

Alternatives to anti-Semitism for the Good Friday Gospel Reading in The Episcopal Church: One Proposal

by Kathryn Piccard¹

The Episcopal Church, by actions of its General Convention, has formally denounced expressions of anti-Semitism, and acknowledged with regret the prejudice against and mistreatment of the Jews throughout history. Yet the Episcopal Church also has some relatively subtle problems of anti-Jewish material in some of the texts of its worship services, and problems in the way that various texts relate to each other. The specific problem with the Good Friday reading from John's Gospel which I examine in this paper is thus part of a larger problem.

The larger problems of anti-Jewishness in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*² and in the *Hymnal 1982* and other authorized Episcopal Church texts are not all dramatically obvious, but they are real. Presumably none of those problems in our liturgical books were intended to function in an anti-Jewish way by the recent authors or revisers, who were probably unaware of this dimension of their work.³ There are several basic problems that combine to make things worse:

1. The Church has a history of anti-Jewishness and supersessionist theology which remains unexamined by many lay people and some clergy.⁴
2. Historic traditions of Christian anti-Jewishness have combined with cultural anti-Jewishness and anti-Semitism to form a lingering and significant cultural context.
3. The Episcopal Church has not bothered to be sure that seminarians and clergy understand the problems of Christian anti-Jewishness and supersessionism, and how to avoid preaching sermons and preparing worship services that can implicitly and/or explicitly function to support or maintain anti-Jewish attitudes.⁵

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² The *BCP* is the official service book of the Episcopal Church.

³ By the recent authors or revisers I mean those who wrote, compiled or revised the 1979 *BCP*, the *Hymnal 1982*, and other texts issued since then, some of which are revisions or translations of biblical, patristic and medieval or Reformation era texts, as well as more recent texts.

⁴ Supersessionism is the erroneous theological opinion that Christianity replaces Judaism in God's favor, that God broke and voided God's covenant promises to Jews and transferred these promises to Christians, and thus that Jews cannot be saved unless they turn to Christ in this life--or just possibly in the next life. However, it is not supersessionist to believe that certain promises God first made to the Jews in a covenant which is still in effect are promises that God later decided to also extend to Christians in another covenant. Several denominations have taken formal positions rejecting supersessionism, according to Marilyn J. Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, p. 37.

⁵ For instance, it has not been a required continuing education topic in any diocese that I have heard of, Episcopal canon law does not require that seminarians be examined on the topic of supersessionism or any other aspect of anti-Jewishness before ordination, and many of the reference works used by clerics include both supersessionist assumptions and a variety of material which caricatures first-century Judaism and its

4. The Church has not cared enough to be sure that texts were written and lectionaries composed so that they could not be understood or used in anti-Jewish ways.
5. One of the worst aspects of liturgical anti-Judaism is the “halo effect,” (especially effective with uncritical children, but also effective with uncritical adults), the implicit or apparent teaching that if it happens in Church it must have God’s approval. This is not only powerful and effective in liturgy, but also in Christian education.

Some of the psalms in the *BCP* were translated with Christian Messianic beliefs influencing the translation into English.⁶ Some hymns in our *Hymnal 1982* presume and express supersessionist theology.⁷ The lectionary in the *BCP* has problems of functional anti-Jewishness.⁸ Remaining problems include passages in our liturgical texts which are open to supersessionist interpretations, including material in the eucharistic prayers, or passages which even strongly suggest supersessionism. When such texts are heard in our contemporary context described above, it is all too easy for these texts to formulate and strengthen anti-Jewish attitudes. Such attitudes can lead to both failure to recognize and oppose prejudice and mistreatment of Jews, as well as (lead to) direct acts of prejudice and mistreatment of Jews. Despite General Convention resolutions denouncing expressions of anti-Semitism, and its acknowledgment with regret of the prejudice against and mistreatment of the Jews throughout history,⁹ the Episcopal Church has not taken responsibility institutionally for its ongoing actions that still lead to prejudice and mistreatment. It is as if the Church is saying, “If we do not intend it, if our texts aren’t explicitly anti-Jewish, it does not count, it does not really matter, we do not have to consider its effects, and we do not have to pay attention or take any responsibility to clean up our act or texts, our sermons or our publications.”

The fact that the Episcopal Church previously offered the Revised Common Lectionary for trial use, and now will require its use as of the first Sunday in Advent, 2007, reduces¹⁰

understanding of the Law. These errors function to support anti-Jewish preaching. Many clergy assume that the New Testament, their seminary education and their reference books provide an accurate and adequate picture of first century Judaism, yet that is not always so, (especially for those of us who attended seminary longer ago; I graduated in 1975), and they have not learned enough more about first century Judaism and modern anti-Semitism to avoid anti-Jewish preaching. As with racism, the mere desire to avoid it is not enough to achieve the desire.

⁶ At www.katrinadream.org, click on **Just Words?** and read *Justifying the Retention of Sexism in a Translation of the Psalms*.

⁷ For instance, one hymn (329, 330, 331, stanza 5) has the phrase, “Types and shadows have their ending, for the newer rite is here,” as if the Seder has been supplanted by the Eucharist. That hymn or stanza can be skipped.

⁸ The *BCP* eucharistic lectionary, or schedule of readings for use in worship services, was adapted from one constructed with the (possibly unconscious) working assumption that the Hebrew Bible does not have its own integrity, but is mostly useful for supporting the Gospel readings about Jesus, who is the fulfillment of predictions and typological precursors in the Hebrew Bible. This theological assumption has and does often inform preaching, and functioned and still functions in an anti-Jewish manner.

⁹ Go to www.episcopalarchives.org/ and under *search* enter “anti-Semitism.” Resolutions approved in 1979, 1991, and 1997 should appear, and eventually the resolution approved in 2006. The electronic database does not go much earlier than 1979.

¹⁰ I do not know if the new Episcopal version of the RCL eliminates (or merely substantially reduces) the anti-Judaism of the *BCP* lectionary. As of Advent 2007 the *BCP* lectionary will no longer be legal to use in the Episcopal Church, with only a few exceptions.

unintended anti-Jewish features of the *BCP* eucharistic lectionary.¹¹ This is a belated start in responding to the fact of anti-Jewishness in our approved (and ordinarily required) liturgical texts, but it does not go far enough. A study that could lead to more action to reduce liturgical anti-Jewishness in the Episcopal Church is now underway, due to result in a report to General Convention in 2009. But it might not call for revised texts or trial use, and even if it did, it would be highly unlikely to *require* trial use of revised texts. Thus I expect that the anti-Jewish aspects of the *BCP* and other texts will be left intact for some years, and I expect them to go on functioning in anti-Jewish ways indefinitely.

The Good Friday Gospel reading

Perhaps you are among the many people in The Episcopal Church who are uncomfortable with how the assigned Gospel reading on Good Friday can function in worship services in anti-Jewish ways, especially when the reading is invested with solemn dignity, perhaps even chanted by vested cantors.¹² (This is a reading that has historically been associated with ghastly murderous Christian mob violence, blaming living Jews for the death of Jesus, a death which was a Roman political execution, leading Jews to fear the Christian Holy Week as an annual season of harassment, persecution and death.) Because of the requirements of canon law and rubrics it has been widely believed that the assigned reading must be used in the Episcopal Church until a new *Book of Common Prayer* is approved at some unknown future date, or at least until alternative texts are approved for trial use by General Convention. However, there is an alternative which can be implemented immediately in any parish or diocese, if this alternative receives the permission of the local bishop. It will be described below.

Many Christians, including some scholars, who have given the matter thought consider John's Gospel to be anti-Jewish, especially in the story of the passion and death of Jesus, and to be more anti-Jewish than the other three Gospels. Yet in recent decades a number of scholars have asserted that John's Gospel was not anti-Jewish *in the Jewish context in which it was written*.¹³ Anyway, with knowledgeable instructors, Bible study group members who learn about this original context can study John's Gospel without learning, or promoting anti-Jewish attitudes or theological opinions. (They may even un-learn prejudicial attitudes they have picked up earlier.) However, worship is different from study groups, and the liturgical use of some parts of John's Gospel cannot always make clear the original context in which John wrote his Gospel. Because of the anti-Semitism present in our culture and in some prior Church teaching and preaching, and unfortunately present in some preaching that occurs today, the liturgical use of the Passion narrative in John's Gospel functions to promote and maintain anti-Jewishness, at least for some of the listeners. For this to happen to one listener is one too many. But that promotion and maintenance of anti-Jewishness is a serious sin we should not want to

¹¹ I am not sure what role fighting anti-Semitism had in motivating this change in the lectionary, but I am sure that reducing sexism was a significant motivation in lectionary change.

¹² The reading from John's Gospel is assigned on *BCP* page 277 at the top. The solemn dignity of vested cantors may enhance the halo effect.

¹³ For example, see Salmon, *op. cit.*, especially pages 110-119, "Is the Gospel of John Anti-Jewish?"

commit, and which it is our responsibility to actively take steps to avoid, corporately as parishes and a Church, and individually as preachers and worship planners and leaders.

The Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams has an excellent essay on the problem of the Holy Week readings,¹⁴ and he points to the work of the Rev. Dr. John Townsend, who compiled a narrative version of the Passion story suitable for liturgical use, published in 1977, which could be substituted for the reading from John's Gospel.¹⁵ Like the narratives used at nativity pageants, and like the narratives used in various eucharistic prayers, this Passion Narrative combines several biblical sources. In other words, it is not a simple Bible reading, although it is biblically based and faithful. William Adams endorsed in principle this solution which John Townsend developed, but noted,

“For Episcopalians, at least, and presumably for other Christians who are similarly obligated to liturgical rubrics, the difficulty with this solution is that such substitution is not sanctioned, anywhere, by anyone in authority.¹⁶ The Prayer Book obliges the reading of the Gospel at every eucharist, without exception. As a study and teaching document Townsend's *Interpretation* is very powerful (and properly edifying) but it simply cannot serve 'legally' as a replacement for what the lectionary requires.”¹⁷

He noted later,

“The dilemma we encounter is real and fraught with difficulties. The stumbling block, of course, is the matter of obedience, obedience to the rubrical and canonical judgment of the church, disregard of which would be required even to attempt resolution. The author sees no way out for now.”¹⁸

However, Dr. Adams was wrong in his common belief that nothing can be done, that there is no way out. The Episcopal Church has made, both in the rubrics and in the *Constitutions & Canons*, provisions that can be utilized for long term and short term approaches to these problems.¹⁹ There is a way out, after all, sanctioned by authority. In the long term, General Convention can be asked to make changes, and so the Diocese of

¹⁴ William Seth Adams, *Moving the Furniture: Liturgical Theory, Practice, and Environment*. NY: Church Publishing, 1999, chapter 1: “Christian Liturgy, Scripture and the Jews: A Problematic in Jewish-Christian Relations,” p. 3-25.

¹⁵ *A Liturgical Interpretation of Our Lord's Passion in Narrative Form*, Israel Study Group Occasional Papers Number One, NY: the National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1977. A second edition with revised wording is available on the internet for downloading and local use, as explained in footnote 21, below.

¹⁶ That was true of the Episcopal Church when he wrote in 1977. When the *Liturgical Interpretation* first appeared it was printed in the missalettes of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Chicago and it was officially adopted in the United Methodist Church, according to John Townsend, personal communication to K. Piccard, 12/12/2006.

¹⁷ Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁹ He was concerned about the rubrics because clergy make vows at ordination to adhere to the rubrics, and if they break these vows in a way judged “intentional, material and meaningful” they can be placed on trial in Church court and possibly be deposed from the diaconate and priesthood.

Massachusetts submitted a resolution in 2005 that led General Convention to pass a resolution in 2006 calling for study of anti-Jewish liturgical texts, and this might lead to trial use of modified texts.²⁰ In the short term, it is entirely possible under canon law and the rubrics to apply immediately to receive permission from one's bishop for a modified rite for Good Friday, which can accurately be described either as an alternate rite or a minor variation in the rite, for use at the next Holy Week. The principle of having a Gospel reading at each service of Holy Communion can easily be respected and maintained as part of this, and the narrative John Townsend prepared can be used either as originally printed, or (preferably) in a second 1985 version with modifications to make it easier to chant and/or to bring gendered language up to date with current usage.²¹ Such an alternate rite calls for a short Gospel reading and a longer reading that is a paraphrase mostly from two Gospels. On Palm Sunday we are used to two Gospel readings, the "Palm Gospel" reading and the "Sunday Gospel" reading. We could do something similar on Good Friday, as will be shown below, or for any other problematic reading during Holy Week or at any other time, with the bishop's permission.

Suitable preparation for your congregation will naturally depend on many factors. You may want the whole parish to study the matter more, or a Bible study group, or the adult education forum, or the liturgy advisory committee. Useful topics and resources include: past General Convention resolutions, past parish practices such as a printed bulletin disclaimer, the hymn "God, Thank you for the Jews,"²² the first chapter of *Moving the Furniture*, and the entire book (or selections) *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*. In addition you might use General Convention 2006 resolution C001 (which might eventually lead to action addressing this problem, possibly as soon as General Convention in 2009, for implementation no earlier than Holy Week 2010), and look at the implications of the phrase, "we repent...of the evil done on our behalf,"²³ in regard to unintended anti-Jewishness—repentance which compels us to further action immediately so as to avoid even the possibility of additional unintended anti-Jewish effects. A simple note in the bulletin mentioning that the bishop has authorized an alteration in the rite will probably satisfy most people. If a few people wonder about the

²⁰ Resolution C001 said, "*Resolved*, That the 75th General Convention direct the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to collect and develop materials to assist members of the Church to address anti-Jewish prejudice expressed in and stirred by portions of Christian scriptures and liturgical texts, with suggestions for preaching, congregational education, and lectionary use, and to report to the 76th General Convention." Presumably they will look at more than just Holy Week material. The Diocese of Massachusetts, which initiated this study request, had asked General Convention to include some trial use material in the 2009 report, but General Convention decided not to require that as part of the report. Perhaps General Convention did not think that the Episcopal Church felt any urgency or saw any significant problem.

²¹ It was published in 1977, with dated wording. In the 1985 second edition available on the internet the wording is updated to current usage, and may be downloaded by congregations for their use without needing further permission. Go to the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/sites/partners/csg/CSG_passion_resources.htm, then click on **Townsend, John**, the second item under **General**. The first edition is listed elsewhere on that website.

²² This hymn by Brian Wren was originally published as "Lord, Thank You for the Jews," in one of his collections, *Praising a Mystery*, set with a wonderful tune by Bill Rowan. The later revision (God thank you...) is found in *Piece Together Praise*, a collection of most of Brian's texts, with commentary. The three stanza hymn text is also printed in Salmon, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-154. The copyright (1986, 1996) is held by Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL, 60188.

²³ *Enriching Our Worship*, p. 56.

bishop's canonical authority to authorize the use of a modified rite, you could, of course, give them the citations.²⁴

A sample letter to your bishop

A diocesan liturgy committee might want to ask their bishop to authorize the use of a modified Good Friday rite throughout their diocese, either for a specified period of years or without qualification. They might suggest that their bishop ask that reports be made to the diocesan liturgy committee, so that they can report to the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, and to their deputies to General Convention and to their bishop, regarding 2006 resolution C001. They might also wish to offer educational workshops on why this modified rite is needed, and how to introduce it.

When there is no diocesan liturgy committee, or it has not asked the bishop to authorize the use of a modified rite throughout the diocese, or when it is known that a bishop prefers direct communication with parishes wishing such permission, after studying the matter in an adult education group, or at least in the liturgy advisory committee, and having that committee or the vestry endorse the proposal, ideally the rector and perhaps the vestry would write to their bishop and say something along these lines:

Dear Bishop Whoever,

Despite some General Convention resolutions opposing anti-Semitism in principle, we are concerned that the reading of the Passion from St. John's Gospel (18:1–19:37 or 19:1–37) on Good Friday can function to promote and maintain anti-Semitism in practice. Thus we are requesting your permission to authorize us to use the *BCP* rite with this minor variation: on Good Friday instead of reading that passage from St. John's Gospel alone we wish to substitute the reading of John 1:29–36 (as a sort of theological commentary on the Passion Narrative),²⁵ together with a reading of the *Liturgical Interpretation of Our Lord's Passion in Narrative Form*, [Israel Study Group Occasional Papers Number One, NY: the National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1977, prepared by the Rev. Dr. John Townsend, second edition]. We have attached a copy which we have taken with permission from www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta

²⁴ The second rubric on page 13 of the *BCP*, authorizes the bishop to take such actions "because the needs of the congregation so require." Besides, a sentence of Article X of the Constitutions of the Episcopal Church authorizes bishops to approve special liturgical forms.

²⁵ Perhaps Luke 23:26–49 would be an acceptable alternative. I am more confident about the *idea* of a dual reading format than I am about the selection of any particular Gospel reading. *Much* depends, of course, on what the preacher does with the material.

[-elements/sites/partners/csg/CSG_passion_resources.htm](#). May we have your permission to try this Good Friday dual-reading format for a period of three years?

After Holy Week 2008 we would like to submit a progress report to you, and to our diocesan Liturgy & Music Committee and to our General Convention deputies, in preparation for General Convention, with the hope that this might help the wider Church with its deliberations.²⁶

(signed) the Clerk of the Vestry on behalf of the Vestry,
and (signed) the Rector

²⁶ The advantage of reporting to the Standing Commission on Liturgy & Music after trying this in 2007 and 2008, especially if you send them a copy of your letter to your bishop, is that it would let them know that parishes in different parts of the country shared enough of a concern about the real risks and deleterious effects of the reading of John's Gospel on Good Friday to take action, supported by their bishops, and it would give the SCL&M an idea of how to deal with that liturgy, besides just leaving it as is, or printing a disclaimer notice in the bulletin. If your parish has a good experience in 2007, your report to your bishop might include an offer to lead a workshop for your diocese on the issues and your experience with this alternate rite, so that other parishes can ask for the same trial use privilege in 2008. If that occurs, be sure to mention it in your 2008 reports. When you report to your bishop and diocesan liturgy committee be sure to refer to the 2006 General Convention resolution C001, and ask them to notify your diocesan deputies of your concerns and experience.