

PASTOR'S NOTES. What was (and is) a Jew? – Part 1

This would seem to be one of the silliest questions I have posed yet... and yet... while I can't attest to the truth of current news reports from various sources today, I can offer some history that might help us see things in a new light.

When I was teaching through the Gospel of John last year, I was blest by the work of a Jewish Christian (*Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg*) who struggled with the charge that this gospel is anti-Jewish. John's Gospel seems to lay all the blame on unbelief and the crucifixion of Jesus on the Jews. One might be tempted to believe that the Romans were the good guys (aside from the oppression, torture, and the crucifixion stuff). I grew up hearing that this gospel was often referenced by the Nazis in their "final solution."

There is a long history of this way of thinking. Justin Martyr (100-165) was by almost all standards, the model of Christian service, compassion, and self-sacrifice (he was killed for his faith by the Romans). Yet he wrote in 145 to a Jew (ten years after the Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem):

"For circumcision...which is from Abraham, was given for a sign: that you may be separated from other nations, and from us [Christians] and that you alone may suffer that which you justly suffer; and that your land be desolate, and your cities burned with fire... and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem."

(Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho XVI)

Justin's words seem unbelievably harsh. But much of the world of the early church was anti-Jewish, many early Christians did not know Jewish history or customs, and what they did know was this passage from Paul:

*"For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last."*

(1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, NRSV)

This passage should immediately raise some questions. Clearly the Romans killed Jesus, though the Jewish leaders were accessories. But wasn't Paul also a Jew? Why would he say "Jews" instead of the Jewish leaders or elders or some other term? I can't imagine anyone talking about their own group with such a sweeping generality – it's as if I (a white guy) would say to someone, "Looks like they arrested another white guy. That's all I need to know. You know those white guys break laws all the time." Something doesn't add up here. But look at this passage:

*"But after His brothers had gone to the festival, then He also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. The Jews were looking for Him at the festival and saying, "Where is he?" And there was considerable complaining about Him among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." Yet no one would speak openly about Him for fear of the Jews."*

(John 7:10-13, NRSV)

So what's going on here? The people feared the Jews? Aren't all the people at the festival Jews? Aren't all of Jesus' disciples Jews? Isn't Jesus Himself a Jew? Is John just going out of his way to make the Jews evil? Did someone change Paul's words in Thessalonians so they could lay all the blame on the Jews? People have wondered about these things for centuries. But I might have an explanation.

There is often a difference between what a group calls itself and what outside persons call them. I have come to believe that the leadership class may have accepted the term "Jews" to apply to themselves, the common people did not. They would have called themselves either Israelites (John 1:47; Acts 2:22, 29; 3:12; 5:35; 13:16; 21:28; Romans 11:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22) or Hebrews (Acts 6:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3:5). This makes perfect sense if we consider their Old Testament tradition. The only time the word "Jew" is used in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is what outsiders (like the wise men and the Romans) call them, and whenever Paul or Peter identify themselves as Jews, it is to an audience that includes outsiders (Acts 10:28; 21:39; 22:3; Galatians 2:14). Based on this, it would seem unlikely that the common people of Israel, including Jesus' disciples, would have called themselves "Jews."

The word "Jew" (in its original language) seems to have been given to the people when they were conquered. It is first used by Jeremiah, and then Daniel, and Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. But all of these last books mention Jews in Babylon and Persia, no longer living in Israel. So "Jew" became a way to identify the common bond among people who were beginning to be scattered around the world.

But while the Israelite leaders were taken to Babylon, the common people of Israel never left. Some of the leadership was later allowed to return, and they may have been ok with being called Jews, the common people never owned that for themselves. This would have been a major point of division between the leaders (the "Jews") and the common people. By Jesus' time, the leader's authority now extended beyond Jerusalem into Galilee, so even there, Jesus is challenged by "the Jews." So neither Paul or John in the scriptures above felt they needed to say "the religious leadership" – there was already a word for that: "the Jews."

The bottom line is this: **the Bible does not warrant the condemnation of a race of people called "Jews" because that's not what was meant.** The people of Israel were already hated by the Romans; there were only a few places in the entire Roman empire that needed to be run directly by a Roman governor. So this hatred, combined with this misunderstanding of the Bible, has fueled suffering and slaughter of "Jewish people" over the centuries.

This has been a partial answer to the question, What was a Jew? It's going to take me another article to show why this is important in our day and time.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.