

A major factor in fostering misunderstanding and hostility toward Jews on the part of Christians is the basic term used in the New Testament, the Jews. In translations of the New Testament, as well as in the interpretation of it, Christians have often assumed that in the time of the New Testament writers, the term had a simple, uniform meaning: the whole of the Jewish people. Accordingly, when the Gospel of Matthew describes some Jewish leaders as persuading the people to accept responsibility for Jesus' execution, "His blood be on us and our children" (Mt 27:25), the details are often ignored. It is the "chief priests and elders" who take the initiative to accuse Jesus before Pilate, the Roman governor, of aspiring to become "king of the Jews" (Mt 27:11-12).

These leaders were not chosen by the mass of the people, but gained their positions of authority through collaboration with the occupying Roman power. Indeed, the high priest in Jerusalem was designated by the authorities in Rome. The leaders' motivation for seeking to destroy Jesus was not the preservation of the moral or religious purity of the Jewish people, but the maintenance of power by those cooperating with the Romans. The elders were members of the council set up by the Romans to provide the appearance of local autonomy, which was designated as the synedrin. In later centuries, the Jewish leaders set up their own council to guide the religious life of Jews, including the interpretation of the scriptures, and called it the Sanhedrin. In the time of Jesus, however, the council's function was an agency to enforce Roman power. It was this small but powerful group that is depicted in the Gospel of Matthew as calling the people as a whole to take responsibility for the death of Jesus.

What is often overlooked is that Judaism in the early Roman period was highly diverse. Jacob Neusner — who has published more than 300 scholarly books on ancient Judaism — has effectively summarized this diversity in a title he gave to a collection of essays (to which I contributed): *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge UP, 1987). It is clear from the Dead Sea Scrolls that two messiahs (royal and priestly) were expected by this Jewish group which withdrew from Jerusalem and the temple to await the divine intervention that they expected would vindicate them and establish God's rule over his people. Other dissenters from the line adopted by the official Jewish leadership include the Pharisees, who fostered the study and personal appropriation of the Law of Moses in order to develop voluntary societies (synagogues) of those convinced of the relevance of this tradition for their everyday lives. Certain Jewish scholars across the Mediterranean world were seeking to encourage religious understanding which would combine insights from the Greco-Roman culture and thereby demonstrate common features between Gentile intellectuals — such as Plato and the Stoics — and the Jewish tradition. A notable example of this persuasion is the first century C.E. scholar, Philo of Alexandria, whose allegorical interpretation of the Jewish scriptures developed along these lines. Jewish books from the Greco-Roman period like the *Wisdom of Solomon* and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* demonstrate the effort to create a synthesis of Jewish tradition and Hellenistic learning.

Toward the end of the first century C.E. and again in the second century, nationalist movements arose which sought to liberate the residents of Palestine from Roman control. Their aims were similar to those of the Maccabees, who for about a century (165-63 B.C.E.) gained a high degree of autonomy for Jews in Palestine. These efforts under the Romans ended in failure and repression. It is the charge of leading a nationalist uprising that resulted in the death of Jesus, who is accused of aspiring to be “king of the Jews”. The charge was made to the Roman authority, Pilate, by the Jewish collaborationists, and clearly did not rise spontaneously among the Jewish people as a whole. The mode of execution of Jesus, crucifixion, was characteristic of the Roman authorities, and was appropriate from their standpoint as a result of the charge that Jesus was seeking to overthrow Roman rule.

The so-called kings of the Jews, in the tradition of Herod, were appointed by the Roman authorities. Jesus’ accusers were this tiny minority of Jews, who are reported in the Gospel of Matthew as taking responsibility for the death of Jesus (Mt 27:25). Matthew’s Gospel was written after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple (70 C.E) when rabbinic leadership was beginning to give structure and direction to a mode of Judaism centered in the personal appropriation of the Law of Moses. Matthew reflects tensions and disagreements between emergent Judaism and Christianity. But the Christians’ resentment toward the collaborationists who encouraged Jesus’ execution cannot rationally be transferred to Jews as a whole.

It is essential, therefore, that Christians in reading and interpreting the New Testament develop sensitivity to the diversity of meanings in specific contexts of references to Jews. Only in this way can one gain more accurate historical understanding of the relationships between Judaism and Christianity, and thereby overcome the hostility toward Jews which has been regrettably and irresponsibly fostered by those calling themselves Christians.

Howard Clark Kee

President American Interfaith Institute

Professor Emeritus, Boston University