

“This Is An Hard Saying: Who Can Hear It?”

by Philip Jenkins

Not too often these days does a church service offer me a moment of startling revelation, a line of scripture that stops me in my tracks. This past Easter, though, I was attending an Episcopal service, when I heard a line—or, more exactly, did not hear a line—that had just that effect. The minister, a recently ordained woman, was reading the famous passage in St. John’s gospel that describes the disciples gathering in great fear after the Crucifixion. She read how “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked. Jesus came and stood among them and said ‘Peace be with you’” (John 20:19). Though the words were familiar, something sounded wrong and, indeed, was wrong. What the minister had done was to omit the few words that described just *why* the doors were locked: “for fear of the Jews.” She had edited a scriptural reading in order to remove an unpalatable phrase, a hard saying. That’s right: She was censoring the New Testament.

In making this omission, she had committed two errors, one substantial in its implications, the other incalculable. On the lesser count, what we might call the venial sin, she was succumbing to a misleading and pejorative historical interpretation of Christian origins. But worse, she was responding to this problem by consciously changing the biblical text to mesh with her political preconceptions. If this were an isolated misdeed by one turbulent priest, I would not be too alarmed, but I am afraid that her omission is a token of a significant trend in contemporary Christianity and of the way modern people read—and misread—the Bible.

In the instance I am describing, the motives for the minister’s change are clear enough. She evidently shares a common cultural assumption about the roots of antisemitism, a view that can be expressed as a (rather dubious) sequence of propositions. According to this view, antisemitism is a central flaw of Western culture, which reached its logical culmination in the Nazi genocide; second, antisemitism is a direct outgrowth of Christianity, and of Christian hatred of Jews;

and third, Christian antisemitism has its roots in the text of Scripture. When the evangelist Matthew had the Jewish crowd cry, “His blood be upon us and on our children,” that sentiment became a self-fulfilling prophecy that was fully realized in the 1940’s. This perceived chain of causation, this link between the New Testament and the death camps, has recently gained a mass audience through James Carroll’s best-selling book, *Constantine’s Sword*.

In the aftermath of the Nazi genocide, it would have been amazing if Christians had not felt a fundamental obligation to atone for an anti-Jewish heritage and to purge any such elements from the faith. Only as late as 1959 did Pope John XXIII change the language of the ancient prayer in the Good Friday liturgy, in which Roman Catholics prayed each year for the conversion of “the perfidious Jews.” Christian-Jewish relations are a very delicate matter, and New Testament passages like John 20 are embarrassing for many believers.

Yet the argument presented by Carroll and others is open to attack from many sides. Most questionable is the connection between the medieval Christian tradition of anti-Jewish activism and the very different ideology of the Nazis. A vital distinction exists between anti-Judaism (hostility to the Jewish religion) and the much later and more lethal racial doctrine of antisemitism. Almost certainly, every so-called antisemitic passage in the New Testament was written by someone of pure Jewish descent, including St. John, St. Matthew, and the apostle Paul. All these writers, moreover, were as thoroughly suffused with the Jewish learning of the day as were any of their great rabbinic contemporaries. They denied the truth of the Jewish religion of their day, but insofar as they could have understood the concept of antisemitism, they would probably have described it under a blanket term like “the works of Satan” or “Antichrist.” A direct historical highway simply does not lead from the evangelists to Auschwitz.

The passage in John 20 records an undeniable historical fact—namely, the hostility between mainstream Jews and the deviant sect of the Nazarenes—and there is no reason why the phrase should not be read. But what was striking about the Easter service I attended was not just that the minister clearly hates the words “for fear of the Jews,” but that she felt free to exclude them from public reading.

What was being censored on this occasion was not the liturgy, not the customary rhetoric of sermons and pulpit exhortations, but the language of Scripture itself. She was rewriting the Bible to her taste.

This kind of biblical rewriting is not entirely new, but it has always been a very radical step, the last resort of the fanatic. Throughout Christian history, competing factions have responded to difficult biblical texts in a number of ways, but rarely by actually changing them. Adding to or subtracting from the Bible text was considered a dreadful sin, one that probably involved heresy. Knowing this, factions made their polemical points by means of creative translations. Even the most freakishly deviant versions of the Bible—such as that offered by the Jehovah’s Witnesses—claim, however questionably, to be retranslating rather than rewriting. For even the most marginal of Christians, the Bible is—to coin a phrase—holy writ. Often, too, committed activists tried to explain away inconvenient readings, to make them symbolic or “merely spiritual” in nature, or (better yet) to ignore them altogether. In trying to explain away the numerous scriptural references to the pleasures of wine, temperance advocates produced a body of exegesis that is ingenious, occasionally hilarious, and seldom convincing—but at least they tried to confront the issue.

Much rarer, at least since the days of the early Church, have been explicit revisions of the biblical text, aimed at purging the “hard sayings.” Certainly, some such attempts have been made, including the splendidly wrongheaded Jefferson Bible of 1816. What Jefferson did was to remove supernatural elements from the New Testament, to present Jesus as a fine moral teacher, whose career ended tragically with His Crucifixion. The book is fascinating both as an insight into the thought of a great American, and as a commemoration of the radical deist religion of its time, but it is far removed from any orthodox concept of Christianity. Equally bizarre—and far more sinister—was the attempt of the sadly misnamed “German Christian” sect under Hitler, which wanted to eradicate the whole Old Testament from the Bible.

For perhaps 1,800 years, the assumption has been that anyone purporting to speak within the Christian tradition must deal with the biblical text as it stands, whether they like that text or not. Yet, within the last 30 years or so, that idea has been transformed, so that people like my

Episcopal minister feel free to edit the text, even in liturgical reading. There are several reasons for this development. One factor has been purely commercial, namely, the huge proliferation of new Bible versions, aimed at every conceivable segment of what publishers know to be a vast market. There are Bibles for women, for men, for teens, for African-Americans, for Hispanics; we have the Recovery Bible, the Life Application Bible, several Twelve-Step Bibles, Bibles for every possible level of reading and comprehension. All put the text into accessible forms, most use paraphrases, and usually the editors of these texts—or, rather, the “authors”—have no qualms about straying from the intended sense of the originals. Most, also, fail to distinguish between the biblical text and the commentary, and only an alert reader can spot the fine line separating the two. As a result, you can find 50 possible translations (or paraphrases) of any given verse, and for even the hardest of sayings, at least a few of these possibilities will offer an interpretation that is not too terrifying or inconvenient. So why not pick one you like?

Most of these “translations” have no particular ideological bent, but we are on very different ground with modern biblical versions that try to accommodate some interest group or other. The best examples are the new versions of Scripture that claim to be “gender” neutral, to avoid appearing to exclude women from the Church. In some cases, they provide a valuable corrective to older translations that unjustifiably assumed that every general statement in the Bible must refer to men, rather than mankind. But commonly, “gender”-neutral translations simply are not translations, in the sense of trying to convey the meaning of what an original author meant to say. The Lord’s Prayer begins with “Our Father,” not “Heavenly Parent” or anything similarly banal, and any “gender”-neutral “translation” is simply wrong. Today, though, the criterion for translation demands more than technical accuracy: A translation is acceptable if it fits what we are prepared to hear, and that is an alarming precedent.

We can predict exactly which passages are going to be under attack in the Bibles of coming years, the phrases which (like “for fear of the Jews”) are going to retreat into footnotes, there to be explicated unto death, and perhaps to vanish altogether. Anything seemingly antisemitic will be first, to be followed by anything about

homosexuality. As the years go by, we should watch closely what happens to the condemnation of “homosexuals” in verses like 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. We should also trace the fate of words like “husband” and “wife.” Within a decade or two, these words might sound as obsolete as, say, fireman or stewardess, words that already produce embarrassed giggles when encountered by a modern film audience. Our present domestic terms will soon be on their way out of new Bible “translations,” replaced by something less biased towards heterosexuality, something like—what? “Life-partners”? It’s anybody’s guess.

Usually, the motives for these textual changes seem praiseworthy: the Episcopal cleric just wanted to avoid saying anything that might be hurtful to Jews. But once the biblical text becomes malleable, there are no limits to the ideological slants that can be imposed upon it. Today, the pressure comes from liberals, feminists, and gay activists; tomorrow, though, we might have racial nationalists trying to rewrite the Bible to uphold their own positions. Perhaps they might like to make *more* explicit and polemical the apostolic condemnations of the evils of Judaism, or to offer a more fervent attack on homosexuality. However powerful the temptation to play with the scriptural text, partisan editing of the Bible is a very dangerous process, and fighting the practice is in everybody’s interest.

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Oriental Fumin’

by J.G. Jatras

It was not what we have come to expect when John Paul II arrives in a Christian country—or in any country, for that matter. In place of adoring crowds lining the streets along which the popemobile made its stately progress, there were scattered groups of demonstrators hurling imprecations both angry and somewhat bizarre: “arch-heretic, two-horned, grotesque monster of Rome.” Was something lost in the translation?

These words, often quoted in the Western media, were those of a parish priest, presumably more moderate than

the monastic zealots who constituted the core of the antipapal reaction to John Paul’s historic pilgrimage to Greece. Some Roman Catholics—particularly conservatives who, like John Paul himself, are generally favorable toward the Orthodox East—were at least as puzzled as they were offended. All right, they figured, we could understand protests from the usual bunch of communists, feminists, and sodomites. But monks? And he even apologized! What more do you people want?

To begin with, let’s get the part about the apology out of the way. Frankly, I wish he hadn’t extended it, and not only because apologies to every group with an ax to grind have become the order of the day, with Bill Clinton the universally recognized master emeritus. (By contrast, John Paul, we can be sure, was sincere.) Saying “I’m sorry” for something he did not personally do not only is beneath his pontifical dignity, but serves to evoke a sappy emotional response on the part of some Orthodox that obscures the real points of division. (While we’re on the apology issue, let me add a footnote: If Rome really is sorry for 1204 and all that, how about giving us back some of the loot—notably, the relics those sticky-fingered Frangoi grabbed and which now hallow virtually every major cathedral in Western Europe. If you break into my house, trash the place, steal all my stuff, and then apologize, isn’t it reasonable for me to reply: “OK, but how about giving me back my VCR and my toaster?” Dibs on the Shroud of Turin!)

The more profound significance of the Greek reaction is that it is finally beginning to dawn on those decent Roman Catholics who see the Orthodox as natural allies in an immoral, neopagan world that sacramental union between Eastern and Western Christianity is not in the cards anytime soon—even if they do not fully understand why. As one commentator describing himself as “a Roman Catholic admirer of Orthodoxy” lamented:

Isn’t working closely to combat the functional nihilism that accompanies the spread of consumerist values a more pressing concern than fussing over the fate of the Filioque clause? The pope knows that the key question in the era of postmodernism and globalization is not what brand of Christianity the world will follow; it is whether the