

**By: Maureena Fritz**

John: 18.1-19.42

A strategic theological evolution occurred at the Second Vatican Council with its publication of *Nostra Aetate* (1965). Prof John Palikowski wrote: *Nostra Aetate* ... represents one of the most decided shifts in Catholic thinking emerging from the Council. [...] In making their argument for a total reversal in Catholic thinking on Jews and Judaism, the bishops of the Council bypassed almost all the teachings about Jews and Judaism in Christian thought prior to Vatican II.[1]

The following two sets of images illustrate this “total reversal” in Catholic thinking

The Former teaching is represented in these two statues, one of the Church and the one of the Synagogue, which stand at the double portal of the south entrance to the cathedral at Strasbourg (around 1230). Both figures are of noble character but the Church has supplanted the Synagogue. The Church is depicted as triumphant with crown and imperial robe on her shoulders, with staff and chalice in her hands, symbolizing her divine authority. She looks ahead to the new age. The Synagogue is an event of the past. She is defeated, her staff broken more than once, the Torah is slipping from her hands, a veil is covering her eyes and her head is bowed.

According to this teaching the synagogue did not recognize her messiah when he came and killed him. Because of its blindness the Church has superseded the synagogue as the new Israel.

The New Teaching: Figure 2[2] that follows, represents the new teaching of the relationship of the Church and the Jewish people.[3] In this image the two figures represent the Church and the Synagogue as partners in God’s design. Both stand tall as representatives of their communities. One is not superior to the other. The relationship expresses the words spoken by Pope John Paul II on November 17, 1980 and repeated in Notes, 1985, No. I.3: God’s covenant with the Jewish people has never been revoked.

This Copernican revolution in ecclesial thinking affects the way we read and interpret the gospel narratives.

The Passion Narratives

Let us recall:

1. That the time in which Jesus and his disciples lived was an oral society. Widespread knowledge of the Torah was gained by people hearing the Torah read to them rather than by reading it themselves.

Likewise, traditions about Jesus were carried orally rather than through written texts. The editors of the gospels knew these stories and used them as they wrote

their gospel but it wasn't a neutral writing. The gospels reflect the point of view of the editor and the needs of the church for which they were written. They give us not only a portrait of Jesus but some understanding of the communities who gathered in his name. The conflict expressed in the gospels between Jesus and the Jews is more a reflection of the conflict that occurred between the young church and the synagogue at the time each Gospel was written. According to Church teaching:

“The Gospels are the outcome of long and complicated editorial work...The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation of the Churches, and preserving the form of proclamation. Hence it cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favorable to the 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. To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today” (1985 Notes IV.IA).

2. The four gospels were compiled at different times, one to two generations after the death of Jesus and the death of all those who knew him personally. The approximate dates at the beginning of the Common Era (CE/AD) for the final redaction of each of the gospels is as follows: Mark—72; Matthew—85; Luke—94; John—100. The place of composition is disputed but a general consensus is: Mark in Rome, Matthew in Antioch, Luke in Greece and John in Ephesus. Mark is considered to be the first Gospel written. Matthew and Luke, though different in many ways, repeat much of the same material in Mark. Hence these three gospels are called the synoptic gospels meaning they can be set out in parallel and looked at together, synoptically, “seen together”. The Gospel according to John is of a very different genre.

3. An accepted method of writing was for an author to give prestige to his work by attributing it to a well-known personality. The Zohar, a 13th century Jewish mystical work by Moses de Leon was attributed to Simeon ben Yohai who lived in the second century. John in his Gospel felt free to attribute to Jesus words and sentiments that Jesus himself probably never uttered while on earth

4. A place name could be used to indicate who the person was. Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was the long awaited Jewish Messiah by putting his birth in Bethlehem, for Bethlehem was said to be the birthplace of the Messiah (John 7.41-42). While it is a theological statement it may not be an historical fact!

5. Before the Passion, Jesus is the beloved of the Jewish people. People flock to him to hear him, to touch him, to be healed. Crowds follow him wherever he went. When he arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, he is joyfully welcomed as a hero. In his first two or three days in Jerusalem large crowds come to hear him. His

popularity with the people prevents the priestly authorities from immediately capturing him.

Hence, in order to find the authentic Jesus within the Gospels one has to distinguish between what Jesus could have said and done from that which comes from the theological stance of the author and the purpose for which the gospel was written and the audience for which it was addressed. The writers and their method of writing create a mystery where real history lurks and the authentic Jesus can be found. But reading them requires detective work.

Examining the Passion Narrative in John 18.1-19.42.

Let us begin by noticing some of the differences between John's account of the Passion and that of the Synoptics:

### 1. The Last Supper

All four gospels tell of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Matthew, Mark and Luke present the Last Supper of Jesus as a Passover meal. The day is spent in preparing for it. After sunset at the start of 15 Nisan, they are all gathered together to celebrate what has come to be known as the Seder meal, which recalls the Exodus from Egypt. During the meal, in the ritual surrounding the eating of the unleavened bread and drinking of wine, Jesus is said to have used words, later understood as the institution of the Eucharist. At some stage Judas leaves and the group completes the ceremony by singing a hymn, probably the last of the Halleluiahs (113-18).

A crucial difference of 24 hours exists between John's account and that of the synoptic writers. The last supper for John is not a Passover meal. It takes place before the feast of Passover, probably the eve of the 14 of Nisan. In his account there is no mention of the institution of the Eucharist. John puts words into the mouth of Jesus that Jesus probably never uttered (see number 3 above). These are long speeches on love of neighbor, on Jesus as the way to the Father, on the Holy Spirit and Jesus' humility in washing the disciples' feet (John 13-17).

### 2. The Trial of Jesus

There is no Jewish trial in John. There are no Jewish witnesses, no Jewish judges pronounce sentence against Jesus. In John, Jesus was taken to, and interrogated by Annas, who then sent him to Caiaphas, and Caiaphas in turn sent him to Pilate. The only tribunal before which Jesus appeared was that of the Roman governor of Judaea. The arrest and the questioning took place the day before Passover.

In the Synoptics, the Sanhedrin (the ancient Jewish court system) under the power of Caiaphas tries Jesus. The Synoptic version of the trial of Jesus by the Sanhedrin and on Passover night (in the morning of Passover according to Luke) is most unlikely. Jewish law forbade such proceedings on a holy day of obligation: "Trials

involving the death penalty may not be held on the even of Sabbath or on the eve of a feast day” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.1).

Because of these differences the passion narratives cannot be read as literally true. They are a mystery where real history lurks and the authentic Jesus can be found.

### 3. John’s Gospel and the Jews

Though many facts in the Gospel according to John seem to be true (e.g., the timing of the Last Supper and the trial by Rome and Roman appointees) this Gospel has been a source of Jew hatred. The word “Jews” throughout John’s Gospel, 21 times throughout the Passion narrative, is mostly used in a negative manner, for example:

If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews (18.36);

After he had said this, he (Pilate) went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him...” (18.38); They (the Jews) shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” (18.40);

Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews (19.38).

From what we have said above, John’s references to “Jews” reflects not the time of Jesus’ sojourn on earth but the tension that existed in the young Church between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the large influx of gentile followers of Jesus. Jesus himself was a Jew and remained a beloved member of his own race.[4]

### **A Suggested Stance during these Holy Days**

As we participate in our liturgical celebrations of Holy week, especially on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, let us remember the 3 R’s: Recall, Remember, Redeem:

1. Remember that we honor Jesus when we honor his people. We honor his people when we remember that God’s covenant with them is everlasting.
2. We Redeem Jesus’ name through our unconditional acceptance of the “other”. We all have slivers of truth and only see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13.12).
3. Recall that Jesus is alive. When the disciples sat at their Seder table the day after Jesus’ death, Jesus was not physically present yet, it can be said, they sensed his presence among them (multiple accounts exist of people sensing the presence of their loved ones after death). Kierkegaard summed up what for him was the essence of Christianity—to become “contemporaneous with Christ—to become contemporary with him.”[5]

No, Jesus' presence here on earth never becomes a bygone event, and never becomes more and more bygone—so long as there is a believer, such a one must, in order to become such, have been, and as a believer must continue to be, just as contemporary with his presence on earth as were those first contemporaries.”

[1] John T. Pawlikowski, “The Search for a New Paradigm for the Christian-Jewish Relationship: A Response to Michael Signer”, 25-48 in John T. Pawlikowski & Hayim Goren Perelmuter (eds.),

Reinterpreting Revelation and Tradition: Jews and Christians in Conversation (Franklin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 25.

[2] Sculpture by Paula Mary Turnbull

[3] Ecclesial Documents: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, par. 4, 1965 (referred to as, *Nostra Aetate*); Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4, 1975 (referred to as, *Guidelines*, 1975); Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church, 1985 (Referred to as, *Notes*, 1985).

[4] *Noes*, 1985, No. III.20-21

[5] Soren Kierkegaard, trans., W. Lowrie, *Training in Christianity*. Vintage Spiritual Classics (no date given). .