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**Article:**

Rollens, S., Vanden Eykel, E. and Warren, M. (2020) Confronting Judeophobia in the classroom. *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, 2 (1). pp. 81-106. ISSN 2633-0695

10.17613/8nx4-qk70

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## **Confronting Judeophobia in the Classroom**

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### **ABSTRACT**

After an arrest was made in the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting (27 October 2018), it came to light that the shooter's social media page was emblazoned with a citation from John's Gospel 8:44<sup>1</sup> and a rough paraphrase of what the shooter thought it meant: "Jews are the children of Satan." In the days that followed the shooting, educators scrambled to try and help their students make sense of what had happened. As three biblical scholars who teach in higher education in the UK and the United States, we outline our approaches to teaching about Judeophobia in the biblical studies classroom. From students who resist reading the gospels as dangerous texts for Jews to the subtler nuances of supersessionism in popular and scholarly understandings of the New Testament, we address the successes and failures of our own attempts to combat Judeophobia in our classrooms.

### **KEYWORDS**

Judeophobia; Anti-Semitism; Pittsburgh; Synagogue

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## **A Note on Terminology**

There is much scholarly debate regarding the preferred terminology to use when discussing racism and prejudice aimed at people who identify as Jewish. The three major options are anti-Semitism, antisemitism, and Judeophobia. This essay opts for Judeophobia for the following reasons. First, to label someone as a "Semite" is a category mistake; the adjective "Semitic" originally referred to language groups (Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, etc), not ethnic groups. Only in the modern period did the term Semite become transformed into a racial category that could supposedly be distinguished from its proximate other, the Aryan. Second, Judeophobia encompasses a wide range of beliefs and practices that have existed in numerous times and places before the term anti-Semitism existed. It allows us to speak of violence, prejudices, social inequality, and other forms of discrimination against Jews at different points in history, even in periods such as Graeco-Roman antiquity, when race and ethnicity were understood very differently. Third, it provides a parallel to the neologism Islamophobia, characterizing these phenomena (correctly) as comparable religio-ethnic prejudices; it also,

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<sup>1</sup> "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (NRSV).

as Jonathan Judaken points out, helps us make linkages between it and other similar phenomena, such as homophobia.<sup>2</sup>

### **Judeophobia in a Bible Belt Liberal Arts College<sup>3</sup>**

I am a professor<sup>4</sup> of Religious Studies in the so-called “Bible Belt” of the American South. Occasionally, when I tell people that I teach about ancient history and the Bible in this setting, they smile at me knowingly or almost with pity, as if to say, “I’m sorry you have to teach to *those* sort of people,” referring invariably to evangelical Christians. I don’t share their view. Not only did I spend much of my youth in the American South, but I also believe that such a view on Southerners is prejudiced and only serves to alienate professors from the students that they are supposed to be engaging. On the contrary, it’s actually pretty exciting to teach about the Bible in the South. Many of my students show up with a robust cultural knowledge of biblical content and are enthusiastic about learning more. Never in my (admittedly short) career of teaching have I seen so many lightbulbs go on while I’m teaching, so many “Oh, I get it now!” or “I’ve never thought of it that way!” moments. Even though many of my students have been culturally “steeped” in the Bible (whether because they themselves are Christian or because it pervades the regional culture that surrounds us all here), they have often never had the opportunity to use academic tools to study it—and even worse, some have been actively discouraged from asking academic questions about the Bible by church leaders. My classroom can thus be a safe space for examining biblical texts in a new light and for thinking critically about them.

There are some drawbacks to teaching in the American South, of course. Especially for my students who come from rural, Southern backgrounds, they have typically grown up in mostly white, Protestant communities. Occasionally and increasingly, they know Roman Catholics as well; in fact, certain regions in the American South (such as southern Louisiana) have a high concentration of Roman Catholics in comparison to surrounding areas. But by and large, the South is dominated by Protestant Christians. When it comes to non-Christian religions, the South lacks religious diversity, especially outside of urban areas. This means, unfortunately, that most of my students haven’t known many, if any, Jewish people, which affects how I approach such challenging topics as Judeophobia in my classes.<sup>5</sup> For one, students typically have no sense for the range of diversity within modern Judaism (Orthodox,

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Judaken, “Rethinking Anti-Semitism: Introduction,” *American Historical Review* (October 2018), 1122-1138, here 1133. Admittedly, another set of issues comes up in the ancient world, when we have differing categories for Jewish identities: Jewish, Judaeon, Hebrew, Israelite, etc.

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term “professor” in the American sense, that is, to indicate my role in the classroom and the way that students address me; it is unrelated to academic rank.

<sup>5</sup> The same can be said for Islam; many of my students from rural, Southern backgrounds do not know many Muslims and often hold stereotypical, outdated, or even erroneous beliefs about them due to this lack of familiarity.

Conservative, and Reform, for instance, mean nothing to most of them, nor do Ashkenazi or Sephardic), and for another, their knowledge about Judaism is routinely based on the often negative stereotypical representations that exist in the New Testament.

Early in my teaching career at another institution, I learned how embedded and naturalized such stereotypes could be. Once in my “Introduction to the New Testament” class,<sup>6</sup> my students and I were looking at the Gospel of Mark, specifically at the many places where Pharisees react negatively to Jesus’ interpretations of the Mosaic law. I asked my students why they would react negatively, hoping to start a conversation about how the law contains many precepts that are not self-explanatory, and that the Pharisees and Jesus were offering competing interpretations of these teachings. It makes sense, a student confidently pronounced, because the Pharisees were stubborn and obsessively devoted to an inflexible view of the law and “that’s just the way Jews are.” As uncomfortable as it was to have such a biased assumption spill out so naively in a university classroom, it was an important teachable moment where we could first, acknowledge, “Yes, that’s what the gospel wants you to think” and second, ask, “Why, then, would an author depict certain Jewish figures so negatively...especially when Jesus himself, all his disciples, and nearly everyone who came to hear his teaching was also Jewish? What’s going on here?”

The *tabula rasa* of religious knowledge among my students should be kept in mind when I describe my approach to addressing the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting (deemed by one of my colleagues “the worst act of Judeophobic violence in American history”<sup>7</sup>) in October 2018. The incident aligned almost horrifyingly well with the content of one of my classes. I was teaching a first-year course called “The Bible and Identity.” Unlike some other courses at the 100-level that are theoretically open to anyone who wants to enroll, this course was restricted to students who were new to university; nearly all were 18-19 year old students.<sup>8</sup> I had structured the course according to various thematic units, such as “Gender Roles and Social Identities” and “Family and Kinship Constructions,” and the like. The Pittsburgh shooting took place when my class and I were in the midst of the complicated unit devoted to disentangling Hebrew, Israelite, Jewish, and Judaeon identities in the Bible and the ancient world. The topic I had initially planned for November 2, 2018, was “Early Christian Polemic Against the Jews”

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<sup>6</sup> Class, module, and course are used interchangeably in this paper and reflect different regional ways of describing a semester-long, multi-session teaching unit.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Judaken, “White Christian Nationalism and Terrorism in Pittsburgh | Opinion,” *The Commercial Appeal*, n.d., <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/contributors/2018/10/29/white-christian-nationalism-and-terrorism-pittsburgh-opinion/1808434002/>.

<sup>8</sup> Rhodes College is a private, 4-year liberal arts college. Though it is located in the South, our students come from all over the country, and a significant portion are international students, too. They have varying relationships to biblical material, with some having never read these texts at all. Others come from an evangelical background that is quite common throughout the United States. No matter the case, our curriculum offers them ample opportunities to explore the Bible. All of our students take humanities courses that engage with the Bible from an academic perspective. While Rhodes has a Presbyterian history, moreover, it is no longer formally affiliated with the denomination, and courses on the Bible are taught using approaches from the academic study of religion.

with the assigned reading as the Gospel of John 2-21 and the Gospel of Matthew 23. My original goal for the class was for students to see how the representations of Jewish figures in the gospels are not objective reflections of reality, but rather, are deliberate literary constructions that function in various ways to create “villains” in the story of Jesus’ life. It’s a simplistic approach to this complex topic, but for first-year students, it’s an appropriate challenge for them, especially for those coming from Southern Baptist cultural contexts that stress inerrancy and a literal interpretation of the Bible.

How much more challenging when we had to wrestle with the fact that the Pittsburgh shooter had used a Bible verse to justify his violent actions that was drawn from the very text that we were reading for class.

All manner of troubling questions suddenly became relevant to the topic for that day. How could I lead the class through an examination of the anti-Jewish rhetoric in these ancient gospels, while simultaneously interrogating a modern instance of someone using their words to authorize extreme violence? Are verses such as John 8:42-44 in the gospels inherently “toxic”?<sup>9</sup> Is there a way to salvage these texts to tell us something important about ancient history and society?<sup>10</sup> Or must we just cordon off the uncomfortable, racialized passages and admit that they do not align with the values of equality that we hold today?<sup>11</sup>

My class had only eighteen students, which is typical for Rhodes, and this made it the ideal size for discussion. I opened the class by making sure they were familiar with recent events and asking what their reactions were. For many of them, Judeophobic violence was new and shocking; they had hitherto considered it a phenomenon of the past, successfully stamped out by the defeat of the Nazis in WWII. I also made sure that they were aware that the perpetrator had cited a verse from the Gospel of John as evidence for his Judeophobic

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Judaken, “White Christian Nationalism and Terrorism in Pittsburgh | Opinion,” *The Commercial Appeal*, n.d., <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/contributors/2018/10/29/white-christian-nationalism-and-terrorism-pittsburgh-opinion/1808434002/>.

<sup>10</sup> I want to leave aside the issue of salvaging these texts for religious purposes. At my institution, we study religion from an academic perspective. And while knowing about the history of the Bible can help students better understand their religious beliefs, I approach the topics without confessional interests, so that believers and non-believers can engage in the same conversation in the classroom. After all, my expertise likely clashes in some ways with the message about the Bible that believers hear in church settings.

<sup>11</sup> Using language of “we” in a classroom setting is tricky, because I don’t want to alienate anyone by presuming similar values or perspectives. However, since Rhodes is a private college with a distinct mission statement that students (theoretically) agree to when they accept admission, I often mobilize its mission statement to help provide guideposts in discussions of morality, even if these guideposts only represent ideals that ancient texts fail to meet. An excerpt from Rhodes’ mission statement emphasizes the importance of diversity and non-discrimination to its community: “We, the members of the Rhodes College community, are committed to creating a community where diversity is valued and welcomed. To that end, Rhodes College does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender identity or expression, color, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and national or ethnic origin, and will not tolerate harassment or discrimination on those bases” (<https://www.rhodes.edu/about-rhodes/rhodes-vision>)

agenda. I gave them an opening prompt to help them think about this discussion from a practical point of view:

Your friend says he doesn't want to be Christian, because the New Testament is Judeophobic, especially the Gospel of John. You disagree with him. How can you respond to his criticism?

After discussing this situation and letting them share some of their first impressions, we then turned to the text itself to think about the anti-Jewish polemic contained in its verses. I wanted to set up a problem to show the lack of logic behind Judeophobic interpretations of "the Jews" in John. We first focused on several specific passages<sup>12</sup> to problematize why a simplistic, literal interpretation of "the Jews" in John makes very little sense. The specific passages from John were:

- John 7:11-13: 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 8:31-32: Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."
- John 9:22: His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.
- John 4:7-9: A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." His disciples had gone to the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.
- John 8:42-44: Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

As we examined these verses, I asked students for volunteers to read each of them aloud before we tried to figure out what we might learn about the rhetorical construction of "the Jews" from each passage. The reading aloud had a pedagogical purpose: I wanted students not only to confront the prejudicial, stereotypical language in some of the passages (e.g., John 8:42-44), but also to hear how, in other places, the text itself challenges those very

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<sup>12</sup> All translations are from the NRSV.

stereotypes (e.g., John 8:31-32). This is important, because I've often found that when liberal Christians engage with the New Testament, they often skip to "the good stuff," to the generic moral bits that they can easily make relevant to their highly individualized lives in their neoliberal contexts.<sup>13</sup>

After reading each passage, we considered what sense is made, if any, for the gospel to be using the term "the Jews" to refer to a specific group of people. In particular, I guided them through the contours of an "interpretative matrix," as I call it, that renders a literal interpretation of "the Jews" nonsensical:

- First, we recalled the obvious fact that Jesus, his family, and his disciples were all Jewish. It is usually just implicit in the narrative, but occasionally it is stated explicitly for the reader (e.g., John 4:7-9).
- We then revisited a theme that is regularly discussed in all of my classes on early Christianity: that the Christian identity developed over time and that the first followers of Jesus didn't think of themselves as "Christians," but rather as Jews, who followed a Jewish teacher, messianic figure, wonder-worker, or some combination thereof.
- In addition, we looked at the absurdity in John's narrative when "the Jews" say the exact same statement at the exact same time—this is highly unlikely to be a historical record of anyone's actual speech. "The Jews," stylized as one homogenous opponent to Jesus and his followers, is clearly a literary device.

These observations made it absurd to suppose that Jesus was criticizing "the Jews" as an entire undifferentiated, ethnic group in this gospel; the label is simply not used consistently. The solution to the absurdity is the possibility that in some passages in John, "the Jews" must mean something other than what we mean by it today. Realizing that, we must be prepared to ask: what else can "the Jews" mean?

Scholars debate what the phrase "the Jews" in the Gospel of John actually refers to. Because this class was so introductory (indeed, the first university humanities class that many of my students have ever had), we didn't get into the question of the complexities of the Greek term *oi iudaioi*.<sup>14</sup> Rather, we left the term as "the Jews" (which is, importantly, the translation that white supremacists have relied on to try to justify their beliefs) and examined its inconsistent use in the Gospel of John, illustrated by the verses listed above. Then we turned to the sweepingly stereotypical, negative references, such as John 7:13. I proposed a basic othering strategy to explain the rhetorical work that these negative references were doing in the text: "the Jews," in verses where it is used polemically, is a cipher that refers to the people

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<sup>13</sup> Craig Martin, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 103-106.

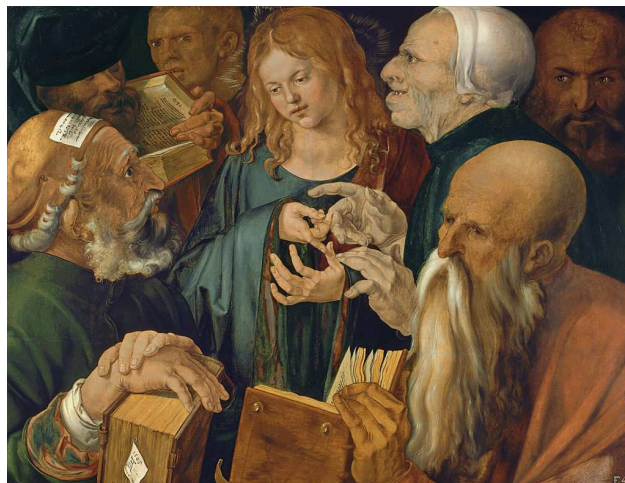
<sup>14</sup> There are numerous studies that argue for different translations of this term. This forum encapsulates the major issues and scholarly positions (with perspectives by Adele Reinhartz, Steve Mason, Daniel Schwartz, Annette Yoshiko Reed, Joan Taylor, Malcolm Lowe, Jonathan Klawans, Ruth Sheridan, and James Crossley): <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jew-judean-forum/>

who don't agree with the author's understanding of Jesus. It is a stock phrase and marker of deviance.

For many of my students, this was a liberating hermeneutical moment. They were accustomed to interpreting *some* passages in the New Testament metaphorically; for instance, they didn't have to be prompted to interpret Jesus' claim to be as "the bread of life" (John 6:35) as some sort of metaphor. But the possibility that an ethnic marker, one loaded with centuries of Judeophobic baggage, might be a flexible idiom that the author used only some of the time to single out his foes, was a brand-new idea.

If the Gospel of John primed students to see how "the Jews" in John might really be a placeholder for something else, Matthew 23 showed a specific example of what that placeholder might refer to: the Pharisees and the religious scribes. For instance, in Matthew 23:29-30, Jesus pronounces judgment against these figures: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'" In other words, with Matthew 23, one could really see how Matthew uses Jesus to undermine the authority of a *particular* group of opponents. Matthew 23 is not about all Jewish people in all times and places. Furthermore, with Matthew 23, it is obvious that the author is doing this precisely because he wants to argue that Jesus *should* instead be an authoritative interpreter of Jewish law. In other words, these conversations are happening *entirely within Judaism*. Modern, Judeophobic readings fundamentally misconstrue the intra-Jewish debates entailed in our earliest "Christian" texts.

We cap off the focus on texts with a turn to art. We examine how Judeophobia becomes so common in the European world that it leads to artistic products such as this:



["Christ Among the Doctors" by Albrecht Dürer (1506), public domain]<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Albrecht Dürer, "Christ Among the Doctors," Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albrecht\\_D%C3%BCrer\\_-\\_Jesus\\_among\\_the\\_Doctors\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albrecht_D%C3%BCrer_-_Jesus_among_the_Doctors_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg) (accessed February 6 2020).



This image depicts Luke's story of 12 year-old Jesus debating with other Jews in the Temple. There is no reason that Jesus should be depicted as ethnically different than the Jewish leaders, but--as my students never fail to notice--he is represented as delicate, fair, and essentially "white," while his interlocutors are rather differently construed. The result is that Jesus stands out as blatantly different than his Jewish contemporaries. Here we can thus see clearly how, no matter their intention, some New Testament texts have led to a distorted legacy about the place of Jesus within Judaism.

These exercises in textual analysis of early Christian polemic against Jews contributed to four goals that I had in view during this discussion (and again, these were first-year students, so the insights, while basic to seasoned learners, were often novel to them). The first takeaway was that texts are constructions of reality, not reflections of it. They are *selections* of material that deliberately includes and excludes for rhetorical goals. In Matthew, the author wants the reader to be on Jesus' side and to recognize his authority as a Jewish interpreter of the law, so he doesn't include things that humanize the Pharisees or create sympathy for their experiences. In John, the author is vexed that some don't share his views on Jesus, so he uses the alienating label of "the Jews" to refer to these consistently stubborn people, even though he knows well and good that Jesus, his family, and his first followers were all Jewish, too. "John"<sup>16</sup> himself is likely Jewish, as well.

Second, I wanted my students to realize that much of the polemic in the gospels is aimed at Jewish leaders or figures of authority; the observations we made in Matthew 23 deal with only a small selection of similar references in the canonical gospels. Undoing the history of Judeophobic readings of the New Testament involves careful attention to the *specific nature* of the conflicts represented in the gospels, which leads us to the realization that these texts were never intended to vilify an entire ethno-religious group. Appreciating the dynamics of the early Jesus movement, which in many instantiations, seems to have been an expression of messianic Judaism that was often in direct conflict with other forms of Judaism, makes perfect sense of these attacks on Jewish authorities. The gospel stories show that Jesus was remembered to rival the authority of other Jewish leaders by providing different interpretations of the Mosaic law, by engaging in healing activities, and by making eschatological pronouncements. He wasn't the only one to have done these things (though modern Christians often don't realize this), and so his actions threatened the authority of others who had hitherto been carrying them out.

Importantly, realizing the localized context of the polemic against Jewish leaders doesn't excuse the often disparaging rhetoric aimed at those groups (which is why I make my

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<sup>16</sup> Identifying the author of each of the New Testament gospels is notoriously challenging and certainly exceeds the contours of this essay. Perhaps the best evidence for the author of John's Jewish identity (whether that is understood religiously, ethnically, or geographically) is his familiarity with the geography of Jerusalem, which seems to be more detailed and accurate than that of the Synoptic Gospels. See, for instance, Wayne A. Meeks, "Galilee and Judea in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85.2 (1966): 159–69; Charles H. H. Scobie, "Johannine Geography," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 11.1 (1982): 77–84.

students read the passages out loud to confront it), but it does highlight its goal in its ancient context and underscore how religious texts are often engaged in strategies of competition. When students realize that they are capable of assessing the original meaning and context of this rhetoric better than white supremacists, it can be quite empowering.

My third goal was to allow them to see that texts have afterlives, entirely unrelated to the original intent of the author—and indeed, the “original intent” of an author is, for some, a problematic focus altogether.<sup>17</sup> In some ways, knowing about the ancient context of Judeophobic language in the New Testament raises as many problems as it solves. If the ancient function of this language was an othering strategy that John used to make distinctions between his brand of Judaism and others, what has happened in the intervening centuries to allow this rhetoric to become a justification (in the eyes of some people) for racialized violence? The mantra of my class is that *context always matters*. As Jonathan Judaken so eloquently put it regarding Judeophobia:

What has endured are persisting myths, images, tropes, or fantasies about Jews developed over the long history of Christian anti-Judaism. But these representations are reworked in different ways in different periods to serve different ends. Most importantly, the social forces, political frameworks and institutions, technological mechanisms, and economic conditions that have periodically driven the revival of these persisting myths are not the same in dissimilar contexts. Consequently, different eruptions of Judeophobia require different explanations.<sup>18</sup>

How have we arrived at a point where the ideas present in a 2000 year-old text can manifest in such violence, where it has become possible to “weaponize words in a context where assault rifles are readily available”?<sup>19</sup>

I also wanted my students to understand how to talk about these things both with me and with each other, which was my fourth goal for the class. As I once explained to a colleague in another discipline, university classes in the humanities give students the opportunity to practice being human. For my 19-year-old students, especially those who have been told by their pastors or parents not to ask questions about the Bible, this may be the first time that they are given a chance to think through the language contained in the Christian scripture.

After analyzing these ancient texts, I gave the students a handout with Candida Moss’ essay “How Bigots Easily Exploit the Bible for Anti-Semitism.”<sup>20</sup> A physical “takeaway,” if you

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<sup>17</sup> Famously, Barthes, “The Death of the Author.”

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Judaken, “White Christian Nationalism and Terrorism in Pittsburgh | Opinion,” *The Commercial Appeal*, n.d., <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/contributors/2018/10/29/white-christian-nationalism-and-terrorism-pittsburgh-opinion/1808434002/>.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Judaken, “White Christian Nationalism and Terrorism in Pittsburgh | Opinion,” *The Commercial Appeal*, n.d., <https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/opinion/contributors/2018/10/29/white-christian-nationalism-and-terrorism-pittsburgh-opinion/1808434002/>.

<sup>20</sup> Candida Moss, “How Bigots Easily Exploit the Bible for Anti-Semitism,” *The Daily Beast*, 30 October 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-bigots-easily-exploit-the-bible-for-anti-semitism>.

will, and if their roommate saw it lying on their desk later and was curious enough to take a look, even better. Moss' piece is a short, but helpful supplement to our discussion. At less than 1,000 words, it is easy to access and to digest, the perfect capstone after a mere 50 minutes on such a heady topic. And she doesn't pull any punches: she implicates our shared historical moments when these texts have been mobilized for Judeophobic violence: "The legacy of these stories is devastatingly clear. They laid the groundwork for and nurtured nearly two thousand years of anti-Semitism. There is no doubt that stories about the death of Jesus can provoke violence."<sup>21</sup> Importantly, even within such a short piece, Moss cites the views of three other biblical scholars; the result is an excellent window into how scholars talk about this and other difficult moral issues. Part of the reward of teaching at a liberal arts college, in my view, is my ability to *model* critical thinking and scholarly activity for my students, and I take that task very seriously. Students need to see that professors themselves struggle to understand things like the Pittsburgh shooting, even though we already "know" all about the long, tragic history of Judeophobia. They also need to see how we still speak up, time and time again, even though the refrain is the same.

As I write this, I am preparing to teach "The Bible and Identity" again for the coming semester, and I find myself wondering, "Will there be another public act of Judeophobic violence that I need to address in my class?" Even if this event had not aligned so conveniently with the topics in my course, I still would have made space in the schedule to address it in my classes. Humanities classes are often able to make space to do this in ways that, say, a chemistry class can't. If we in the humanities are going to be a truly human-centered discipline, we need to have this flexibility. About a week after covering this topic in my own class, I even agreed to teach the very same class in a colleague's first-year course. Her thematic focus was the Bible and Archaeology, but she, too, opted to forgo a day on the schedule to address Judeophobia. Such a move, I believe, is, in itself, part of the teaching process, too: showing students that some issues are important enough to disrupt our carefully thought-out schedules. Through this disruption, I hope, I'm teaching them that racism and social violence demands our attention and that their professors are willing to make time for such difficult topics.

## Judeophobia in Appalachia

I teach Religion at a small liberal arts college in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of western Virginia. In what follows I give an overview of my first day in the classroom after the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting. I have tried to reproduce conversations as accurately as my memory allows, and I have attempted to highlight not only my successes that day, but my failures as well. I end by commenting briefly on how I have conducted this particular lesson in subsequent semesters.

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<sup>21</sup> Candida Moss, "How Bigots Easily Exploit the Bible for Anti-Semitism," *The Daily Beast*, 30 October 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-bigots-easily-exploit-the-bible-for-anti-semitism>.

Our campus is rural, and profoundly so. We are about ten miles southwest of the nearest city—a town of about five thousand people—and the county that surrounds us is deeply conservative, both politically and theologically. Most of our students hail from Virginia, but they come to us from a variety of life settings and socio-economic backgrounds. We have a healthy population of first-generation college students, for example, and an even healthier population of students who are eligible for Pell Grants.<sup>22</sup> Roughly half of our students are persons of color, so we are also fairly diverse in terms of race. A past president of the college was fond of saying: “There’s no place like Ferrum.” One could quibble with the semantics of a statement like this, but the longer I teach here the more inclined I am to agree with its fundamental claim: this place is unique. And like all unique places, it brings with it a share of unique challenges. Not least among those is fostering a classroom environment in which our broad array of students can find some common ground.

Every semester I teach a course called “Literature of the Bible,” a 100-level survey that is generally populated by students who are fulfilling one of their two Religion/Philosophy requirements. I hear colleagues elsewhere complain about having to teach courses like this. There certainly are moments where such courses can become tedious, but Literature of the Bible has become one of my favorite courses to teach, and for two reasons. First, because we can’t possibly cover everything in one semester, I have permission to focus on those portions of the biblical texts that are fun to teach and that students generally respond well to; those who want to go into more depth have the option of taking one of my upper-level electives. And second, because I love watching the transformation that happens to my classes every semester.

Many of my students were brought up as some brand of “Christian,” and they arrive to class on the first day a bit apprehensive. Some are worried that because they “grew up around the Bible,” and that because of this the class is going to be “boring.”<sup>23</sup> What could I possibly tell them that they haven’t already heard from the pulpit or in the family Bible studies? Others, on the other hand, have been warned about college professors who make it their life’s work to destroy the faith of their students.<sup>24</sup> Some of my students were not raised in any particular

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<sup>22</sup> The Pell Grant Program in the United States provides need-based financial assistance to low-income undergraduate students.

<sup>23</sup> Quite a few of my students presume that they have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the biblical texts because they have grown up hearing some of the stories. Yet start-of-semester quizzes reveal that such assumptions are generally ill-founded. My experience is that students often grown up around Bibles and with a sometimes-misguided understanding of what they would find in these Bibles if they took the time to read them. Timothy Beal offers a helpful take on this phenomenon in his *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (New York: Mariner Books, 2012). Chapter 1 (pp. 1-28), in which he speaks about the Bible as “cultural icon,” is particularly instructive.

<sup>24</sup> To cite but one example of such a “warning”: the film *God’s Not Dead* was released in 2014 (the year I began teaching at Ferrum). In this film, an atheist philosophy professor requires that his students affirm the statement “God is dead” in order to pass his class. One student challenges him to a series of public debates on the subject of God’s existence, and in the end the professor has a “conversion experience.” I won’t spoil the specific details here, in case you haven’t seen it.

religious tradition, and they too are apprehensive at the start of the semester because they fear that I am going to preach to them and require them to talk about things relating to their (possibly-non-existent) spiritual lives. The transformation that I love to witness begins when all of these students realize that their expectations are all wrong.

While Ferrum College is affiliated with the United Methodist Church, our classes are taught from a non-sectarian perspective. My goal when I teach courses on the Bible is not to help students discover what a biblical text means to *them*, but rather to discover what these texts meant to those who wrote them and to those who have read and tried to understand them at various points throughout history. Students who approach the texts from a non-religious angle are therefore able to speak about these texts without any particular faith commitments, while students who approach these texts from religious angles occasionally discover a point of contact between how *they* understand a text and how *others* have perhaps understood the same text. It is a rewarding experience to watch students discover over the course of a semester that it is possible for them to have meaningful conversations about the biblical texts, despite the fact that in their own lives they may approach these texts from wildly disparate places.

My non-religious students frequently remain non-religious at the end of the semester, but leave the class with a better understanding of an influential collection of ancient texts. And my religious students frequently remain religious at the end of the semester, but with a more mature understanding of the complexity of biblical traditions, and a keen awareness that any claim about what “the Bible” does or does not say is almost certainly going to be mistaken or oversimplified. It was this approach to the biblical texts, the desire to understand where their authors were coming from, that drove my classes on Tuesday, 30 October 2018, our first meeting after the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting.

When I heard about the shooting over the weekend, I was horrified and disgusted. Upon learning that the shooter seemed to invoke John 8:44 as part of his rationale for this horrific act, my disgust was joined by a sense of disorientation. As a scholar of early Christianity, I am of course aware of the Judeophobia to which the New Testament has given rise, as well as the numerous instances of Judeophobia in the texts of the New Testament themselves. My disorientation was largely vicarious, arising from the knowledge that my students were also watching news coverage of the shooting, seeing the same reference to John’s Gospel, but without the tools to adequately process what they were seeing. We were already well into the second half of the semester at this point, having spent the first half analyzing selections from the Hebrew Bible. And then, in the weeks leading up to the shooting, we had read numerous stories about a first-century Galilean preacher whose teachings are squarely within the categories set up by those Hebrew texts, and who cannot be understood properly apart from them. But I hadn’t prepared them for this.

The Tuesday after the shooting, my classes were scheduled to talk about the parables of Jesus. I decided to push these conversations to the following week and instead talk about “the Jews” in the Gospel of John. I began class with a brief recap of the events that had

transpired only a few days before. I then projected a screenshot of the shooter's social media page (see Image 2, below) and asked the students to comment on what they saw in this image and how they made sense of it. There was about a minute of silence, followed by some rustling as they got their Bibles from their bags to look up John 8:44. The looks on their faces as they dug for their Bibles were easy to decipher; they were confident that once they saw the verse with their own eyes, all would be well because they would be able to dismiss this as a mistranslation or a misunderstanding. One by one they looked up, alarmed to have found that the shooter's paraphrase of John 8:44 wasn't as much of a stretch as they had hoped. What is more, they were stunned to find that the source of these words was actually Jesus himself. How could the Jewish Jesus, who we had spent weeks talking about and who many of them had spent their lives learning to follow as somehow God in human form, how could this Jesus say something like this?

A few minutes of silence followed, and then one student suggested: "Jesus wouldn't have said something like that." I responded: "Why not?" More silence. Another student suggested that maybe a scribe added it.<sup>25</sup> "Probably not," I replied. "We don't have manuscript evidence that would support that. What else y'all got?" A few more suggestions emerged, until finally the first student spoke up again and reaffirmed her earlier position: "I still just don't think that Jesus would have said something like that." And I responded again: "But why not?" I went on: "Pretend someone has come to you asking why Jesus says this in the Gospel of John. 'He didn't actually say that' isn't going to be convincing to someone when they have been taught that the Gospels are transcripts of things that he actually *did* say. So how do you help someone understand this?" I could tell that they were unsettled, and not quite sure how to proceed, so I decided to give them a bit of autobiography to help them understand not only what was at stake, but also where my exasperated tone was coming from and what I hoped to accomplish with them that day.

For much of my college career, I began, I was deeply religious and quite committed to the Bible as a source of wisdom, morality, and spiritual guidance. But like many of my students, I hadn't spent all that much time actually reading it. Rather, I just assumed that I knew "what it said" about pretty much everything. And I assumed, like so many, that "what it said" about X or Y was conveniently what I already happened to believe about X or Y. Most of my social circle shared similar assumptions about the alignment of "the Bible" with our own religious worldviews, and we enjoyed our fantasy. Ignorance was bliss, until it wasn't. On 7 September 2001, members of the Westboro Baptist Church came to my alma mater.<sup>26</sup> Students, faculty,

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<sup>25</sup> At the start of the semester we spend a day talking about textual criticism, and I show students a number of examples of "missing verses" in the New Testament (i.e., Mark 7:16, John 5:4). We talk about how scribes sometimes altered the texts they were copying, and how these alterations can be either accidental or deliberate. I caution them, however, against using scribal emendation as a way to dismiss "difficult" stories or sayings that they otherwise don't know how to address.

<sup>26</sup> Based in Topeka, Kansas, the Southern Poverty Law Center describes the Westboro Baptist Church as "arguably the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America" (SPLC, "Westboro Baptist Church," <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/westboro-baptist-church>). They are known for

and staff were warned ahead of time that they would be on campus, and we were encouraged to ignore them.<sup>27</sup> Most heeded this instruction, but many did not. I was among the handful who did not.

Ever confident in my knowledge of the Bible (of which, I remind you, I had read very little), I went to the gathering and approached an older gentleman who was wearing a cowboy hat (I learned later that this was Fred Phelps, the founder of the WBC). He was carrying two signs: one read “fags burn in hell,” and the other read “God hates fag enablers.” I took a breath, cleared my throat, and said to him: “Show me where the Bible says any of these things.” He snorted, and asked me if I had a Bible on me. I told him I did, and he instructed me to open it up to Leviticus 18:22 and read out loud. I did: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (NRSV). I paused, and then looked up to see him grinning at me. “Now,” he said, “turn to Leviticus 20 and read verse 13.” I started this, so I did. “If a man lies with a male as with a woman,” I read, “both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them” (NRSV). “So what you have here” he declared triumphantly, “is clear evidence that fags are an abomination and that God wants them to die. I’d say that settles it, wouldn’t you?” I disagreed (and still do, for the record), but at the time I had no idea how to respond to this. I was embarrassed, and I walked away.

I spent the weekend stewing about the experience, and in the wake of the September 11 attacks the following Tuesday, I switched my major from Psychology to Religious Studies. As a person with deep religious commitments, as well as a keen sense of the importance of social justice and progress, I found myself in desperate need of an alternative to what I saw as two extremes: first, that Christians were bound to uphold every word of the biblical texts as they are written; and second, that the Bible was an antiquated tome that had no value other than as a sometimes-interesting historical artifact. While my religious views are different now than they were when I was a college student, I see my goal in the classroom as continuing to help students navigate between whatever extremes they might have vis-a-vis the biblical texts. This is where I end my autobiographical account.

I shared this story with my class that Tuesday (and have continued to do so in subsequent semesters) not to get them stirred up emotionally, but to highlight a point made at the start of this article, namely, that homophobia and Judeophobia are categorically similar in a number of ways. And on a practical level, many (if not all) of my students know an LGBT person, but most have virtually no experience whatsoever with Judaism. So speaking about homophobia at the outset resonates with them more than Judeophobia, and it helps them understand what’s at stake in the conversation. The strategy described here will undoubtedly

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their web address, “God hates fags dot com” (link not given so as to not drive traffic to their site) and for their tendency to picket the funerals of soldiers.

<sup>27</sup> Our campus newspaper announced the WBC’s intention to picket a few days before they arrived. That issue is available here: <http://digitalcollections.smu.edu/digital/collection/stud/id/7413/rec/2>. The paper also did a writeup in the aftermath of their picket, available here: <http://digitalcollections.smu.edu/digital/collection/stud/id/7680/rec/3>

look different depending on the comfort level of the instructor as well as the institution that she or he teaches in. But I can say that in my case, I've found it to be an effective way of framing the conversation.

At this point I brought their attention back to John 8:44, and we did a bit more collective brainstorming on what this statement is doing in the Gospel of John. This time around I had better luck eliciting responses. Our conversation quickly moved rather quickly toward the idea that while the "you" in Jesus's "you are from your father..." certainly refers to "Jews," it most certainly does not refer to "all Jews everywhere." One student who had been skimming through the pages surrounding this statement made the point that the narrator refers throughout these pages to "the Jews" as a group distinct from Jesus and those who follow him. "And that doesn't make sense," she noted, "because every person in this story is Jewish." She noted as an example the following story of the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41).<sup>28</sup> Specifically, she noted where "the Jews" don't believe that the man had once been blind (John 9:18), and where the parents of the man refuse to speak because they are afraid of "the Jews" (John 9:22). "This makes as much sense," the student continued, "as someone telling a story about me, and saying that I was afraid to leave my dorm because of the students. I'm a student. We're all students. That doesn't make sense."

Other students chimed in at this point and suggested that when the narrator refers to "the Jews," maybe they are using that as a sort of shorthand for a smaller group: the Pharisees, people who live in Jerusalem, or maybe just people that seem to disagree with what Jesus is doing or saying. So also when Jesus tells those gathered that "you are from your father the devil," it stands to reason that he (or, more accurately, the author of the Fourth Gospel) does not have in mind all Jews everywhere, but instead refers here to a smaller subset whose precise identity remains somewhat mysterious. In response to the last point, I asked them what they thought this shows us about how this particular author saw Jesus. After a bit of prodding, one student suggested that perhaps this shows that the author believed Jesus was either not Jewish or was "a different kind of Jewish" than the others in the story. This comment highlighted a problematic lacuna in the sequence of my course.

When I first introduce the gospels in this class I emphasize the fact that Christianity begins as a movement within first-century Judaism, and we talk quite a bit about the various groups that exist within that matrix. Then, when we get to Paul, we spend a lot of time discussing how Paul "translates" this movement for Gentiles. But what I realized is that I hadn't really discussed the internal "split" that happens when claims about the person of Jesus develop to the point that they are judged as "incompatible" with, for example, messianic expectations or the oneness of the god of Israel. The question of the "parting of the ways" is by no means an easy one to address, of course. The evidence does not suggest that such "parting" was a singular event but rather a complex series of factors that transpire over

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the insights of this student, this story is now part of the standard package of readings that I assign when we talk about Judeophobia in class.



centuries.<sup>29</sup> Yet perhaps especially in John's Gospel, we can see those types of dynamics at work in how the evangelist tells his stories. And knowing that these dynamics are present, and that they are affecting the contours of the story, helps the reader understand the potential background behind the narrator's references to "the Jews" as well as Jesus's words in John 8:44.

One model for the possible background of John's Gospel that I find helpful in the classroom is that of Raymond Brown. In his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, Brown offers a hypothetical reconstruction of the alleged turmoil that shades the rhetoric of John's Gospel.<sup>30</sup>

His argument assumes three phases. First, "the Johannine community" at the heart of the Gospel first took shape in the synagogue, under the leadership of the so-called Beloved Disciple. Then, for various reasons, that community was expelled from the synagogue at some point. Brown argues that this is the background behind verses like John 9:22: "the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." Finally, the community that was expelled from the synagogue begins to define themselves over and against the group that expelled them. Brown uses this final phase to explain sentiments like the one expressed in John 5:38: "you do not have [the Father's] word abiding in you, because you do not believe him who he has sent." Brown argues, therefore, that when the author of John's Gospel uses the category "the Jews," this is indicative of a "hostile" relationship that comes about later but is then woven anachronistically into earlier narratives.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, the simplicity of Brown's thesis is one of the grounds on which it has been critiqued. But this same simplicity is one of the reasons I've found it useful in the undergraduate classroom. It's one way of making sense of the available data, and every detail need not be "correct" in order for the broader theory to have some heuristic and pedagogical value.<sup>32</sup> Yet as Amy-Jill Levine reminds us: theories like Brown's, while compelling and useful, by no means exonerate the author of the Fourth Gospel from the charge of Judeophobia. While it may be tempting to dismiss the author's rhetoric as indicative of an "in-house fight," Levine notes that we do well to remember that "insider location does not preclude one's being seen as a hater of the internal group."<sup>33</sup> What is more, regardless of whether we

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Paula Fredriksen's analysis in "What 'Parting of the Ways'? Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City," in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 35-63.

<sup>30</sup> The argument first appears in Raymond Brown, "The Passion According to John: Chapters 18 and 19," *Worship* 49.3 (1975): 126-34, esp. 130-31; and then more prominently in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> So Brown, *Community*, 66-69.

<sup>32</sup> Brown says as much in his Preface to *Community*: "if sixty percent of my detective work is accepted, I shall be happy indeed" (7).

<sup>33</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 105.

consider these passages in John's Gospel to be Judeophobic vis-à-vis the author's intention, the fact that they have been used for centuries to fuel the fires of Judeophobia is indisputable. Brown's reconstruction of the struggles of the Johannine community helps provide some nuance, then, but it by no means "solves" the problem.

What began as an impromptu conversation in the wake of a horrific tragedy revealed a number of gaps in the sequence of my intro course. As such, this initial conversation forced me to rethink how I approach John's Gospel in the classroom. In subsequent semesters I have introduced the idea of the "parting of the ways" earlier, and have put greater emphasis on dating the gospels in relation to this dynamic. As preparation for class, I have students read John 5-9 and address the prompt: "The narrator of John's Gospel makes frequent references to a group that he calls 'the Jews,' and this label is frequently used in a negative sense. Why might this be unusual in stories about Jesus and his disciples?" The array of responses to this prompt is diverse, but this usually contributes in helpful ways to the discussion. My students generally leave these classes overwhelmed, and with far more questions than answers. But I am ok with this, as I figure the "easy" answers have most often contributed to our lack of understanding and the violence that it too often arouses.

### **Judeophobia in UK Higher Education**

In my time as Lecturer and now Senior Lecturer at the University of Sheffield in Yorkshire,<sup>34</sup> UK, I have observed that Judeophobic views are subtly pervasive in the UK classroom. While elsewhere I will argue that the seeds for these views are first sown in the GCSE and A-Level curricula, they appear to be well established by the time students enter university. These include the belief that the God of the Hebrew Bible is cruel, vengeful, and violent, while the God of the New Testament is loving, kind, and forgiving; the belief that Jesus hated sacrifice and therefore Jewish Law; and the belief that the New Testament represents 'true' inward belief as opposed to the 'empty' ritual of the Pharisees. I have even had to correct colleagues outside of biblical studies on these issues, so pervasive are they.

The focus of my discussion for this essay will be on a module called "Jesus and the Gospels." This is a one semester (half-year) module that introduces students in their second year to the methods of historical analysis of Jesus through the extant texts. My approach to the module broadens the scope to the social and economic world of the first century and to a range of texts outside of the canonical New Testament. Students read early Jewish apocalypses, learn the very basics of exploring Mishnaic literature, and read some non-canonical gospels and acts. While I stress throughout the module that Jesus and his followers were Jewish, both before and after Jesus' execution, and that Paul wrote from a Jewish perspective, one week (2 hours) is spent entirely dedicated to Judeophobia in the New

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<sup>34</sup> These positions are roughly equivalent to Assistant and Associate Professor in North American universities.

Testament, in a unit called 'Jesus, Jews, and Christians: the Construction of Identity in Gospel Narratives.'<sup>35</sup>

By this time in the module, about half-way through, students have already been guided to read ancient texts critically and have read scholarly articles about each of the four canonical gospels and about a few non-canonical ones. We have discussed and analysed Jesus' exhortations in Matthew's Gospel to uphold the Law (5:17-48) and that author's consistent reference to the canonical prophetic works in what is now the Hebrew Bible in order to support his view that Jesus represents a 'fulfillment' of those texts.<sup>36</sup> We have looked at anti-Jewish rhetoric in Gospel of Peter, where the Passion story explicitly blames Jews for almost every aspect of Jesus' crucifixion. The unit on the social context of the early Jesus movement discusses apocalypticism, eschatology, messianism, and resurrection, and introduces students to texts such as the Qumran fragments, early Jewish apocalypses, Philo and Josephus, and the economic and social structures in Judea and in the Diaspora. In other words, students for the first half of the module have been primed to examine the Gospels as products of a dynamic Jewish world.

In preparation for the week on Jesus, Jews and Christians, students read three academic articles, each of which address the issue of Judaism within the New Testament from a different perspective.<sup>37</sup> The article by Matthias Henze pushes back against common assumptions that Jesus abolished Jewish Law, and gives examples from the Gospels to support its argument. In his introduction, he makes some of the same observations about public understandings of ancient Judaism that I have noticed among my students:

During my presentations on Jesus and the law in several churches, I was struck by two sentiments that I heard repeatedly from people in the audience. The first: At the time of Jesus, Jews had a rather narrow understanding of the law. Their religious lives were largely organized around the interpretation of, and strict obedience to, the law, which they took to an extreme. And the second sentiment: Jesus overcame this form of religion and freed his followers from the law. Jesus abolished the law and replaced it with love and common sense. He called on people to follow the Golden Rule and to love God and neighbor, which, after all, is much more sensible than following a primitive set of antiquated rules. Why do so many Christians today believe that Jews at the time of Jesus were fixated on

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<sup>35</sup> A week on "Palestine at the Time of Jesus" precedes this week, and a week on various Jewish and non-Jewish comparisons for Jesus (e.g. hero, messiah, prophet, healer) comes later on.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Matt 1.22–23; 2.6, 15-16, 23; 4.15-16; 12.17-21, etc.

<sup>37</sup> Adele Reinhartz, "Judaism in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation* (2009): 382–393; Daniel Patte, "Anti-Semitism in the New Testament: Confronting the Dark Side of Paul's and Matthew's Teaching" *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 78 (1988): 31-52; Matthias Henze, "Did Jesus Abolish the Law of Moses?" in *Mind the Gap: How the Jewish Writings Between the Old and New Testament Help us Understand Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 115–146.

the law? One reason is the way in which the evangelists write about the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees in the Gospels.<sup>38</sup>

He notes in this excerpt that the anti-Pharisaic rhetoric of the canonical gospels is convincing to readers who have not interrogated the texts for bias, and that it is then expanded to Jews in general. In tracing the role of law (*torah*) in biblical and early Jewish texts, Henze not only showcases the diversity of definitions of 'law' among Jews, but also how Jesus and his earliest followers (e.g. Paul) understand themselves as participating in and upholding *torah* in that tradition. This article is useful for students to read for two reasons: it pushes back against the idea of a 'revolutionary' Jesus, while illustrating the myopic view of Jews and Judaism portrayed in the Gospels.

Adele Reinhartz's article, "Judaism in the Gospel of John," outlines the fraught relationship among Jesus-followers and Jews expressed by the author of the Fourth Gospel. Reinhartz outlines "both the positive and negative elements of John's portrayal of Jews and Judaism, and suggests some ways that twenty-first century readers might come to terms with this problematic issue."<sup>39</sup> Building on her previous work which examines John's Gospel as a multi-level story, Reinhartz reminds readers that *oi ioudaioi* represent the cosmic enemy of God, a hard reminder indeed.<sup>40</sup> However difficult stating this explicitly is for students to hear, it helps to break down assumptions about a uniformly loving and forgiving Jesus and prompts students to ask questions of 'what now?' which Reinhartz goes on to answer. In observing many examples in which the author speaks favourably about Jews (e.g. 11:1-44), Reinhartz provokes readers to consider the choice they have in engaging with troubling texts, and that confronting difficulties in scripture is a better way of doing scripture honour than simply pretending the legacy of specifically Christian Judeophobia doesn't exist.<sup>41</sup> This reading prompts students to reflect on that choice and to consider whether apologetic or defensive responses to texts that may be important to them are doing harm or good to communities of others around them.

Patte's article explicitly addresses the question of intentionality. He uses semiotic theory to tease apart the effect a text has on readers from the hypothetical intentions of its author, focusing specifically on the Gospel of Matthew and on Paul's letters.<sup>42</sup> He carefully separates the Jewish authors from their works' use by exegetes. Rather than critique articles and essays

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<sup>38</sup> Henze, "Did Jesus Abolish the Law of Moses?", 115.

<sup>39</sup> Reinhartz, "Jews and Judaism in the Gospel of John," 382. Reinhartz's recent book, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Fortress Lexington, 2018), takes the idea of the Gospel of John's rhetorical effect further and asks us to consider the Gospel's intentions as well as its historical effects.

<sup>40</sup> Reinhartz, "Jews and Judaism in the Gospel of John," 386. She also rejects the Gospel as an ecclesiological tale in the aftermath of some expulsion from the synagogue (388-390).

<sup>41</sup> Reinhartz, "Jews and Judaism in the Gospel of John," 393.

<sup>42</sup> Patte, "Anti-Semitism in the New Testament," 33.

published by others scholars, Patte selflessly uses his own previously published work to illustrate that authorial intention does not guarantee that a piece will be free of Judeophobia.

This article is important for students in several respects. First, it encourages difficult self-reflection, since as Patte says, "It is not enough for the exegetes to have good intentions, that is, it is not enough simply to want to avoid anti-Semitism, to be committed to rejecting anti-Semitism."<sup>43</sup> Rather, students learn that taking action against Judeophobia involves challenging and thorough self-reflection. Second, it provides a rebuttal to the student response that I get annually when teaching this unit, that since the so-called parting of the ways has not yet happened, the texts in the New Testament cannot possibly be anti-Semitic. Patte shows that meaning is slippery and depends on reader rather than author; he provides space for students to engage critically with the ways that the New Testament has been used and continues to be weaponised against Jews.

Students were asked to prepare notes or thoughts on the following questions in advance of the class session:

- What argument does each article make? Come up with a 1 sentence summary of each to make sure you understand.
- How did Henze's article change or challenge your thinking about Jesus's relationship with Jewish law? about the Gospel authors' relationship(s) with the law?
- According to Reinhartz in "Judaism in the Gospel of John", what problems does the Gospel of John have re: Jewish-Christian relations?
- What does Levine's article contribute to the conversation about the depiction of Judaism in early Christian texts? Do these ideas confirm or challenge the ideas in Reinhartz's Gospel of John article? Give examples to support your thinking.
- Is it fair to describe any or all of the canonical Gospels "Jewish texts" What would each scholar make of this claim? Describe whether you agree or disagree, using evidence.
- What is at stake, for Reinhartz, in the representation of Judaism in the Gospel of John? What's wrong with the "expulsion theory"? What does an "Engaged Reading" yield?

When I taught the module in Autumn of the 2018-19 academic year, the week fell only a month after the Pittsburgh Synagogue murders.<sup>44</sup> As an instructor, I was getting increasingly frustrated with continually having to push back against the pernicious (but often, I hope, unintentional) Judeophobic assumptions that were repeatedly made by students during discussion, especially by the seminarians in the room, which may have been merely because they often dominated the conversation. In previous iterations of the module, I had not been as direct in pushing students to consider their own role in perpetuating anti-Jewish

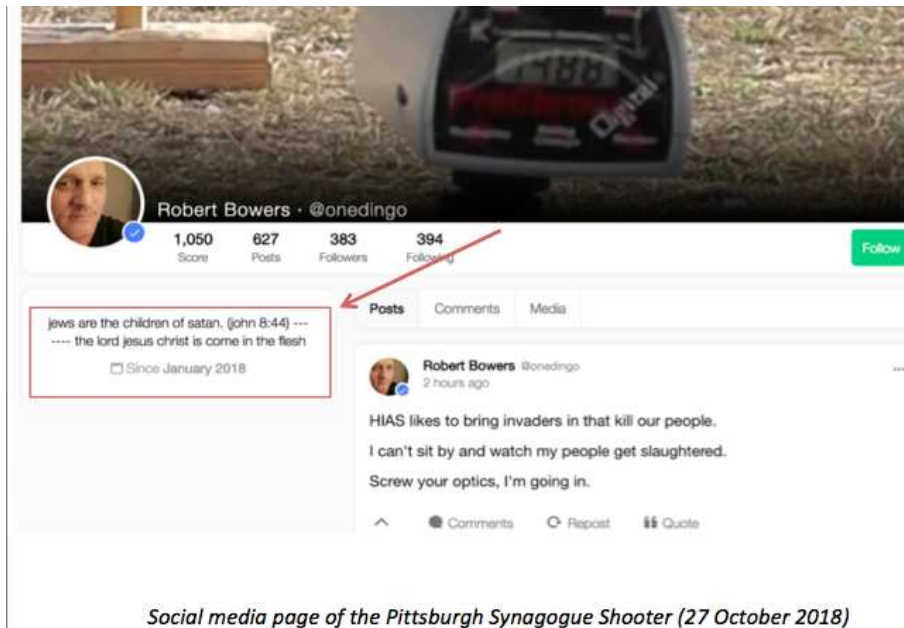
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<sup>43</sup> Patte, "Anti-Semitism in the New Testament," 35.

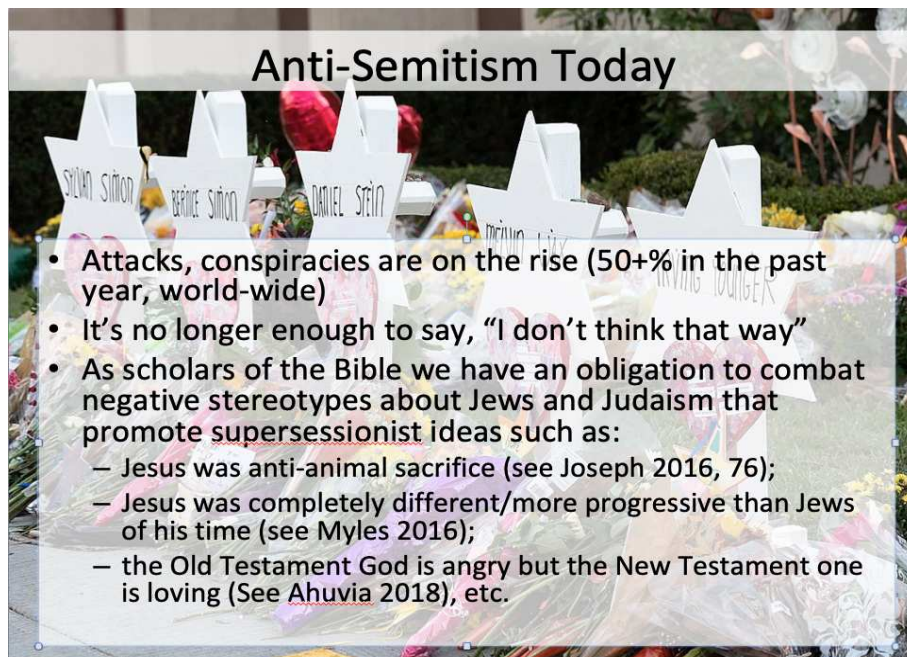
<sup>44</sup> For a timeline of anti-Semitic incidents, see

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_antisemitism\\_in\\_the\\_21st\\_century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_antisemitism_in_the_21st_century)

assumptions; however, the rawness of my sentiments in 2018 provoked me to open my lecture for the week with a screen capture of the shooter's social media profile and with a slide of statistics and the responsibilities of biblical scholarship to combat anti-Judaism.



*Image 2; powerpoint slide used for teaching, annotated with red box and arrow by author.*



*Image 3*<sup>45</sup>; powerpoint slide used in teaching. Background image from Wikimedia Commons. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tree\\_of\\_Life\\_Synagogue\\_Memorials\\_10-30-2018\\_01.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tree_of_Life_Synagogue_Memorials_10-30-2018_01.jpg))

<sup>45</sup> References on this slide were linked for students to read on MOLE after the lecture. Mika Ahuvia, "Us vs. them: Challenging stereotypes about Judaism in the wake of Pittsburgh shooting," *Medium* 2 November

The lecture portion of the class traces the discussion around the Parting of the Ways, to provide context for the depiction of Jesus' interactions with Jews in the canonical and non-canonical Gospels. Together, we read through excerpts from John Chrysostom's *First Speech Against the Judaizers*, as well as portions of Reinhartz's article, "A Fork in the Road or a Multi-Lane Highway? New Perspectives on the 'Parting of the Ways Between Judaism and Christianity.'"<sup>46</sup> Reading together in class creates an environment of exploration with the aim of inviting students to learn beyond their assigned reading and to introduce some of the major ancient and contemporary authors pertinent to the discussion.

I then introduce the concept of supersessionism and define some of its various types. I explain that supersessionism says that Christianity represents the final development of Judaism, and that Judaism, in fact, is nothing but a *preparation* for the ultimate Truth, which is the Christian Gospel. Judaism is therefore incomplete, according to supersessionist views. I give three subcategories and some names indicative of thinkers who advanced those views:

- *Punitive supersessionism*: Jews who reject Jesus as the Jewish Messiah are consequently condemned by God, forfeiting the promises otherwise due to them under the covenants. (Luther)
- *Economic supersessionism*: the view that the practical purpose of the nation of Israel in God's plan is replaced by the role of the Church. (Justin Martyr, Augustine, Barth.)
- *Structural supersessionism*: minimizing or denying the importance of the Hebrew Bible for Christian thought.

After reviewing some excerpts on intentionality versus effect from Patte's article, we then go through some examples from the New Testament.

All of these twenty-seven texts [i.e. the NT]... involve polemics against the Jews and/or Judaism. Furthermore, these polemics against the Jews are not some minor issues which could be shown to be secondary and left aside. They are an intrinsic part of the message of these texts. [...]

We have two questions rather than one: (1) Do the New Testament texts involve an anti-Semitic intentionality? (2) Is the effect of these texts upon the readers anti-Semitic? [...]

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2018, <https://medium.com/@mikaahuvia/us-vs-them-challenging-stereotypes-about-judaism-in-the-wake-of-pittsburgh-shooting-2b56710321d4>; Myles, Robert J. "The Fetish for a Subversive Jesus." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14, no. 1 (2016): 52–70; Joseph, Simon J. "Jesus and the Temple Incident: A New Proposal." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 14, no. 1 (2016): 71–95. I also include a link to the library copy of *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (Paula Fredriksen and Adele Reinhartz, eds; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Reinhartz, Adele. "A Fork in the Road or a Multi-Lane Highway?: New Perspectives on the 'Parting of the Ways' between Judaism and Christianity." In *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, 280–95, 2006.

It is essential to determine for each text of the New Testament whether or not the polemics take place ‘within Judaism’ as a family dispute so to speak. If they do, there cannot be any ‘intentional anti-Semitism.’ But, such discourses might still have an ‘anti-Semitic effect.’”<sup>47</sup>

One of the most challenging aspects of this lesson is getting students to think critically about intention versus effect. In this way, Patte’s article offers a useful example; since Christian students can often be quite defensive about Christianity’s long history of often violent Judeophobia, it also helps that Patte writes from an explicitly Christian perspective. Reminding students of what they read prior to class helps create space for reading the New Testament texts critically. Together, we read and discussed John 6:28-59; Galatians 3:6-14; and Romans 4:1-12. Students were asked to reflect on what kind of Judeophobic effect these texts might have to someone engaging with them uncritically, and were encouraged to view these excerpts using the types of supersessionism outlined earlier in the class.

Finally, we discussed the theological aftermath of New Testament anti-Judaism. I provided quotations from Justin Martyr, Hippolytus of Rome, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Pope Innocent III, and Vatican II’s 1965 statement (repeated by Pope John Paul II in 1991) that “The Church is the new people of God.”<sup>48</sup> Although this series of quotations is very difficult to listen to, it traces the rhetoric of Judeophobia to the present day and demonstrates the ramifications for leaving supersessionism unchecked. I then ask the students to reflect on what they can do in their own scholarship to make sure they don’t repeat the same mistakes.

Students find this class very challenging, and some continue to resist the implication that their statements or anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in the New Testament might contribute to anti-Semitism. However, I also noticed a difference in the work handed in before this lesson and after; whereas the assignments I read prior to teaching them explicitly about Judeophobia in biblical studies were frequently marred by supersessionist claims, the final projects were more careful in their approach. This is not a game-changing result, unfortunately, and it is an ongoing struggle with each new year of students.

## Conclusion

Some common threads run through each of our experiences teaching this difficult subject matter. The first is that each of us is committed to teaching interpretive frameworks with which students can analyse new materials. This means that above all, we want students to walk away from our classes better able to talk about and engage with difficult issues like Judeophobia. Tackling difficult topics in the classroom sets a model for not being “too polite”

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<sup>47</sup> Patte, “Anti-Judaism in the New Testament,” 37, 43-44.

<sup>48</sup> [https://web.archive.org/web/20121020145251/http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19911106en.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20121020145251/http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19911106en.html)



to talk about religion or politics, or the violence done in the name of either or both. Students have, for the most part, been receptive to engaging with these issues, and to taking on responsibility in learning more about inadvertent complicity in Judeophobic rhetoric. More often than not, even though students find such heavy discussions challenging, they are keen to delve into the implications of problematic texts; indeed, it can drive their interest in studying them.

Second, each of our classes attempts to make connections between ancient and contemporary contexts. Again, this is a skills-focused lesson in which students not only gain familiarity with the content of New Testament and related texts, but also the ability to critically engage with such texts' impact, in the time they were written and directly afterwards, but also the legacy (sometimes unintended) that texts have had outside their own temporal milieu. As such, cultural context likewise affects pedagogy. Our approaches are responsive, changing depending on the needs and questions our students have. The texts we study hold cultural and often spiritual resonance for our students; students are therefore just as much a part of the context as anyone else. To somehow pretend that these texts do not have these resonances with our students stands to enact significant pedagogical barriers in the classroom. The fact that these multivalent texts carry so much weight so broadly within society is precisely why it is crucial, we argue, to address white supremacist use of the New Testament head on. It is not so much that such groups should set the classroom agenda, but that we as instructors have a responsibility to help students engage critically with the phenomena they will meet (and have likely already met) out in the world.

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