**A Note on Holy Week Scriptural References to “The Jews”**

We live under the burden of the Christian Church’s sad and violent history of anti-Semitism, in the sobering shadow of the Holocaust, and with the painful awareness of current events in Israel/Palestine. It is important to us to be clear about what our sacred texts mean when they make reference to “the Jews,” especially during Holy Week, when we contemplate Jesus’ death.

It may be helpful to recall the cultural context of our Christian scriptures, emerging as they did from a small, originally Jewish community of believers in Jesus, who for reasons of faith in him as the Messiah, were eventually “put out of the synagogues” (John 9.18-23), their places of worship. In John’s usage especially, “the Jews” functions as technical term for those among the people who do not accept Jesus as Messiah. It is a term that reflects the growing antagonism and mutual recrimination that developed in the latter part of the first century between church and synagogue.

The Gospels’ use of the term “the Jews” should never be understood, therefore, as a blanket condemnation of Jews in particular or in general. And when the crucifixion narratives speak of “the chief priests and leaders of the people”, these are also never to be identified with the Jewish people as a whole, past or present,

It is one of the bitter ironies of history that the sacred texts of a beleaguered minority have been used to justify the subsequent persecution of the covenant people who were and are forever God’s first love.

*~ From* [*First Church in Cambridge, Congregational U.C.C.*](https://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/)

**“Preach Peace during Holy Week”** *from a March 29, 2010 Boston Globe column by* [*James Carroll*](https://www.jamescarroll.net/)

Now begins the most sacred week of the Christian year — and the most dangerous. In Holy Week down through the centuries, mobs have poured out of churches in search of Jews to harass and kill. (In 1096, beginning on Good Friday, Christians killed something like 10,000 Rhineland Jews in a few short weeks — Europe’s first pogrom). And why? The Passion

narratives that Christians hear proclaimed from pulpits between now and Friday explicitly blame the murder of Jesus on “the Jews.’’ Mobs were avenging the death of the Lord.

Each of the four Gospels cast “the Jews’’ in the role of villain, and Christians will hear that story repeated verbatim this week. The vast majority will believe they are hearing a report of what actually happened. The most open-minded of them will adopt an attitude of forgiveness toward the Jewish people (“Father, forgive them. . .’’), but that compounds the problem.

Although based on events that actually occurred (the Romans crucified Jesus), the Gospels are not works of history. They were not written by eyewitnesses. They have a polemical intent that does not originate with Jesus.

Who wrote the Gospels? When? And in what context? A brief review of the chronology might help. Jesus was murdered in about the year 30. In subsequent years, those who loved him kept his memory alive (especially over meals of bread and wine) by relating stories about him, retelling his parables, recounting his sayings, understanding him in terms of their scriptures (which, of course, were Jewish scriptures, since they were all Jews). An oral tradition about Jesus developed. The Christian movement was still essentially a Jewish sect.

But then, in the year 70, a catastrophic trauma occurred. The Romans savagely destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem, generating a religious crisis of identity for all Jews — including the Christian Jews: What is it to be a Jew without the Temple? One group of Jews answered that now observance of the Law and study of Torah is key — the start of today’s Rabbinic Judaism.

The other group answered that now, Jesus is the New Temple — the start of the church. The two groups, in effect, were arguing over what it is to be a Jew. And that argument is reflected in the texts that only then began to be written down — the Gospels.

The earliest Gospel is Mark, and it dates to about 70. The latest is John, dating to about 100. In those three decades, the argument between Jesus- believing Jews (and their Gentile associates) and Jews who rejected claims for Jesus is reflected in the way the Gospels demonize “the Jews.’’

The point is that this polemic was written by people who were themselves Jewish, and for them the loaded phrase “the Jews’’ actually meant “those Jews who reject our understanding of Jesus.’’ When they define the Jews as the enemy of Jesus, they are writing about their own experience two generations after Jesus.

Christians must hear these texts as if they are themselves Jewish, having foremost in mind that Jesus never stopped being a faithful Jew. If Christians had remembered that and measured both their doctrines and their behavior against their Lord’s undying love of his own people, the history of the last 2,000 years would be very different.

*~ This column is no longer available in the Globe archives. To read James Carroll from 2015, click* [*here*](https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/03/29/the-wicked-irony-holy-week/3a3NVXLszv2uG23w39MnXO/story.html)*.*