

Addressing Anti-Judaism during Lent and Eastertide

Report of Task Force to The Consultation on Common Texts (CCT)

References to “the Jews” (Ἰουδαῖοι) in the New Testament and in the subsequent history of the church are often problematic for Christian and Jewish people alike.

During the early ministry of Jesus, his followers constituted one among multiple competing groups within the larger family of Judaism. Groups referred to in the New Testament included Pharisees, Sadducees, the followers of John the Baptist, and Zealots.¹ Jesus shared a concern with the Pharisees for the interpretation of the Law in daily life and an expectation of the near approach of the Kingdom of God with the followers of John the Baptist. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke preserve some of the complexity of Judaism in the time of Jesus. In Mark, for example, Jesus directed criticism against specific groups, especially the Sadducees and Pharisees. He did use strong language in his criticism, but it was not significantly different from the hard language that he used with his own disciples (Mark 8:33, Cf.: Matthew 8:26, Luke 12:28). In Mark’s Gospel, the term “Jew” is not applied collectively to non-Christian Jewish groups. It appears infrequently, in comments addressed to outsiders—once in a parenthetical remark for the reader about the washing of hands (Mark 7:3), and five times in statements by Romans in the passion narrative. It is never used to suggest a religious group of which Jesus and his followers were not a part. Matthew and Luke largely follow this approach by Mark.

The relationship of Christians to other Jewish groups is less clear in John’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. While there are passages in these two books that acknowledge the early Christian placement within Judaism (See John 4:22, John 8:31, John 11:49-51, Acts 23:6, and Acts 26:5), the close connections of Christians to other Jewish groups is generally ignored. John’s Gospel was written in the context of the beginnings of the parting of ways between church and synagogue a half century after the lifetime of Jesus and often uses the word “Jew” to refer to those Jews who opposed Jesus’ teaching. The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the growth of the church after the resurrection and also uses “Jew” to mean those Jews who objected to the teaching of Paul or other early disciples.

This use of the word “Jew” in John and Acts has contributed to a common misreading of the Gospel story—that Jesus died because of the behavior of non-Christian Jewish people, rather than because of the decisions by Roman officials or the sinfulness of all humanity. This misreading has in turn been used to support discrimination and violence against Jews. It still inspires anti-Jewish actions to this day. This is something for which Christians need to repent. We must acknowledge how we and members of the church before us have discriminated against and mistreated Jews. We need to seek ways to amend our personal and communal understanding of Scripture that shapes our attitudes and behavior toward the Jewish people.

The lessons of Lent and Holy Week should be handled with care to avoid this harmful reading. The Consultation of Common Texts, the developer and curator of the Revised Common Lectionary, recommends possible actions:

¹ Some Jews were also identified by the functions they exercised, such as priests and high priests, scribes, members of the Council, money changers, tax collectors, etc. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the tradition of the Pharisees became the dominant tradition within Judaism to this day.

First, acknowledge with confession and lament the centuries of history of reading the Holy Week texts in ways that have caused or fostered discrimination and violence against Jewish people. Preaching and teaching involving these texts are appropriate occasions for making this acknowledgment, especially during Lent and Holy Week, as well as whenever these texts are mentioned in preaching and programs of Christian formation.

Second, exercise care about translations of the texts used, especially for the passion narrative. Some translations such as the *NET Bible*, the *NIV Bible*, and *The New Testament for Everyone* have chosen a variety of different ways to translate the term “the Jews” to fit the particular context rather than, as does the *New Revised Standard Version*, simply repeat “the Jews” at every instance. The *NET Bible*, for example, uses “Jewish leaders” at some points and “Judeans” at others. *The New Testament for Everyone* uses “Judeans” for most references. Some denominational resources have done the same thing with translations of particular passages used in the liturgy.² While this approach may hide the degree to which John’s gospel is easily read as anti-Jewish, a more nuanced translation at least mitigates some harms. A rotation of different translations for key passages may be a helpful course.

Third, where congregations make use of dramatic readings of the Gospel with multiple readers, consider assigning passages that suggest responsibility for the death of Jesus to the Jewish people, such as Matthew 27:25 (The Sixth Sunday in Lent, Year A), to the entire congregation. This may help the congregation realize more deeply that Jesus Christ “is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Fourth, recognize that our concerns do not end with Holy Week. The RCL lectionary for Easter Season has perpetuated what we also find to be a potentially harmful practice of replacing the first reading from the Old Testament with a reading from Acts during Easter Season. For Christians not to read from texts shared with Jews during any season of the year is inherently problematic. God has exercised mercy and has worked deliverance and salvation throughout the biblical story apart from the specific events and dynamics of the passion. Indeed, the early followers of Jesus and the gospel writers, in particular, learned how to interpret Jesus’ life and death as redemptive precisely by looking at what God had been habituated to do with Israel. Those stories were the paradigms of salvation that the gospel writers used to tell their story of Jesus. Therefore, the Consultation recommends alternative readings from the Hebrew Scriptures during Eastertide, drawing on work from the Church of Scotland as promoted by the English Language Liturgical Consultation.

Fifth, consider delaying the use of readings from Acts until after Pentecost as a substitute for the Epistle readings. The Consultation proposes a new set of readings from Acts for this purpose. The Consultation also suggests using the passion narrative from Mark’s Gospel on Good Friday.

Finally, worship planners and leaders should provide brief commentaries or explanations of problematic lectionary readings in printed worship materials, particularly as regards the

² See the translation of John 18:1-10:42 in the Tenebrae Service in the *United Methodist Book of Worship* (1992), 355-61. Resources from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s 1517 Media/Augsburg Fortress publishing ministry take a similar approach.

issues addressed here. A sample statement is provided below, together with the alternative readings.

A Statement on the Lectionary Readings

This statement on the lectionary readings for Holy Week and Easter may be spoken in worship and/or printed/projected in service materials.

Throughout Christian history, references to “the Jews” in scripture—particularly in John and Acts—have been used to perpetuate negative stereotypes and falsely assign blame for the death of Jesus. These references gloss over significant distinctions among religious leaders, such as Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees, and obscure the fact that Jesus and his disciples were themselves Jews. As Christians, we confess and lament the history of anti-Judaism associated with these texts. We renounce the evils of violence and discrimination against Jewish people. We strive for mutual understanding, respect, and partnership with Jewish neighbors and commit ourselves to the work of reconciliation among people of all faiths.

Alternative Gospel Reading for Good Friday

Mark 14:1–15:47

Alternative Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in Easter

For use in the place of the first reading from Acts and the accompanying Psalm during the season of Easter. The Epistle and Gospel readings remain the same.

	Year A	Year B	Year C
Easter Day	Jeremiah 31:1–6 Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24	Isaiah 25:6–9 Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24	Isaiah 65:17–25 Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Easter 2	Exodus 15:1–11 Psalm 111	Isaiah 65:17–25 Psalm 3	2 Kings 7:1–16 Psalm 2
Easter 3	Isaiah 51:1–6 Psalm 34:1–10	Isaiah 6:1–9a Psalm 40:1–5	Isaiah 61:1–3 Psalm 90:13–17
Easter 4	Ezekiel 34:7–15 Psalm 100	Zechariah 10:1–12 Psalm 80:1–7	Isaiah 53:1–6 Psalm 114
Easter 5	Proverbs 4:10–18 Psalm 119:9–32	Exodus 19:1–6 Psalm 118:19–25	Leviticus 19:9–18 Psalm 24:1–6
Easter 6	Ezekiel 34:1–7a Psalm 115	Genesis 35:9–15 Psalm 101	Deuteronomy 34:1–12 Psalm 109:21–31
Ascension	Daniel 7:9–14 Psalm 24:7–10	Daniel 7:9–14 Psalm 68:15–20, 32–35	Daniel 7:9–14 Psalm 113

Easter 7	Isaiah 45:1–7 Psalm 21:1–7	Jeremiah 10:1–10a Psalm 108	2 Kings 2:1–15 Psalm 2
Pentecost	Numbers 11:24–30 Psalm 104:24–34, 35b	Ezekiel 37:1–14 Psalm 104:24–34, 35b	Genesis 11:1–9 Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Proposed Acts Readings for the Time after Pentecost

For use as alternatives to the Epistle lessons during the Season after Pentecost (Propers 20-26 for Year A, Propers 10-16 for Years B and C)

Year A (Peter)

Acts 1:14–21, 33–35	Peter’s address on Pentecost
Acts 3:1–19	Peter heals a crippled beggar and preaches in Solomon’s portico
Acts 4:5–12	Peter and John before the Council
Acts 8:14–25	Peter and John preach in Samaria
Acts 10:34–43	Peter’s address to Cornelius
Acts 10:44–48	The Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles
Acts 11:1–18	Peter’s report to the church at Jerusalem

Year B (other converts)

Acts 2:37–47	The first converts
Acts 4:32–37	The example of Barnabas
Acts 6:1–7	Seven are chosen to serve
Acts 8:26–40	Philip teaches and baptizes an Ethiopian
Acts 11:16–30	The church in Antioch
Acts 16:6–15	The conversion of Lydia
Acts 18:1–3, 18–21, 24–28	Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos

Year C (Paul)

Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–6 (7–20)	Paul’s conversion, baptism, and preaching
Acts 13:1–12	Paul and Barnabas preach in Cyprus
Acts 17:1–12	Paul and Silas in Thessalonica and Beroea
Acts 17:16–34	Paul in Athens
Acts 21:17–26	Paul in Jerusalem
Acts 25:6–12; 26:24–32	Paul appeals to the Emperor for judgment
Acts 28:14–30	Paul in Rome

The CCT Subcommittee on anti-Judaism in the Lectionary

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