
E. ELIZABETH JOHNSON

One of the most striking features of the New Testament is the remarkable diversity of its writings in form and content alike. With these twenty-seven documents—composed by nine to eighteen authors, depending on who does the counting—there are no fewer than five genres of literature written within fifty to one hundred years—again, depending on who does the counting. From the earliest days of the church, centuries before there was a canon of New Testament documents, Christians recognized and often struggled with the wide variety represented by these diverse documents. As recently as the Reformation, Martin Luther declared that some New Testament books—notably James and Revelation—were lacking in true evangelical proclamation. Even today, most Christians betray their own functional “canon within a canon” by the fact that some pages in their Bibles are more worn and heavily used than others. All this testifies to the diversity of the New Testament.

The breadth of this diversity is particularly evident when New Testament writers talk about the relationship between Christians and non-Christian Jews. At least eight of the authors in the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and the writers of Ephesians, Hebrews, and Revelation—give us direct or indirect evidence of their feelings about the church’s stance toward the synagogue, and none of them arrives at the same conclusion.

This multitude of voices is intriguing for two reasons. First, the subject itself continues to be important. Since World War II, the obscenity of the Holocaust has forced the church to confront the reality of violent Christian anti-Semitism. But even throughout the rest of church history, Christians have carried on a peculiar love-hate relationship with Jews. On the one hand we have adopted the Jewish Scriptures and language about God, and on the other hand we have caricatured and misrepresented Jewish faith as a foil for our own. The relationship between the church and the synagogue raises profound theological questions about the continuity between Israel’s faith and our own, and the ways Christians live with non-Christians in a pluralistic world. The time is overdue to examine our complicity in anti-Judaism and to consider what our tradition has done to foster it.
The second reason the several New Testament pictures of Jewish-Christian relations are intriguing is that this very diversity brings into focus the problem of how Christians use the Bible to make decisions about life and faith. If there is no unified New Testament voice on the subject, then how can we hope to do anything like biblical theology? There are many people for whom the only possible answer is: We cannot. I do not want to give up that hope. What it means to be Christian is to count the Bible an essential source of theology. It is by no means the only source, of course, but theology that dispenses with Scripture ceases to be Christian. This essay suggests that the issue of Jewish-Christian relations can be one way to approach fruitfully the problem of biblical theology.

Of the several New Testament writers who talk about Christians and non-Christian Jews, let us consider three: the Evangelists John and Matthew, and the Apostle Paul. Each of these writers proposes a Christian response to non-Christian Jews in a different way, from a different social and religious context, and with a different language — and their struggles can inform our own.

**John**

On the one end of the spectrum — and the latest of the three chronologically — is the Fourth Evangelist. John highlights Jesus' identity as the Jewish Messiah (1:41), the king of Israel (1:49), the one sent by the God of Abraham and Moses (8:58; 5:46), the one who dies for the people (11:50). Jesus' ministry takes place in the context of Jewish religious festivals (e.g., 2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 10:22; 11:55), he invokes the Jewish Scriptures to authorize himself and his teaching (5:39-40), and he claims a profoundly intimate — even exclusive — familial relationship with the Jewish God (e.g., 6:40, 46, 65). But although “salvation is from the Jews” (4:22), John makes no bones about his hostility to Jews who see things differently. Nathaniel, a Jew who recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, is “an Israelite in whom there is no guile” (1:47); but Nicodemus, a “ruler of the Jews” (3:1) and “a teacher of Israel” (3:10), goes to Jesus only under cover of darkness (3:2), and Joseph of Arimathea becomes a disciple only in secret (19:38) ‘‘for fear of the Jews,’’ a phrase that is repeated three times in the Gospel (7:13; 19:38; 20:19).

Although the community to which John writes is itself overwhelmingly Jewish in origin (and probably composition), it is clear that a serious rupture has taken place between the church and its Jewish neighbors. The very generalized identification of Jesus’ enemies as “the Jews” is practically synonymous with the notion of “the world”, the world that hates Jesus and opposes his followers (1:10; 16:33; 17:14). The temple is no
longer the site of authentic divine worship—the "true worshippers" worship neither on Gerizim nor in Jerusalem, but "in spirit and truth" (4:23). John's Jesus accuses the Jews of misunderstanding their own Bible—"you search the scriptures," he says, "because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (5:39-40). He denies the Jews their own parentage—they are no longer Abraham's children, but children of the devil (8:39, 44). He warns his disciples to watch out for the Jews (e.g., 10:8; 15:18-19; 16:3) because they have relinquished any claim to know God by their refusal to know Jesus. Any hope that the people God brought out of Egypt have a share in the eternal life Jesus offers is finally dashed at Jesus' trial, when Pilate says, "your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me" (18:35). And the people convict themselves of their own idolatry by crying out on the eve of the Passover celebration, "we have no king but Caesar" (19:15), when the very next night at the Passover seder they will claim, "We have no king but God!".

There are still a few positive portrayals of some members of historic Israel in John's Gospel—remnants, perhaps, of a happier time in John's church when the enmity was not so fierce. For the most part, however, John's Gospel drips with vitriol toward the Jews who do not believe in Jesus. Most of it seems to be focused on the issue of Jesus' identity: any Jew who refuses to believe that Jesus is the Christ comes in for John's vituperation. And this seems to be the result of a very concrete experience in the life of John's church—it's exclusion from the synagogue. Three times the Evangelist makes reference to an official Jewish action to exclude from fellowship Jews who confess Jesus as the Christ (9:23; 12:42; 16:2). And the conflict concerns more than just excommunication—this is apparently a life-and-death matter for John. Jesus warns at 16:2 that "the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think to be offering service to God."

In John's church, conflict with non-Christian Jews is almost intrinsic to Christian confession. Because Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, anyone who refuses Jesus refuses God. Although the Johannine Christians have been branded heretical and excluded from fellowship with other Jews, they consider themselves the true continuation of Israel and their Jewish neighbors the heretics. Although for John Jesus replaces the Jewish cult, that replacement is seen largely in terms of fulfillment. Jesus brings to completion what Judaism is all about. Israel's God and Israel's Bible are extremely important for John's church, even though any sense of continuity with Israel as God's people has been sacrificed to the church's protection from attack and its consequent focus on Christology.
Matthew

The second of these writers, from perhaps fifteen years earlier, is Matthew. Matthew’s attitude toward Judaism is much less hostile than John’s. He urges his church to surpass the scribes and the Pharisees in Torah righteousness (5:20), and intensifies rather than contradicts Pharisaic halakah in the antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-48). Although Matthew’s Jesus is greater than the temple (12:6), and has extraordinary authority to interpret Torah and perform miracles (7:29; 8:5-13; 21:23-27), he is nevertheless, in the opening words of the Gospel, “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). Whereas John seems to think Jesus surpasses and in some sense replaces Israel’s history, Matthew goes to great length to say that Jesus is continuous with and brings to fruition the best of that history. Matthew’s creative calculation of the forty-two generations between Abraham and Jesus (1:17) is designed to demonstrate that all God’s dealings with Israel—from the very beginning of the nation—have been moving purposefully toward Jesus. This conviction is borne out repeatedly in Matthew’s Gospel as much of what Jesus says or does happens in order “to fulfill what was said by the prophet saying ...” (e.g., 1:23; 2:6, 15, 17, 23; 3:3; 4:14).

But Matthew is not without a good deal of anger toward non-Christian Jews. He repeatedly speaks of “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 13:54; 23:9, 34), three times calls their leaders a “brood of vipers” (3:7; 12:34; 23:33), and devotes an entire chapter to excoriating the Pharisees for their moral bankruptcy and religious hypocrisy, calling them blind guides and white-washed tombs (23:1-39). At Jesus’ trial, Pilate makes an elaborate ritual of declaring Jesus’ innocence by washing his hands of the matter, thus handing responsibility back to the Jewish authorities. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he says; “See to it yourselves.” And the people respond by shouting, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (27:24-25).

Although Matthew is inherently more sympathetic to Judaism than John is, and his sense of the church’s continuity with Israel is far greater, it is clear he understands truly faithful Jews to be only the righteous who “follow Jesus” (4:20, 22, 25; 8:1, 10, 19, 22, 23; [23 x]), who do God’s will (6:10; 7:21; 12:50; 18:14; 21:31; 26:42), and who therefore “bear fruit” (3:8, 10; 7:16-20; 12:33; 13:8, 26; 21:19, 34, 41). Although it is not until Barnabas and Justin Martyr in the second century that any Christians speak of a “new Israel,” there is a very real sense in which for Matthew the church is the “true Israel,” led by Christian Jews like himself, scribes “trained for the kingdom of heaven” who bring out of their treasures what is new and what is old (13:52).

The simultaneous continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church seem to be a function mostly of Matthew’s attitude toward the
Jewish leaders rather than the people themselves.\footnote{16} He exhorts his flock to listen to what the Pharisees say, but not to do what they do (23:3). It is not Judaism so much as its leaders who come in for Matthew's harshest criticism, and that is best reflected by two parables that only Matthew tells and two others that he modifies in important ways. Significantly, these parables in Matthew immediately follow the story of Jesus' argument about his authority with the temple establishment (21:23-27). And because the church's authority derives from Jesus' (10:1; 28:18), these stories say something about Matthew's authority, as well.

Only Matthew recounts the parable of the two sons (21:28-32). The elder son agrees to obey his father, but then does not; the younger initially refuses the order to go work, but then changes his mind and obeys. So also, says Matthew's Jesus, the sinners who repent—and follow Jesus—precede the temple establishment into the kingdom (21:31). Similarly, in the very next parable (21:33-44; cf. Mark 12:1-12), the wicked tenants who refuse to pay the householder's share of the profits from the vineyard are replaced by more suitable tenants who will give God the fruit of the vineyard. Jesus then interprets the parable to mean that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it" (21:44). Then Matthew's editorial remark notes that the chief priests and the Pharisees "perceived that [Jesus] was speaking about them" (21:45), that is, about the Jewish leadership.

The final parables in this series tip Matthew's hand most obviously. When Luke tells the story of the great banquet (14:16-24), it is the story of a dinner party whose invited guests decline and are replaced by street people—as much as to say that God is generally a God who sides with the oppressed. When Matthew tells the same parable, though (22:1-10), he allegorizes it to an almost absurd degree. When some guests are invited to a king's wedding feast, they do not simply send their regrets, they kill the messengers who bring the invitations. A simple, "no, thank you" probably would have sufficed. But their violent response provokes the king to more violence; the city is destroyed, and only then are the street people invited in. Clearly the Jews who are first called by God and refuse are replaced by Christians (Jewish and Gentile) who accept.

At this point, Matthew inserts another parable that is unique to his Gospel (22:11-14), and this one adds an important nuance to his position on this subject. One of the wedding guests dragged in off the street is not dressed for the occasion. This is scarcely surprising. But for his failure in etiquette, the man is bound "hand and foot" and "cast . . . into the outer darkness" (22:13). Although those first invited—Israel's leadership—have been replaced by others, the latter-day, Christian guests are not therefore relieved of the need to respond appropriately to God's invitation with righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees (cf. 5:17-20). Al-
though the Jewish leadership has abdicated its responsibility—and therefore its authority (cf. 21:23-27)—the rest of the world is not absolved of its responsibility to be righteous. While Jewish ancestry or position is no longer a guarantee of one’s religious standing in Matthew’s church, neither is any other kind of ancestry or position. The same point is made in the parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16), where Matthew affirms God’s impartial treatment of all, Jew and Gentile alike, when they are called to follow Jesus.

Matthew’s argument with the Jewish leadership illustrates an early conflict that becomes all too familiar in post-apostolic times.¹⁷ In a region where Jews and Christians are missionizing the same people (very likely Gentile God-fearers), Matthew is competing with the Jewish authorities for leadership. What is at stake is the leadership of both potential converts and Matthew’s own flock—and that is a significant source of his anti-Jewish polemic. Although he continues to retain and to treasure Christianity’s connection with Judaism, the crunch comes when the two groups must compete for members. Matthew is willing to sacrifice God’s faithfulness to part of Israel—its leadership—for the sake of his church’s position of authority and his own vision of authentic Judaism. While John’s argument with the synagogue revolves around Christology, Matthew’s centers on ecclesiology.

**Paul**

The third New Testament writer who talks about Jewish-Christian relations is also the earliest, and he too experiences conflict with non-Christian Jews. At least five of the incidents he mentions, however, are of synagogue discipline (2 Cor. 11:24), which means that in at least some places around the Mediterranean he was still considered to be within the Jewish family rather than an outsider. Paul also reports Jewish opposition in Judea to his Gentile mission (1 Thess. 2:14-16) and expresses anxiety about the fate of his Christian relief effort at the hands of non-Christian Jews in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:30-31). Although his relationship with the synagogue has scarcely broken off so violently as John’s, and his competition with Jewish leaders is not nearly so fierce as Matthew’s, Paul nevertheless engages in some serious conflict with non-Christian Jews. It is curious, therefore, that when Paul writes about Christians and Jews, he arrives at a conclusion very different from either Matthew’s or John’s. Paul devotes three long chapters in his letter to Rome to the place of Israel in God’s plan of salvation, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the church, and the relationship between Christian Gentiles and non-Christian Jews outside the church. In Romans 9—11 Paul offers the
most sustained and direct reflection on Christians and Jews in the whole New Testament.  

In Romans Paul insists on two distinct and parallel points: (1) God is absolutely impartial in dealing with Jews and Gentiles, and (2) God is absolutely faithful to Israel. The gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,” but that is “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16). Although he repeatedly claims that God judges and saves Jews and Gentiles on the same basis (1:16; 2:11; 3:9, 22), he three times reiterates Jewish priority (1:16; 2:9-10; 3:1-2). Even when he is most careful to put Jews and Gentiles on the same footing, he still retains their separate identities. At 3:30, when the very oneness of God demands equal treatment of all, Jews are justified “from” their faith and Gentiles “through” their faith. There is no substantial difference between the prepositions here, and the phrases are clearly parallel. So also at 4:12, Abraham is the ancestor of all who follow in his faithful footsteps, both circumcised and uncircumcised believers. And at 15:8-9, Paul says Christ demonstrates God’s truthfulness for two reasons: “in order to confirm the promises given to [Israel], and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God.” These twin affirmations—of God’s impartiality and God’s faithfulness to Israel—dominate Paul’s argument in Romans, and he never resolves the tension between the two. In the conclusion to the whole argument at 11:28-32, he sets two parallel statements side by side to emphasize his point: “the gifts and the election of God are irrevocable” (11:29), and “God has consigned all to disobedience in order to have mercy on all” (11:32).

The specific discussion in chapters 9-11 addresses head on the problem of that unresolved tension: if God deals with everyone impartially and yet remains faithful to the elect people of Israel, then why is it that the church is full of Gentiles and the synagogue is full of unbelieving Jews? Either God has stopped keeping promises to Israel—in which case God cannot be trusted to keep promises to the church—or God has become partial to Gentiles, since they are the ones who believe the gospel.

Paul responds to this problem in three stages, beginning at 9:6, 9:30, and 11:1. First (9:6-29), he demonstrates from Scripture what every Jew knows—that God has always elected without regard for human ancestry or behavior, in order to demonstrate God’s power, sacred wrath, wealth of mercy, and glory. This is standard Jewish election theology, and only at 9:24 does Paul introduce a distinctively Christian element to his argument. God elects by this same sovereign mercy not only Jews but Gentiles as well. “The God who justifies the ungodly” (4:5), “who makes the dead alive and calls into being the things that are not” (4:17), is the God who creates a people out of no people (9:25-26) and against all odds saves them from annihilation (9:27, 29).
But if this is true, Paul asks at 9:30 — the beginning of the second stage of the argument — they why the current imbalance in the church? Why the Gentile majority if God calls Jews and Gentiles alike? The gospel that is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (1:16; cf. 10:4, 11) has tripped up Jews who mistakenly thought God's righteousness was distinctively for Israel and not impartially for all. God has deliberately set this proclamation of impartial righteousness as a stumbling stone in Israel's path (9:31-32). The gospel of the righteousness of God is available to all. Just as the wisdom of God holds the universe together like cosmic glue and is accessible to all who look for it, so the gospel is near to everyone without distinction (10:6-8). Its nearness to Israel has been a stumbling block and a scandal, since Israel understood God's faithfulness, but was ignorant of the implications of God's impartiality — that is, that God is faithful to Gentiles, too. God's covenant with Israel, Paul says, was always intended to be inclusive; now, in the gospel of Christ, it has reached that goal (10:4). Paul quotes Scripture in 10:15-21 to buttress his further claim that although the gospel is for Jew and Gentile alike, God continues to reach out to Israel "all the day long" (10:21) in a special way.

At 11:1, he begins the third stage of the argument. See, he says, God's offer of impartial mercy has been accepted by some Jews — Paul himself is one of them. Furthermore, even those Jews who have not yet believed are still included in God's gracious plan. Their current unbelief has opened up the Gentile mission, and this too is by God's design. The eventual success of that mission (which Paul seems to think imminent) will similarly serve to evoke Jewish faith (11:11-16). When unbelieving Jews see God's righteousness poured out on all the Gentiles, they too will respond to the gospel, and the current salvation-historical imbalance will be corrected (11:25-27). Consequently, Gentile Christians can scarcely be arrogant about their apparent replacement of Israel in God's redemption. Both their faith and Israel's current unbelief are functions of God's sovereign plan (11:17-24). Paul magnifies his ministry to Gentiles for the very purpose of serving Israel's salvation (11:13-14). The Christian response to Jewish unbelief is therefore not more ardent proselytizing of Jews, but concentration on the Gentile mission.

The relationship between Jews and Christians, then, is for Paul an intimate and interdependent one. Paul does not rail against Jews who refuse to believe in their own Messiah, either because they are demonic, as John says, or because they are hypocritical, as Matthew says. Paul looks instead to God's saving intention for the world, an intention that offers to all the same gift of righteousness and yet retains the abiding validity of ancient promises to Israel. Ultimately, the problem of Jews and Christians is God's problem, and Paul is willing to let God solve it. His personal anguish
about the problem is very keen; he uses more emotional language in this part of the letter than in any other (cf. 9:1-6; 10:1; 11:1). Yet because Paul hopes in God’s ultimate victory over all the forces that would defy God’s sovereignty, his anguish does not collapse into anger. The hymn that concludes the first eleven chapters of Romans (11:33-36) is one Paul borrows from the synagogue, perhaps to suggest that Israel’s worship is itself oddly kerygmatic. This hymn praises the wisdom of God that is able to restore order in a chaotic world, even to the extent of finally bringing Gentile Christians and non-Christian Jews together.

Conclusions

To summarize: John writes from a context of extreme pressure. The Johannine church has broken violently with the synagogue, and the Fourth Gospel’s perspective on Jews and Christians must be understood within this context. John speaks viciously about non-Christian Jews, but does not thereby intend to encourage violent Christian anti-Semitism. Although Christians in the ensuing centuries have repeatedly invoked John 8:44 against Jews—“you are [children] of your father the devil”—they can claim no license from John to move from that imprecation to violence. Although “the world” is John’s enemy, it remains the world God loved enough to send Jesus (3:16); and despite Johannine enmity with the synagogue, “the Jews” are still very much included in this world God loves, even if they seem unresponsive. The rupture between Christians and Jews is bitter and final, though, as far as the Fourth Evangelist is concerned. Salvation may be “from the Jews” (Jn. 4:22), but it is clearly for Christians. Christology, the question of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah of God, is the dividing line between the two communities. John affirms God’s impartiality—all who believe in Jesus are God’s people—but transfers God’s faithfulness from Israel to the church.

Matthew writes somewhat earlier than John from a situation also marked by conflict, conflict not with Jews in general but specifically with their leaders. Despite his angry denunciations of the Pharisees and his clear demarcation between righteous and unrighteous Jews, Matthew has no intention of fostering anti-Semitism. Much of his anger is motivated by a deeply religious conviction about the nature of true righteousness. Although “his blood be on us and on our children” (27:25) has been the standard proof-text for the Christian charge of Jewish deicide, one can hardly claim support for cruelty or revenge from the evangelist who exhorts Christians to turn the other cheek (5:39), love their enemies (5:44), and pray for their persecutors (5:44). Although Matthew does not sanction persecution of non-Christian Jews, he does exclude them. The only way one is authentically
part of the people of God is to be part of Matthew’s Christian community, and faithful obedience to God’s law is determined by Jesus’ distinctive interpretation of it. Matthew’s biggest complaint against Jews, however, is against their leaders, the Pharisees of his own day with whom he is in competition both for Gentile converts and for authority in the community. Whereas John’s polemic against Jews is christological, Matthew’s is ecclesiological, but both have allowed their conviction of God’s impartial treatment of all on the basis of Christ to redefine God’s faithfulness to Israel.

Paul also writes from a situation of Christian conflict with Jews. Of the three, Paul’s conflict is the least intense, not only because his is the earliest, but also because he perceives the problem differently. Likewise his solution to the problem of Christianity’s continuity with Judaism is the most nuanced and the least polemical. For Paul, God has a present, not just a past, purpose for historic and ethnic Israel. Israel’s continuing role in salvation history is evidence of God’s abiding faithfulness even as the justification of Gentiles demonstrates God’s impartiality. The church’s relationship with the synagogue is a familial, even symbiotic one: the dynamic of Jewish faith, Gentile unbelief, Gentile faith, Jewish unbelief, and ultimately Jewish faith forges the church and synagogue into a single plan of God whose will to redeem the creation cannot be thwarted by either Gentile presumption or Jewish unbelief.

In light of this wide diversity among just three New Testament writers, what hope can there be for discerning a coherent New Testament vision of the church’s relation to the synagogue? Given that the contemporary church’s experience of grace leads us to repent of the violence we have wrought by perpetuating John’s defensiveness or Matthew’s competitiveness, it would appear that Paul’s more even-handed and thoughtful response is the most instructive one. Does that then mean that we must write off Matthew and John as culturally conditioned representatives of a past conflict from which we have nothing to learn? Perhaps not entirely. The heat of their polemic may also shed valuable theological light.  

Paul’s analysis of Jewish-Christian relations is profoundly theocentric. What is at stake for him is not the identity of Jesus or the leadership of the Christian community, but the nature of God. By refusing to relinquish either God’s impartiality or God’s faithfulness to Israel, Paul demands that Christians and Jews see one another in the context of God’s merciful redemption of the whole world. The result is an organic image, a tree whose gardener is God, and whose parts are mutually dependent on one another (Rom. 11:17-24). For Paul, the gospel is “the power of God for salvation” (1:16), which means that human responses to the gospel and proclamations of it stand under the sovereignty of the God who makes no distinctions.
When Johannine Christians focus exclusively on Christology or Matthean Christians concentrate too heavily on ecclesiology the theocentrism of the gospel shifts toward a kind of anthropocentrism that does make distinctions—often with tragic results. In order to make a biblically informed theological judgment about church and synagogue, we cannot say that Paul is more helpful simply because he is less polemical. Matthew and John also make significant contributions to our thinking by revealing—as cautionary examples—how crucial it is to keep this issue focused on God, and how dangerous it can be to reduce the gospel to one of its aspects. All three writers affirm both God’s impartiality and God’s faithfulness; only Paul holds the two affirmations in dynamic equilibrium. For both Matthew and John, God’s impartial treatment of all in Christ is allowed to redefine God’s faithfulness by transferring it from Israel to the church. But that redefinition of divine faithfulness functionally relinquishes it, something Paul refuses to do.

It is perhaps most instructive to note that the less hope a New Testament writer has for a successful Jewish mission, the greater seems his animosity toward the Jews. Does this suggest that hostility toward non-Christian Jews may be the result of evangelistic efforts aimed more at human recruitment than extolling the glory of God? The historical distances between these three first-century writers testify to early Christianity’s movement away from the Jewish mission, and may be instructive for the contemporary church. To focus Jewish-Christian relations on Christology or ecclesiology obscures the central issue of theology and results in dangerous conflict.23

Thus it is not only what these three New Testament writers say about Jews and Christians but how and why they say it that are valuable, even necessary components of our theological reflection and praxis. The coherent structure of the gospel provides a critique of all who preach it in whatever contingent contexts they preach.24 This is not to claim that Paul’s construal of the gospel is necessarily correct and that Matthew’s and John’s must be measured by it. Paul’s answer to the problem of Jews and Christians is not “right” because it is the least polemical or the most appealing to modern sensibilities. He does, however, remain in this case most faithful to the gospel by refusing to relax the necessary tension between God’s impartiality and faithfulness. The First and Fourth Evangelists too, when they are not consumed by polemical debate with their Jewish neighbors, affirm the Old Testament conviction that covenant faithfulness is definitive of God’s dealings with humankind. Their inclination, though, and this might be said for almost everyone else in the New Testament as well,25 is to reinterpret God’s covenant faithfulness in a way that includes the church and excludes Israel. This reinterpretation, however, actually implies restriction of God’s faithfulness. Paul rejects this viewpoint with startling
force by turning in his argument from the absolute reliability of Christian hope (Rom. 8:28-39) to the place of Israel in God's plan of salvation (Romans 9-11). If God is to be trusted to keep promises to Christians, then God must be shown to be faithful to Israel.

The stark differences among the attitudes of John, Matthew, and Paul toward non-Christian Jews highlight the necessary centrality of God in Christian theology and preaching. Certainly Christology and even ecclesiology cannot be dismissed from our conversations with Jews. Faithfulness requires Christians to bear witness to Christ and the church in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Faithfulness requires us first, however, to bear witness to God. To speak first of the one God of Jews and Gentiles is to begin on common ground and to set both church and synagogue at our legitimate theological points of departure. At critical points Christians and Jews will diverge in our confessions of the one God, and those legitimate differences should be neither minimized nor ignored. But the New Testament's own internal Jewish-Christian dialogue bears witness to the unnecessary conflicts which may arise when our focus shifts away from the first person of the Godhead. Christian dialogue with Jews can and must be informed by careful reading of the Bible. In honest conversation with the wide diversity of the New Testament, we learn that God is sovereign not only over the church and the world, but over Scripture as well.

ENDNOTES

1 "In general," writes Paul W. Meyer, "the search for some kind of doctrinal common denominator on which we might find unanimity among the New Testament writers has been given up — and rightly so. That procedure is so reductionist that what it yields is too meager to deserve our giving it status as the nourishing heart and center of our faith . . . . Although our religious vocabulary is profoundly shaped by the New Testament, we discover that the meaning of each term and each theme . . . is different according to the writer who uses it" ("The This-Worldliness of the New Testament," The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, 2 ns [1979], 228). James D. G. Dunn's Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) is a remarkably thorough treatment of the problem.

2 Note, for example, 2 Peter's early second-century witness to the diversity of Pauline interpretation in the church — perhaps reflecting the proliferation of pseudonymous epistles (2 Pet. 3:15-17), or the Muratorian Canon's late second-century attempts to make sense of the differences between the synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel and the particularity of the Pauline letters. On the latter, see Nils A. Dahl, "The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church" in Neotestamentica et Patristica (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 261-271.

Wayne A. Meeks makes a particularly trenchant observation about the church’s historical reconstruction of first-century Judaism that in part explains how Christians have responded to Jews: “Christian scholars, especially Protestants, have for generations used ‘legalism’ as a perjorative term to describe a theory of salvation attributed to Judaism, from which Christians were supposedly liberated, particularly by the teachings of Paul. In this century we have come to see that this picture is wrong in many ways. Luther’s polemics against the penitential system of the late medieval church has been projected onto Paul's polemics against the ‘Judaizing’ apostles of Galatia, and the Lutheran Paul’s polemical statements have been taken as historical description of ‘Judaism.’ And then post-industrial-revolution individualism has been read into all of them” (The Moral World of the First Christians [Library of Early Christianity 6; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986], 95). For a refreshing—if sometimes controversial—alternative, see E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).


Several other troubling questions facing the contemporary church meet with a similar multiplicity of responses from the New Testament. Despite frequent claims in the church of a putative “biblical sexuality” or “Christian family,” for example, New Testament writers are far from unanimous in their visions of appropriate family relationships or community life. The age-old battles over forms of church government, the role of women, Christian engagement with secular powers, and so on, have frequently been waged on proof-text grounds, demonstrating that people of good faith can almost invariably find as many Bible verses to refute as to support their positions. Part of this problem is surely a function of uncritical hermeneutical assumptions, but it seems to me the more significant cause is the very diversity within Scripture itself.


The synoptic Gospels’ precision in identifying Jewish groups—scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, etc.—is greatly softened in the Fourth Gospel, while the polemical term “the Jews” (used over 70 times) is “almost a technical title for the religious authorities, particularly those in Jerusalem, who are hostile to Jesus” (Brown, Gospel, lxxi).

Martyn's analysis of the two-level drama in John (*History and Theology*) centers on the anachronistic uses of *aposunagoge* at 9:23; 12:42; 16:2.

The writer of Hebrews gives evidence of much less active conflict with the synagogue than does the Fourth Evangelist (although Heb. 10:25 probably reflects anxiety about Christians who are being drawn back to synagogue worship), but it is clear that Christology is also at the heart of his stark contrast between Christianity and Judaism.


This classical proof text for Christian violence against Jews is invoked in a particularly chilling scene of the documentary film "Shoah" when a Polish Christian in Chelmno explains to Claude Lanzmann why thousands of Jews were rounded up, imprisoned in the Chelmno church building, and then taken away in gas wagons to be slaughtered (*Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust: The Complete Text of the Film* [New York: Pantheon, 1985], 99-100).

See particularly Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution*.

Melito of Sardis's late second-century Paschal Homily and John Chrysostom's Homilies Against the Jews (386-387) are only two of the many illustrations that could be offered.

For a fuller exegetical treatment of Romans 9 - 11, see E. Elizabeth Johnson, *The Function of Apocalyptic and Wisdom Traditions in Romans 9 - 11* (SBLDS 109; Atlanta: Scholars, forthcoming).

The antecedent of *autō* in 9:33 and 10:11, the stone of stumbling from Isa. 28:16, is not the person of Jesus, as most modern translations suggest ("he who believes in him will not be put to shame" [RSV]), but "the word of faith which we preach" (10:8). The stone of stumbling is not simply the person of Christ but Christian proclamation, and Paul's citation of Isa. 28:16 should therefore be translated, "the one who believes in it [that is, the gospel] will not be put to shame." Confusion about the passage is perpetuated when 10:4 is translated "Christ is the end of the law," since in context *christos* is surely a short-hand description of the whole of the gospel which includes God's sovereign creation of the world, impartial righteousness, justification of sinners, impending redemption of the world, and coming glory rather than a simple christo-
logical reference. 1 Cor. 1:24, 30 are remarkably similar uses of christos as short-hand references to the full content of Christian preaching. Furthermore, Paul's biblical proof in 10:6-8, invoking Lev. 18:5 and Deut. 30:12-14, shows that telos in 10:4 must mean "destination" rather than "termination" (Johnson, Romans 9 -11, chapter 3).

The image of anger and anguish is Walter Brueggemann's (The Prophetic Imagination [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 80ff.).

Recent attempts by Lloyd Gaston ("Paul and the Law"), John Gager (The Origins of Anti-Semitism), John T. Koenig (Jews and Christians in Dialogue: New Testament Foundations [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979], 37-59), Pinchas Lapide and Peter Stuhlmacher (Paul: Rabbi and Apostle tr. L. W. Denef [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984]), and others to portray Paul as the single helpful (or least obnoxious) New Testament writer on the subject generally suffer from this temptation to truncate the canon. Moreover, these arguments frequently go beyond Paul himself by claiming in his name that non-Christian Judaism retains abiding validity alongside Gentile Christianity. That may indeed be true in ultimate theological terms—that is, in the mind of God—but it is exegetically indefensible to say Paul thinks so. For a critical response to Gaston's extensive exegetical program on this score, see Johnson, Romans 9 -11.

It is not only scholars who employ this non- or anti-canonical approach to the problem of Christians and Jews. The study paper, "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews" commended to the Presbyterian Church (USA) by its 199th General Assembly (1987) (available from OGA Sales, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1201, New York, NY 10115) adopts an unabashedly Pauline stance while not even acknowledging the presence of other opinions in the New Testament. The paper is extremely thoughtful, I find myself in agreement with most of its recommendations, and it provides a helpful resource to the churches, but to my mind it glosses over the significant—and prior—question of diversity in the New Testament. The study represents Paul's position very faithfully and appropriates his thought usefully for contemporary Christians, but it operates with an unspoken assumption that one must simply choose from among New Testament voices on a given subject and offers no theological rationale for doing so. Surely there are church people who will study this paper in search of guidance about Jewish-Christian relations who have also studied Matthew and John and will wonder what to make of the differences.

The Reformed Church study paper takes a similarly Pauline tack, and makes remarkably similar recommendations, although it espouses a stronger case for Christian evangelization of Jews ("A Study of the Biblical Perspective on the Evangelization of the Jews for the RCA Today" in The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology Reformed Church in America 1959-1984, ed. James L. Cook [The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 182-197). Although it acknowledges in passing the presence of diversity in the New Testament, something the Presbyterian paper ignores ("The very New Testament which contains the evidence to prove the gospel is addressed to Jews has been challenged as containing not only distorted pictures of Jews and Judaism but also a considerable amount of material that is anti-Semitic" [p. 184]), the paper nevertheless side-steps the theological question of how one discerns which parts of the New Testament are to provide guidance for Christians seeking faithful relationships with Jews. By centering on Paul's argument in Romans 9-11, but diluting the uniqueness of his position as Apostle to the Gentiles by harmonizing that with the picture of his career painted in Acts, the Reformed Church in America paper tends to view the New Testament more holistically than to underscore and listen to its internal debate.

Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth observe that throughout history, "Jews and Christians could not help but disconfirm each other's religious traditions," *(Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its Legacy* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1987], 9) and they quote Raul Hilberg who speaks of the "three fundamental anti-Jewish policies: conversion, expulsion, and annihilation. The second appeared as an alternative to the first, and the third emerged as an alternative to the second . . . . The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live among us. The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live" *(The Destruction of the European Jews* [New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985rev] vol. 1, 8-9; cited in *Approaches to Auschwitz*, 9).

Beker (*Paul*, 23-36) makes a convincing case for a necessarily dynamic relationship between the coherent core of the gospel in Paul's thought and its contingent expressions in the letters. See also more recently *idem*, "'Paul's Theology: Consistent or Inconsistent?'* *NTS*, 34 (1988), 364-377.

Luke-Acts is arguably the single exception. Luke was once thought to espouse a supersessionist view (that is, that the church supersedes Israel as the people of God), although admittedly with less hostility than some other New Testament writers. Since Jacob Jervell's *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), however, and most recently Robert L. Brawley's *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation* (SBLMS 33; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), that opinion has come in for substantial and telling criticism. Luke's sense of the present — as well as past — function of Israel in God's plan of salvation has more to do with the continuity of salvation history than the theocentricity of the gospel, but is clearly closer to Paul's view than either John's or Matthew's is.

Although he addresses himself specifically to the scholarly discipline of New Testament theology, Nils A. Dahl's criticism of the tendency toward christocentrism is well taken for the church as well ("'The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology,'" *Reflection*, 73 [1975], 5-8).