

By Dr. Peter Fiedler

Herder Verlag in Freiburg, Germany has adopted Lion Publishing's The Children's Bible in 365 Stories. This book has become a best-seller (more than 100,000 copies in 5 years), provided with the "imprimatur" granted by the authorities of the archdiocese of Munich. That seems to be a great success - but at what a price! We leave aside the (mis)treatment of the Hebrew Scriptures as if they were leading directly and exclusively to the Jesus event and exemplify the anti-Jewish character and effects by exploring the presentation of Jesus' life and work in the book. "Jesus the teacher" is confronted with the religious leaders. On a single page the chapter on the Sermon on the Mount contains a lot of false or misleading assertions, e.g: The religious leaders refuse to accept what Jesus was teaching about God; by adding hundreds of precepts to the Torah of Moses; they have their own ideas how to please God; they prevented Jesus from teaching in the synagogues: they liked only to pretend to be good, but in their hearts they had murderous thoughts against Jesus. Such a confrontation obviously implies malicious distortions of the Torah itself and its various interpretations at Jesus' time.

In the chapter entitled "Jesus' Enemies", the children get to know the Pharisees as a special sort of his inhuman and hostile enemies among the religious teachers. Their hearts are stubborn: they hate Jesus, therefore they decide to kill him. That attack on the Pharisees is underlined by the picture added. On the one side, the children see Jesus and his disciples pictured with "usual" clothes and on the other side three of such Pharisees, not only wearing black but also covering their heads the way tallits do. The medieval anti-Jewish picture tradition thus returns in a modern form.

As expected, the polemics grow in the section entitled "Jesus' Enemies Become More Powerful". The same dark figures appear, now pictured twice as big as before. The religious leaders are accused without any distinction of seeking how to kill Jesus; they want to trap him by asking him for the right of paying tribute to Caesar. The comment on Jesus' escaping from this trick question reverses the historical situation: The Jews owed much to the Romans, for they supplied them with roads and water and granted peace between the nations - what ingratitude on the part of Jews not to pay tribute to their oppressors!

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The parable of the wicked husbandmen then gives the opportunity not only to ascribe blazing hate to the religious leaders but also ascribes to Jesus' audience the schizophrenia of being happy that God will take away the election of the Jewish people.

The murderous thoughts of Jesus' enemies become realized in the betrayal by Judas. The illustration added is obviously anti-Semitic: A money counting figure covered with a red kippah-the "Stuermer" sends his regards. The scene of Jesus' standing

before the Sanhedrin returns to depict black and white: Jesus in white clothes faces the members of the Sanhedrin in black garments suggesting tallits. As the pretext for the demand to crucify Jesus, the High Priest lets him claim to be God-against the clear evidence of the Gospels which unanimously use the title "Son of God."

These examples which could be multiplied by the presentation of the post-Easter church are sufficient. They show a distinct anti-Jewish atmosphere in order to separate Jesus' person and teaching from its real "Sitz im Leben" of the contemporary Jewry in Israel. Such an opposition between Jesus and the religious leaders of his people obviously contradicts not only the historical facts but also the fundamental change the churches have undertaken concerning Judaism. This is particularly offensive for a Catholic publishing house like Herder Verlag which claims to promote the Jewish-Christian dialogue. It is even worse that the "Imprimatur" has been provided-and until now not revoked by church authorities. Thus, the new attitude of the Catholic Church in view of Judaism, publicly again and again emphasized since Vatican II, is likewise publicly compromised.

The consequences for religious education are obvious. Against the clear instructions in the Vatican guidelines of 1974 and 1985 (and other relevant documents), Jesus' Jewishness does not serve to promote a better understanding between Christians and Jews but is misused to continue the "teaching of contempt", even of hate. It is not by accident that the vocabulary of hatred often occurs; the illustrations strengthen this atmosphere. Should we really assume that the editor and the church authorities did not see how disastrous the effect must be for Christian children by getting to know an anti-Jewish Jesus?

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