to settle scores. It does not bode well for mutual understanding, justice and peace.

Even trying to uncover the full context can be very difficult. John's term "the Jews" is not carefully explained in the text. John says that "the Jews" had already met and formally convicted Jesus in their council. The increasing opposition to the ministry of Jesus among powerful Jews had been growing throughout John's account. And Jesus is portrayed as "intentional, knowledgeable, and fairly self-confident" in the face of that growing opposition. John regards the Romans as only passively involved in the drama while the chief priests and Pharisees are viewed as directly involved in the arrest, trial, conviction and execution of Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, stops any resistance to his arrest; he will not support any opposition to it because it is a necessary prelude "to the cup God has set before him." When questioned, he becomes the ideal witness for the prosecution. John's version of the trial of Jesus is "striking in its construction, the portrayal of Pilate, and the impression one gets of the Jewish opposition to Jesus." It is a theological statement about the conflict between Jesus and his enemies. Here it appears that the term "the Jews" is extended to include the entire leadership of the Jewish council, not simply priests and Pharisees, and Pilate refers to the group who accuse Jesus as being "your own nation and the chief priests." This implies broad participation in the accusing party.

In using the term "the Jews" John cannot have had in mind all of Judaism; Jesus continued to worship in the Temple until the very end and never regarded himself as anything other than a faithful, observant Jew. We are left with the overall impression that the term refers to the religious leaders, not to Jews in general. This would limit the group to the Pharisees and chief priests, but we also know that John goes beyond that definition. Most New Testament scholars would say that this term is a literary fiction. "a composite group, drawn out of Judaism to be sure, who oppose Jesus' ministry and his witness." But John doesn't even stick to his own literary creation; he makes a distinction between "the Jews" and their leaders. This means John has created a character in the Gospel, one with an identifiable trait --- consistent opposition to Jesus" and this allows the conflict with Jesus to be easily portrayed in a gospel account.

That's as close as we are able to come in determining what John has in mind in speaking of "the Jews." What is important to remember is that "there is a difference between the historical people of Israel and John's narrow use of "the Jews" to refer to that literary construct I just referred to, because John places the greatest guilt for Jesus' death on their shoulders. So, to repeat, we need to recognize the term "the Jews" as a literary one by which the evangelist is able to emphasize the idea that Jesus was rejected even by those who should have known him and accepted him." And that very idea is central to the meaning of the prologue to the gospel in chapter one (1).

Because of this, it is wrong and destructive to interpret the term as referring to all Jews. John's gospel should be read for its fundamental message "about the God who overcomes opposition and darkness, which exists even among those who claim God." It's a shame when this controversy over the meaning of one term can lead to excessive confusion and rancor. All of that simply sidesteps the overall message. Which is where our emphasis should be.

*Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Sources:

John A. Matson, John, *Interpretation Bible Studies*, Westminster John Knox Press, London, 2002 David Paulsen, "Church Faces Renewed Pressure to Change Good Friday Liturgy that Risks Fueling Anti-Jewish Hatred," <https://www.episcopalnewservice.org>, March, 2021