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Violence Among Jews and Gentiles: The Consequences of Failed Christian Biblical Education

Précis:

Because religious educational leaders in the institutional church have not insisted upon a post-*Shoah* theology that would challenge the historicity of the Gospel narratives and relocate Jesus and Paul in their 1st century Jewish contexts, explicit and implicit supersessionism continues to license Christian violence toward Jews. Christian leadership is culpable, not only in their failure to correct for the effects of 1st century Gospel polemics, but also in their failure to help Christian lay people study and interpret biblical texts so as to enable them to live faithfully among other faith communities.

The first portion of the title for this paper is taken from Krister Stendahl's 1976 book *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. But, as is often the case in a paper that is named before it is written, I need to tweak my title. I need you to imagine that the title is, "Violence Against 'Jews' and 'Gentiles.'" Put in those air quotes. Because it is the thesis of this paper that when it comes to talking about Jews and Gentiles, we Christians are just making stuff up.

I am currently a leader of adult Bible studies in the parish, primarily Old Testament, although I do venture into the New Testament occasionally. For many years, before beginning my work with adults, I taught Bible studies with junior high and high school students. I have been doing bible studies with lay people of all ages for over 40 years now. And I am still being astonished at the ways in which we Christians are just determined to misread our own canon.

It seems that every Christian is trained at some point to believe that “the Old Testament is Law” and “the New Testament is Gospel.” Sometimes you actually hear Christians say “the Old Testament is Law” and “the New Testament is Love” which is so self-congratulatory you would think our irony detectors would ping, but no. Anyway, the message we have received is clear: however good the Old Testament might have been and might still be on occasion—for certain specialized uses, such as devotional psalms, fodder for VBS musicals, and material for big budget movies—the New Testament is better.

I am of a certain age—which is to say, I am a Boomer—and therefore I clearly remember when we Christians made up our minds that we really had to clean up our act about supersessionism and start working out a post-*Shoah* theology. It was in the 60s, when the public at large became fully aware of the horrors of the Holocaust, the Six-Day War was fought, and the Second Vatican Council issued *Nostra Aetate*. Or maybe it was in the 70s, when E.P. Sanders came out with *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Or perhaps the decade we really made up our minds to do away with supersessionism in our theology was the 80s, when so many U.S. Protestant denominations came out with their church-wide statements repudiating anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. Then again, it might have been the 90s, when Clark Williamson came out with *A Guest in the House of Israel*; or, in the first decade of the 21st century, when Amy-Jill Levine came out with *The Misunderstood Jew*. Or maybe it was last year when Mary C. Boys published *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*.

From all this activity it would certainly seem that at least one of our goals as Christian Religious Educators for the past 50 years was the correction of false stereotypes about Jews. Fifty years on and a lot of books about teaching and preaching without contempt, a lot of Jewish-Christian dialogues, a lot of church-wide statements authored and issued, Martin Luther’s remarks about the Jews thoroughly repudiated, generations of seminary students trained to understand that the four Gospels reflect “the expansion of the Gentile mission” and “the polemic of the early church after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 CE,” and where are we? Every Christmas we still happily admire our crèches and sing the hymns that imply there was of course a handy and widely available scriptural checklist available for “the Jews” on how to recognize the Messiah when He comes. Nary a word from Christian education about “the expansion of the Gentile mission,” which needed a Messiah for first-century Gentiles. Every Holy Week we still solemnly read aloud all those gospel verses about how “the Jews” killed Jesus while poor old Pilate looked on helplessly wringing his hands. Nothing from the pulpit about “the polemic of the early church after the destruction of the Temple” or how the Gospels are wartime literature. Still plenty of sermons that portray Jesus as a proto-Christian set against the corrupt Temple establishment, exactly as though he were Martin Luther facing down the papacy or Martin Luther King facing down segregation. And I still have to vet every bit of the biblical scholarship available to me whenever I plan a bible study, because I never know when some perfectly nice and well-meaning Christian scholar is going to come out with something so patronizing about a character or story from the Old Testament it sets my teeth on edge.

My favorite examples on the unself-conscious condescension contained in Christian biblical scholarship come from commentaries on the book of Jonah. It seems to me, reading the first two sentences of the book of Jonah, that the author of the book is

neatly setting us, the hearer or the reader, up to understand that the stakes here are very high. The first line of the book of Jonah is “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai.” Anyone who has a study Bible with footnotes, a computer, or a smart phone, can look and see that Jonah son of Amittai was a court prophet active during the reign of Jeroboam II, ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, 786-746 BCE.

The second sentence of the book of Jonah is “Saying, Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” Now, every scholar of every commentary I have looked at knows perfectly well that Nineveh was a major city of the Assyrians, who conquered Israel in 722 BCE. But how many of them make the connection between Jonah being a prophet of the ancient Kingdom of Israel and his not wanting to be the agent of salvation of a people who will wipe the ancient Kingdom of Israel off the map for all time?

Here’s Mary Joan Winn Leith in the introduction to the book of Jonah from the 3rd edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, which is the Bible I bought for myself when I was working on my Master’s in Old Testament: “Instead of portraying a prophet who is an obedient servant of the Lord, calling people to repentance, it features a recalcitrant prophet who tries to flee from God and his mission and sulks when his hearers repent.”¹

Here’s James S. Ackerman in the introduction to the book of Jonah from *The Harper-Collins Study Bible*, which is the Bible I usually recommend that my friends at church buy: “Should one all-out repentance ceremony that includes sincere adults as well as innocent children and animals warrant God’s ‘changing his mind’ concerning the judgment planned for the city? This is not justice, thinks Jonah; this is divine caprice.”²

And here’s Steven L. McKenzie in *How to Read the Bible*, a book used in the Introduction to the Old Testament course in which I am currently serving as a TA: “[Jonah] is a self-centered bigot whose reasoning is clouded by prejudice and hate.”³

Whether you take the traditional view that Jonah is a prophet and therefore Jonah knows what the future may bring, or you take a post-modernist reader-response view that the audience for the book of Jonah is one that knows what the future *did* bring, shouldn’t it be immediately apparent that we need to begin the reading of this book with empathy for a character who has just been ordered to offer salvation to the people who will kill his children and enslave his grandchildren? I mean, if *you* knew a group of people were going to destroy the United States of America in the next generation, and God wanted you to go tap them on the shoulder and wake them up so He could save them, how do you think you’d feel? Do you think you’d just be cool with that?

Here we have an ancient book that is both heartbreaking and hilarious—in just four chapters! —and we, seemingly, cannot wait to turn it into a VBS lesson. Always do what God tells you, kids. Even if it means the agonizing death of all you hold dear.

¹ Mary Joan Winn Leith, “Jonah,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1321.

² James S. Ackerman, “Jonah,” in *The Harper-Collins Study Bible* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; New York: Harper-Collins, 2006), 1233.

³ Steven L. McKenzie, *How to Read the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

This is what Christian Education has taught us to do: take magnificent poetry and timeless prose that reminds us what it is to be a human being in a world created by God, and substitute for that, the most complacent and self-congratulatory theology possible. We have nothing to say to a violent world other than “Try to be more like us.”

Obviously this is not sufficient, and that is why for 40 years I have been trying, with varying degrees of success, to get people to bring their whole heart and mind and soul and brain to this ancient text. During this time I have had three phrases, from three eminent religious educators, serving as my hermeneutical slogans.

The first is “what it meant and what it means” from Krister Stendahl’s 1962 article on “Contemporary Biblical Theology” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*.⁴ Obviously I didn’t read this in 1962—I was seven in 1962—I read it 15 years later, in 1977. It was assigned to me, along with Stendahl’s *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, in a class I took at the University of Michigan on biblical criticism. These two texts really shocked me. Stendahl’s appallingly obvious premise was that the texts of the Bible didn’t necessarily mean in their original settings what we take them to mean now. I was the product of 18 years of the best church education available and I thought the Bible had been written by Christians. I thought—I mean, if I *had* thought about it at all, which I hadn’t—that even though the people in the Bible had been *living* in the time of Jews, Abraham and Moses and David and Matthew and Luke and all those people were really Christians—they were just *dressed up* like Jews. Unfortunately I think a lot of us still feel that way.

The second is Verna Dozier’s “the authority of the laity.” I came to read Dozier in the 80s because she was published by the Alban Institute. Dozier is famous for two things: revivifying the study of the Bible, and renewing the churches understanding of the ministry of all believers. However, in Dozier’s work these two things are really one thing: the study of the Bible authorizes lay authority and lay authority authorizes lay biblical interpretation. If it’s good for preachers and pastors to study the Bible, it’s good for the laity to study the Bible; and Dozier makes a sharp differentiation between lay people *reading* the Bible for their own individual devotional purposes, and *studying* it in a group. The thing I love best about Dozier, however, is how she recommends study, not as an aid to integration and certainty, but as a means toward a desirable *disintegration* and a sought-after *uncertainty*. Dozier believes that the demand for certainty is the besetting sin of Christianity: “We resist living with the doubt, incompleteness, confusion, and ambiguity that are inescapable parts of the life we are called to live.”⁵ “Over and over we show that we are not willing to live in the uncertainty. We grasp that new insight and hold onto it anxiously. We have to see ourselves reproduced in order to know that we are right.”⁶ But Dozier believes that “living by faith means living in unsureness.”⁷ To be

⁴ Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. G. A. Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 419.

⁵ Verna Dozier, *The Authority of the Laity* (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1982), 8.

⁶ Verna Dozier, *The Authority of the Laity* (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1982), 12.

⁷ Verna Dozier, *The Authority of the Laity* (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1982), 8.

Christians, we must bear with “the uncertainties with which the gospel message calls us to live.”⁸

The third is Amy-Jill Levine’s phrase “the scandal of the Jewish Jesus,” the subtitle of her book, *The Misunderstood Jew*.⁹ John Dominic Crossan calls this book, “A searing challenge from the heart of Judaism to the conscience of Christianity.” Which it is. It’s also hilarious and eye opening. The chapter on “Stereotyping Judaism” should be required reading for all Christians, especially preachers. Levine lists seven misperceptions or slanders concerning first-century Judaism; I hear them in sermons almost weekly. First century Jews were anti-woman; but Jesus was a feminist! The Law was a hideous burden; but Jesus came to save us from the Law! The Temple was an oppressive institution; but Jesus was a liberator! Somehow Christian seminary education has managed to train our preachers into a sort of liberation “-ish” theology that requires turning 1st century Judaism into a murky and monolithic backdrop before which Jesus can appear in glorious and radiant relief. As Levine points out, “The proclamation of the church can, and should, stand on its own; it does not require an artificial foil, an anti-Jewish basis, or an overstated distinction.”¹⁰ No, the New Testament is not sinister soldiers, ugly advisors, corrupt leaders, or decaying edifices of ancient evil; that’s not the Gospel, that’s a Peter Jackson movie.

The consequences of failed Christian biblical education have left Christians without any way to witness to their own faith without condescending to or patronizing the faith of others. We can’t read our own canon without turning it into something with considerably less nuance and sophistication than, say, *Veggie Tales*, or Monday night football; and fifty years of feverish scholarship about Jews and Romans in the ancient world, and dialogues with Jews and Muslims in our modern world has not put a dent in our happy self-regard concerning our own tolerant universality.

Here are three things I would like Christian education to do in regard to biblical education in the 21st century:

Following Levine, I would like to see acknowledgement on the part of religious educators that Christian biblical scholarship, Christian theology, and Christian preaching is not just partially or incidentally supersessionist, but largely and foundationally supersessionalist; and I would like seminaries and churches to adopt curriculums that challenge Christian supersessionism. We don’t need Judaism to be wrong in order for Christianity to be right.

Following Stendahl, I would like to see religious educators incorporate more challenging historical-critical material—particularly that concerning the dating of the biblical texts, and the non-historicity of many parts of the Gospel narratives—into devotional and educational guides. I realize that previously this information was to be found only in seminary courses and seminary libraries, but it is now a part of popular culture, available on social media, on Wikipedia, on television, on the N.Y. Times best-

⁸ Verna Dozier, *The Authority of the Laity* (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1982), 8.

⁹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2006) 228.

¹⁰ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2006) 125.

seller list, in public libraries, and in movies. Religious education needs to deal with this newly public information in a faithful and intellectually honest way.

Following Dozier, I would like to see serious reflection on the part of religious educators as to the negative impact of the professionalization of theological and biblical studies in the 20th century, and the extent to which this has led ordinary Christians in the 21st century to believe that serious biblical study and theology are “not their job.” Many Christian educators are now calling for lay people to do theology in their day-to-day lives; but this call ignores that fact that for a long time now, lay people have been told that any theology they could come up with could only be second best, after that of people who had been to seminary and learned how to pronounce Wellhausen and Barth.

The consequences of failed biblical education in the 20th century are that Christians in the 21st century have been taught to think that a reading of scripture that does not contribute to Christian certainty cannot be a good reading. This does violence to the dialogue, the tensions, the conversations and conventions that undoubtedly exist within our shared scriptures. If we cannot learn to listen to the voices at our center, how will we ever learn to listen to the voices at our margins?

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