



Does the New Testament Teach Anti-Semitism?

In a recent documentary aired by TVNZ called *The Investigator – Jesus the Cold Case*, the documentary maker, Bryan Bruce, set out to answer the question of who killed Jesus and why.

In the introduction to the documentary Bruce states that;

“According to the Gospels it was because his fellow Jews found him guilty of blasphemy, so they had him executed by the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate.”

In the documentary Bruce alleges that the traditional Christian answer, that the Jews killed Jesus because they believed he was guilty of blasphemy, is inherently Anti-Semitic and forms the basis for the Church holding and promoting Anti-Semitic views. He goes on to argue that it is ultimately this Christian Anti-Semitism that Hitler played upon to perpetrate the Holocaust in Germany and Poland.

What Bruce is asserting here is that the traditional Christian answer to the question of who killed Jesus and why is inherently Anti-Semitic and as such all those who hold to that traditional view also hold to an underlying Anti-Semitism.

In support of these allegations, Bruce appeals to an admission of guilt made by Pope Benedict XVI¹. In doing so Bruce falls into the all too familiar error of believing that Christian=Catholic, and that therefore the Pope speaks for all Christians everywhere. This is simply not the case. The Pope only speaks for the Catholic Church, and as such, only represents the views of that group.

However, the question is not whether this group or that group which claims the name of Christ, holds Anti-Semitic views or not; and it is not whether certain groups within Christianity have conducted themselves in ways that reflect an underlying Anti-Semitism.

¹ www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/03/02/501364/main20038389.shtml

The question is are they justified from the teachings of the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole to do so. Does the New Testament teach Anti-Semitism?

It is Augustine that is often credited with saying that no philosophy can be judged by its abuse. One needs to examine the true teaching of that philosophy and make a judgement from what is actually said.

Bryan Bruce argues that the scriptures lay the foundation for Christian Anti-Semitism. He argues on two fronts. We will examine his first line of argument in part 1 of this article, and look at his second line of reasoning in the second part.

In Bruce's first line of reasoning he argues that in the Gospel of John, the Jews are repeatedly presented as the adversaries to Jesus. For example, it is the Jews who argue with Jesus about what it is lawful to do on the Sabbath (John 5:10), the Jews who sought to kill Jesus (7:1), and the Jews who plead with Pilate to have Jesus executed (19:7). Bruce concludes from this that the Gospel of John blames the Jewish nation (the Jews) for the death of Jesus, and as such, John's Gospel promotes Anti-Semitism.

Bruce is not alone in his reading of this Gospel. Celebrated theologian and Church reformer Martin Luther also read John's Gospel and concluded that the Jewish nation were adversaries to Jesus and therefore to God. As a result Luther held some very definitely Anti-Semitic views. The question is are Bruce and Luther right to take this understanding from John's Gospel. I would strongly suggest that they are not.

Firstly, the Greek word translated into English as 'the Jews' is *Ioudaios*. This word can have several meanings depending on the context in which it is found. For example in John 4:9 where the Jews are named over against a neighbouring people group the Samaritans, clearly *Ioudaios* means the Jews as a nation of people. It is also used this way in 5:1 where we see the Passover described as a feast of the Jews, in other words, a feast celebrated by the people of the Jewish nation.

However, the word can also be used to mean the particular people from the area of Judea; the Judeans. We see it used in this way in John 11:7-8;

"Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?"

Here Jesus tells his disciples that he intends to return to Judea. His disciples are surprised because the last time he was there, 'the Jews' tried to stone him.

The disciples are here referring to an incident that took place on Jesus' last visit to Judea where 'the Jews' tried to stone him for blasphemy (John 8). Is it the Jewish nation that tries to stone Jesus? No, Jesus is in Judea, and so *Ioudaios* in this context means, the Judeans.

We see *Ioudaios* used in a third way in John 18 where we are given the account of Jesus' arrest.

Joh 18:1 When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

Joh 18:2 Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples.

Joh 18:3 So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

Joh 18:4 Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?"

Joh 18:5 They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.

Joh 18:6 When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

Joh 18:7 So he asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth."

Joh 18:8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go."

Joh 18:9 This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one."

Joh 18:10 Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.)

Joh 18:11 So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

Joh 18:12 So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.

Joh 18:13 First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.

Joh 18:14 It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.

In verse 12 we are told that it is the soldiers and officers of the Jews that arrested Jesus. What does this mean? Verse 3 tells us clearly that the soldiers and officers were sent from the chief priests and Pharisees, in other words they are the soldiers and officers of the chief priests and Pharisees. So in this context *Ioudaios* ‘the Jews’ specifically refers to the Judean leadership represented by the chief priests and Pharisees.

This is reinforced in verse 14 where Caiaphas gives council to ‘the Jews’ that it is expedient that one man should die for the people. This is referring to a previous passage in John’s Gospel (11:47-52) where a council of the chief priests and Pharisees is called, so again *Ioudaios* here means the Judean leadership, not the Jewish nation as a whole.

We have seen that the Greek word *Ioudaios* translated into English as ‘the Jews’ can have three meanings, the Jewish nation, the people of the area of Judea, and the Judean leadership - the chief priests and Pharisees. What we are to understand by the word is dependent upon the context in which we find it used.

Bruce’s interpretation of the words ‘the Jews’ does not take into account the context of what the Gospel is actually saying. As such, to lay the charge of Anti-Semitism at the feet of Christians on the basis of this Gospel is wholly inappropriate, a misreading of the text, and an illegitimate understanding that the scripture itself does not promote.

Anybody who reads Anti-Semitism out of these passages whether Bruce, the Pope, Luther or any other person, does so illegitimately. To find out what the words mean we must read the text in context, we must read out from what is actually written, not read in our own presuppositions. We must see and take seriously what the scripture is actually saying. Bruce fails to apply such critical reasoning and as a result he arrives at a faulty conclusion.

In the next part we will examine Bruce’s second line of reasoning.

Kristopher Bate

Director

Thinking Faith Ministries

