

IN THE MIDST OF ANOTHER REVOLUTION:
FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT TO THE FIRST TESTAMENT

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Those who work in the Old Testament, whether as scholar or preacher, are aware of a move to call it the First Testament instead of the Old Testament. This change in terminology at first appears to be minor--just a semantic thing, some will say. Let the fussy ones call it the First Testament; those of us who are less fussy, we will stick with the tried and true term. It is the contention of this paper, though, that underneath this shift in designation lies one of the most profound, and potentially shattering, revolutions imaginable in Christian theology.¹ And we are only now in its beginning stages.

What is emerging--slowly but unmistakably--is not a revolution in Old Testament studies per se, even though its impact there is already being felt. It is a revolution in Christian perception, but not just of the Old Testament scriptures, or even of the Jewish people. More precisely, it is a revolution in Christian perception of the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, and of the relationship between those who consider themselves Christian and those who are Jews. While the reasons for the revolution are complex far beyond the scope of this short paper, they are at one level rooted in the growing Christian-Jewish dialogue of the past two or three decades. At a deeper level, though, the revolution is rooted in the larger global demographics of sociocultural, ideological and religious pluralism, a development that, in this instance, is increasingly forcing us to take seriously the integrity and autonomy that every religion of the world has a right to claim for itself.²

Only a few short years ago, there was a remarkable unanimity among Christian biblical and theological scholars, of both Old and New Testaments, about the relationship between the two testaments. No one at the time summed up that unanimity better than the Old Testament scholar and homiletician Elizabeth Achtemeier in her 1973 book, The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel. Lest anyone might miss what she wanted to say, Achtemeier opened her last chapter with this paragraph:

Let us summarize the thesis of this book. The valid use of the Old Testament in the Christian pulpit is built upon the historical fact that Jesus Christ, as proclaimed in the New Testament, is the completion and fulfillment of the word of God witnessed to in the Old Testament. On this basis, the Old Testament is given to the Christian as the promise of Jesus Christ, not just in its prophetic portions but as a whole. Jesus Christ is the final reinterpretation of every major tradition in the Old Testament, and Jesus Christ is therefore fully proclaimed only when the Old Testament portion of his story is also proclaimed.³

No matter where one searches in the Christian literature of the Old Testament and its preaching through the past century or more, one finds the same theology: the Old Testament is an incomplete book, one in which promises are made, foreshadowings are cast--but none is realized, since every word of the Old Testament (and we must call it that in this context) was designed to point only to the coming of Christ, "in whom its hopes are fulfilled and its promises realized," as Lawrence Toombs, another prominent Old Testament scholar and homiletician put it, also back then. He added: "The preacher must not fall into the error of treating the Old and New Testaments as if they were on the same level of inspiration and insight. Between Malachi and Matthew something transformingly new took place; and in that new thing the old passed away."⁴

The revolution in which we now find ourselves amounts to a challenging, and ultimately an undermining, of those very ideas about the relation between the two testaments--first, that the Old Testament is nothing if it is not Christological, meant (by its very nature) to be interpreted from beginning to end from a Christological standpoint; and, second, that the Old Testament somehow was made to "pass away" with the coming of the New, as Toombs put it. What we have had over the past ten or fifteen years--no more than that, as far as I can tell--is a growing repudiation of those ideas among at least some biblical scholars, both of Old and New Testaments.⁵

There are two primary issues that form the parameters around what we have called a revolution in Christian theology and biblical studies. The first has to do with the original appropriation of the Jewish Scriptures by Christians from the late first century well into the fourth century. The second has to do with the overt and often hostile anti-Judaism that emerged during that same period to become the orthodox theology of the Christian church's entire subsequent history, even through the century now closing. Each of these matters requires a closer look.

First, we turn briefly to the Christian appropriation of the Old Testament, a subject that is only now, in the study of Christian origins, beginning to be fully appreciated. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70 and the months after that, the Jews were decimated. They had lost their Temple and with it the Divine Presence in their midst; they had lost what remained of their sacrificial system of worship and with that their most fundamental means for the atonement of sin. From the Jewish perspective, it was a near-fatal catastrophe. However, a group of rabbis from the Pharisaic tradition, led by Yochanan ben Zakki, managed to set up an academy at Yevne on the coast, ironically with Roman permission. There, Jewish survival began, albeit slowly. It turned into a fully lay movement, synagogue based; and it focused on Torah study primarily rather than on sacrifice. Atonement could come through repentance and good deeds before God; and a new term for that repentance, giving it high and holy form, came into use; the term is *teshuvah*. Out of that same Jewish movement, with its Pharisaic roots, also came a full-blown effort to fend off the aggressive proselytizing by Christians. Sometime between 75 and 85 this small band of Jewish leaders adopted the so-called 19th Blessing, added to the 18 Blessings of the Great Synagogue Prayer, said three times a day. That 19th Blessing was important because it was, in fact, a bitter curse against what were called the Jewish heretics--the Christians.

This tended, however, to inflame late first century Christians, particularly gentile Christians, against the Jews and their leaders. It prompted many influential Christians, in fact, to argue that the Roman sacking of Jerusalem and temple was nothing more or less than God's ultimate denunciation of the Jews for what they had done to Jesus. At the same time, Christians delighted in announcing God's sending of this new religion attributed to Jesus, now presented as Son of God--as the religion to replace Judaism. This required the gospel writers, though, to set the Jews, and particular their Pharisaic leaders, into shape relief as the murderers of Jesus. Battle lines on both sides--both the Christian and that remnant of Pharisaic rabbis--were drawn and, as far as New Testament writers were concerned, were crystalized. So, as we read our gospel accounts, it was Christians versus Pharisees; they became the crucifiers of Jesus, rather than the Romans who carried out the deed. And Christianity, as the new religion, began to gain a toehold throughout the Roman empire.

By the middle of the second century, though, Christianity was having to "explain itself," having to legitimize itself, as it were, within the religious framework of the empire. It needed a unanimous voice, or at least something close to that, which it did not have. Its churches were widely scattered, and their bishops were functioning pretty much on their own. So the focus shifted to Rome, where over the next hundred years a host of new leaders--many of them young--began to converge for "discussion." Marcion was one of those voices, arguing (as all homileticians know) that Christianity would only work if it cut all its ties to the Jews, to their scriptures, to anything remotely connected to that God of vengeance and sword. Valentinus, a

Christian leader from Alexandria in Egypt, also made his way to Rome; with him came a complex set of Greek gnostic ideas that were being used to construct a very different Christian theology. Over time they were “joined” by Tatian of Syria, Athenagoras of Athens, Theophilus of Antioch and Miletus of Sardis; they were followed by Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen.⁶ What a theological ferment that must have been!

One of the things that became clear, however, was that for both the Roman and Greek mind, “new” religion was not something that was valued; in fact, it was looked on with enormous suspicion. Religion needed to be old; it needed to have roots in the past, preferably the ancient past, if it was going to be widely-respected and embraced. In a sense, that became the touchstone for the Christian drive to “create” a past for itself, a past not just historically--which the Jewish scriptures and legends provided--but a past that stretched all the way back into the very mind of God. The scholar/theologian who emerged to give form to this central theological notion was Justin Martyr. He is the one who, as Burton Mack has put it, worked through the question of “how the history of Israel could possibly be read as the story of the Christians’ God and thus count as the Christian epic, not the epic of Israel that obviously pointed toward the establishment of a Jewish theocracy in Jerusalem.”⁷

For Justin, the key to this was found in the idea of the “logos,” the Greek notion that was slipped, almost incidentally, into the gospel of John very early in the second century. The logos of John revealed the “mind of God,” that gospel argued; moreover, words similar to logos--God’s mind--were scattered throughout the Hebrew scriptures, all the way back to the various creation myths of Genesis. Jesus was there all the time!--or so the argument emerged. And it caught fire. The Hebrew scriptures were about Jesus after all. All that was necessary was to find all the references to Jesus--hidden or veiled though they were--and follow them out. The Hebrew prophecies, and there were many of them, were not about what they appeared to be about; they were about the coming of Jesus. God’s “word” that was heard all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was, in fact, the voice of Jesus. Marcion, with his rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures, never had a chance. All that was necessary was to revise Jewish history so that it would lead to Jesus rather than to the establishment of a Jewish state based in Jerusalem--which was not to be, of course. This meant rearranging the Hebrew scriptures so that they would end with Malachi and not Chronicles. It also meant creating a theology that contended that the God and Father of Christ was the same “God” who had tried--unsuccessfully--to lead the Jewish people for centuries.

The Jews, however, never got it--that idea became the cornerstone of Christian theology. God could never get through to them, and even when God sent “his only begotten Son,” the Jews proceeded to kill him. For that, the Jews would have to pay, and pay dearly. They would forever be branded as the killers of Christ, whether such a theological statement is made delicately or indelicately. This became a part of the dominant (what Mack calls “centrist”) theology of the church by the late third or early fourth century; it had emerged from the cauldron of debate, attack and counter-attack in Rome. Viewpoints that did not fall into place around this tight theological core were shunted aside as heresies. The Christians had their scriptures--not only their new “Christ as the Son of God” gospels, but, just as important, also their mythic past. From creation, God had Christians in mind, and Jewish history became the history of the Christ. In his discussion of the history of the papacy from the fourth and fifth centuries through the Medieval era, even to the present, William Nichols put it like this. The popes, he said,

fully believed the Christian myth of the Christ-killing Jews, and the theology of supersession based on it. The Jewish law had been abolished and replaced by the new spiritual law of the church, which they administered. In particular, the popes inherited the theology of Augustine, according to which the Jews were destined to survive until the second coming of Christ as a witness to their crimes. They were to be preserved, but in misery.⁸

There are the roots of what Rosemary Radford Reuther first called the “theology of supersession.” It is the theology that the Old Testament was (or is) inferior to the New, that it was merely a “preparation” for the New, from which the Lordship of Christ would be proclaimed. The Old has been trumped, superceded, by the New. When the New finally came, the Old was done away.

There is a second primary issue, though, that sets the parameter for the revolution in Christian biblical studies vis-a-vis the “Old” Testament. It has to do with the anti-Jewish attitudes that Christianity has fostered over the centuries. It is not just that Christianity believed itself superior to Judaism religiously, or that Christianity believed it had “superceded” Judaism. It is that Christianity has actually taught and practiced anti-Judaism, giving it a theological legitimacy and making violence against the Jews a virtually unending activity. It still goes on. Anti-Judaism is preachable because so much of the New Testament contains anti-Judaic language, innuendo, story and narrative. To preach many New Testament texts is to preach anti-Jewish ideas, imagery or thinking; and to preach from many Old Testament texts, when one infers Christian theological meaning from those texts, is to preach in an anti-Jewish mode, whether that is intended or not. Williamson and Allen have written that anti-Judaism “is a systematic hermeneutical strategy which Christians have too often and too long used in interpreting for each other the meaning of the Christian faith,” and not just as a specific theme in itself, but as the filter through which virtually all other themes in Christian theology are interpreted.¹⁰

In the New Testament, and in the first few centuries of Christianity’s formation, it was anti-Judaism that was the problem. By the third or fourth centuries, though, when Jewish peoples began to create highly visible communities throughout the world, the hatreds and the animosities become anti-semitic--based not just in religion, but firmly and clearly in race as well. Over the centuries, down to the present, the two have become so intertwined that what is often expressed now is a mixture of anti-Judaism and anti-semitism. To come to terms with both the prevalence and the bitter ugliness of it, though, it is necessary to read a book like Nicholls’ Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate, to which reference was made earlier. Ironically, for all of its horror (as most of us know) the German Holocaust which saw the murder of more than six million Jews was only one of numerous holocausts directed against the Jews over the centuries. From a contemporary Jewish perspective, Jews have been mistreated and murdered over the centuries in large part because of the Christian theology that they have been cursed by God for what they did to Jesus, God’s Son. As Nicholls put it, “The (Christian) myth continues to tell millions of Christians all over the world deadly things about the Jews. Weekly and daily, it still reinforces the belief that Jews were the Christ-killers, and breeds in the Christian people a natural suspicion of the Jews of today.”¹¹

With this background, then, it is possible to return to the nature of the theological revolution we noted at the outset, a revolution signaled by the shift of terminology from Old Testament to First Testament. For a growing number of Christian theologians today, several important ideas are taking hold. Among these are

(1) that the “theology of supersession” is wrong and must be repudiated--that Christianity did not supercede, and thus does not make void in any way the premises of Torah Judaism, despite what certain texts within the New Testament along with the history of Christian theology might suggest;

(2) that the so-called Old Testament is not a Christological document, nor can it legitimately be interpreted as one; it is the ancient history of a people, told in their way, and, to be understood correctly, it must be read through their eyes, from their points of view; and

(3) that Christianity and Judaism are both legitimate forms of religious expression, sharing some theological and ethical ideas, but profoundly different in numerous bedrock assumptions and practices; each has its own scriptures, and each deserves to have its scriptures treated with respect, non-judgment, and non-appropriation by the other.

These are, to be sure, revolutionary ideas, at least as far as the history of Christian theology is concerned. These are the ideas that are in the process of being embraced, however, by those who want the Old Testament to be known as the First Testament. The word “first” is intended, that is, to designate the “testament” of the Bible that chronologically precedes what may then be called the Second Testament. However well it does it, the word “first” is intended to nullify the notion of something “old” superceded or replaced by something “new.” To call the Old Testament the First Testament, preceding the Second Testament, is clearly intended to give them equal footing, equal status as religious documents, each testifying to the faith of a particular group of people over time. This is what is meant by Allen and Holbert when they say that “an increasing number of Christians seek to respect the particularity of the First Testament and its people. The minister can regard Judaism as a valid religion whose adherents have full standing before God.”¹² But if one thinks back to the statements by Achtemeier and Toombs that we noted earlier, these emergent notions of the Jews and the “Old” testament are revolutionary, indeed. Beyond that, they undercut the very tenets of what has, until now, been the dominant--if not the only--Christian perspective on those people and those texts.

In a religiously pluralistic world, however, this new view of the relationship between Jews and Christians, between the “Old” Testament and the “New,” is one whose time is long overdue. It is a view, though, that makes severe demands on us who consider ourselves Christian. It requires that we think differently and do things differently. In the remainder of this paper, I want to outline three of those demands that I believe this revolutionary change makes on us who teach the Christian pastors and ministers of the next century.

(1) First, I believe it requires that we preach--and teach others to preach--in strikingly new ways from the First Testament. I do not believe we have to give up the First Testament in our preaching, though something in me clearly wants to give it back to the Jewish people and keep our Christian noses out of it. Yet, with Allen and Holbert, I don't think we have to cower before the “ghost of Marcion,” either. But some specific and deliberate changes are called for. Foremost among them must be a refusal to interpret First Testament texts through Christological eyes, as utterly difficult and reactionary as that will be to many preachers, homileticians and Christian theologians. The question for many will be: if it cannot be interpreted Christologically, then why should we want it at all? Because it is, as David Tracy would put it, a religious classic; it is the Holy Scripture of a great historic religion, the religion out of which, or, rather, against which, our own Christian religion emerged.¹³ But Christianity did not--repeat, did not--do away with Judaism. From the Jewish point of view, then and now, what we Christians have considered the “new covenant” in the crucifixion of Jesus did not, under any stretch of imagination, negate the classic, ancient covenants between God and the Hebrew people.

What do we have, then, in the First Testament? We have a classic story of people hammering out an identity--for themselves, their families and their clans, an identity that was fundamentally religious and ethical, an identity that changed as their definitions of their God changed. So the questions for Christian preaching are not primarily: What did God do to these people? What claims did God make on them? What rewards and punishments did God mete out to them? The questions center, instead, on such things as: How did these historic religious people, at various times in their history and by their own telling, come to understand themselves as “children” of a supreme being for whom they had many names? How did they come to frame such odd ethical notions and define God as overlooking, if not blessing, those notions--as in the stories of Abraham and Pharoah, or Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, or even in the stories of David and Solomon?

How did they come to draft, and progressively refine, such a remarkable religious document as the Decalogue. Yes, of course we can say that it came from God, was “given” to them by God, but that begs the question. These remarkable people created legends and stories to frame where those “laws” came from. They devised--someone in their past devised--vibrant myths to account for the origins of those priceless laws, but vibrant myths nevertheless. Even they recognize that. What remarkable religious imagination and ethical sensibility combined to create these great stories, these profoundly insightful stories of human and divine meeting in mortal flesh and flawed community?

Yes, in Christian preaching, there is so much to draw on in the First Testament, much to meditate on in speaking to people today from our pulpits. But it is not because the First Testament is about Christ; nor is it even because it is about God and what we can “learn about God.” It is because it is about the human condition, about richly-textured mythic stories of naming “God,” of naming each other, of coping with good and evil, and of struggling to live together and embrace each other. All of these things are still the fabric of our contemporary milieu; thus, the stories of those ancient peoples resound over and over again--and we can meditate on those stories, not to make them something that they are not, but to learn from them together, whether we are Christian or Jew or Muslim. Those stories still have their power. But they are stories that we borrow from the Jews, from their history, from their epic struggle--not to make them our own, which would be a violation of them, but to learn from them, something that God-fearing Jews, by and large, would probably not mind that we do.

(2) The second demand that the revolution makes on us Christians is that we come to terms, and help others come to terms, not with our similarities, but with our differences. This is important for two very distinct reasons. First, because Jews today--as few in number as they are in today’s world¹⁵--need their distinctive identity without it being muddied still further by Christians.⁵ The problem is that over many centuries Jews have been largely defined for the world by Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. So the distinctions that prevail are that Christians are for love and Jews are for law, Christians are all about grace and Jews are all about revenge and greed. Such distinctions (and definitions of Jews) could not be farther from the Jewish truth. One should read the concluding essay of a remarkable little book entitled Preaching Biblical Texts: Expositions by Jewish and Christian Scholars.¹⁶ The essay is by a Jewish writer named Blu Greenberg who clearly is distressed at the way that Christians (and Christian scholars) have treated both Jews and Jewish beliefs over the centuries. She is writing about Deuteronomy. She describes Judaism this way:

Judaism is a religion of redemption that promises the physical and spiritual perfection of the world. The earth will be made into a paradise, and the fullness of knowledge and of love between God and humanity will be achieved. The vehicle for this achievement is the covenant, a special partnership motivated by love between God and humanity, in which the pacesetter and teacher is God’s chosen people .. The most extended and nuanced statement of the centrality of the covenant in Judaism is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Its distinctive thrust is particularly expressed in two ways: (1) it is a covenant of love and of law, not of political fidelities; (2) the sacred covenant between human beings and God incorporates within itself civil laws and societal ethics. Thus, the law of the stranger (Deut. 10: 19-20) or the law of weights and measures (Deut. 25: 13-16) is intimately connected to the believe in one God; in fact, observing these laws becomes a measure, a corollary, a tangible expression of belief in one God.¹⁷

Moreover, she adds:

The covenant is not to be rescinded or replaced or forfeited. It never becomes an old testament but an ongoing one. Even when the people sin, the covenant is not over. Not sacrifice but repentance and confession will restore the relationship (Deut. 30: 1-6).¹⁸

Finally,

To follow the commandments (of the covenant), ethical and moral as well as ritual and sacral, is felt not as an onerous duty but as an expression of love. There are still some who hold a stereotypic view of Judaism with regard to the salvific function of the law. This view maintains that love and law are dichotomous and that love is the fulfillment of law and can, therefore, replace it. However, a careful reading of Deuteronomy shows how inextricably linked are law and love. For a Jew to say, "I will" or "I do" is as powerful a statement of love as it is to say the words, "I love" or "I believe."¹⁹

We Christians are obligated, it is fair to say, to come to terms with Judaism--not as we see it, or have historically defined it, but as Jews themselves understand it, something that is not nearly as difficult as some would have us believe. Greenberg's statement is a door into that Jewish understanding; she is obviously wanting to talk to us Christians. This is, in large part, what has prompted a few Christian seminaries to hire First Testament faculty who are Jewish--not Jews who were "converted" to Christianity, but Jews who are good, practicing Jews for whom the Scriptures that they teach are their Scriptures.²⁰

The second reason that the differences between Christians and Jews must be taken account of today is because the Jewish faith and the Christian faith are not, at their core, compatible; Christians by and large would like for this not to be true, Jews know very well that it is. While some liberal, even radical, Christian theologians struggle for a new theology that spans them both in some dialogical fashion, the fact is that both religions are based, in slightly different ways, on the idea of covenant. For Christians, the Jewish covenants with first Abraham and then Moses were broken by the Jews, and thus replaced (or superseded) by the covenant that God gave through Christ. For devout Jews, on the other hand, the Mosaic covenant is still in force, as it has been from its institution, and nothing whatsoever has come along to either nullify or replace it. They argue that even Jesus, reforming Jew that he was, understood that completely, and that he himself lived fully within the Mosaic covenant and Torah. For Jews, no new covenant was instituted by Jesus, who was only later hailed as Messiah by renegade Jews. Neither side, Christian or Jew, accepts this fundamental premise of the other, and the result is a theological stalemate--something that honesty and integrity requires that we Christians acknowledge.

(3) There is a third demand that this revolution makes upon us. It has to do not with the First Testament or with letting the Jewish people, both past and present, be the Jewish people. It has to do, instead, with the New--or, rather, the Second--Testament, the Christian Scriptures. It is fully time, as a few have courageously said in recent years, to systematically and thoroughly remove the anti-Judaism from New Testament texts when we preach and teach them. How to do this, of course, is the problem, and the preacher must learn (or be taught) to look closely at every New Testament text and ask whether it has within it some element which is negative toward the Jews. So many texts do. The next question, then, is what to do with a text that does, in fact, have anti-Judaic ideology or theology in it.

One can ignore the text, of course, and simply refuse to preach it. Another option--taken much too often--is to assume that if the "word of God" has anti-Jewish elements in it, then it must be because God wants them there, and wants them preached for what they are. Hopefully, most preachers are beyond that tragic option. The best approach is the direct one. One preaches in a way that teaches the congregants about the anti-Jewishness of the text, that exposes the text for what it is; and then one uses the sermon, at least in part, to help congregants work through to some meaning beyond or beneath the text's surface. The fact is that here is an area in serious need of the most creative work that homileticians and preachers can do. New preaching strategies must be developed for ridding the New Testament of its anti-Judaism.

It can be done. Let me suggest one such strategy. The parables of Jesus in the gospels represent one of the true bastions of anti-Jewish thinking and theology, an area that has troubled me for a long time. It is possible, though, to make creative and very effective use of the Nag Hammadi documents, particularly the so-called Gospel of Thomas, which was a startling find in that literature uncovered in 1947. The Gospel of Thomas has remarkable parallels with much in the synoptic gospels. However, Thomas is a “sayings” gospel rather than a narrative one, and scholars now generally agree that the sayings gospels--Q is considered to be one as well--pre-date by many years even Mark, which was most likely written after Jerusalem and the Temple fell in 70. What is remarkable is that if we compare the same parable from, say, Matthew (circa 80-85) and Thomas (pre-70), a strange thing happens. While Matthew’s telling of the parable has a strong, biting anti-Jewish point to it, the same parable in Thomas is devoid of any anti-Jewish elements whatsoever.

Let me illustrate. Matthew 21: 33-46 carries the parable of the landlord who planted a vineyard and put it in the hands of tenant farmers. He then sent servants to collect the crops for him from the tenants. But the tenant farmers abused the servants, beating one, killing another, all the while refusing to turn over the crops that belonged to the landowner. Finally, the landlord sent his son and heir to the land to collect the crops. The tenants reasoned that if they killed the heir to the land, they had a chance to take over the land for themselves and the crops would finally all be theirs. In Matthew, God is then identified as the landlord, the Jews as the evil tenant farmers, the iconoclastic prophets as the servants of God and Jesus the “heir” whom the tenants killed when he arrived to claim the crops. Matthew actually has Jesus telling the story about himself, and the Jewish leaders recognize clearly (we are told) that Jesus is castigating them. Like so many parables that surround this one, it is a harshly anti-Jewish story, and, try, as we may to develop some non-Jewish analogy for today from it, the anti-Jewishness just does not go away easily.

Thomas, though, contains this same parable, but--remarkably--without the anti-Jewish allegorization. In Thomas, the story is sparse, but clear. A landlord owned a vineyard and rented it out to some tenant farmers.²¹ When the owner of the vineyard sent servants to collect the crops from them, they beat them and sent them away. Then the landlord sent his son, the heir, believing that the tenants would at least respect him. Since the tenants knew the son to be the heir to the land, Thomas has Jesus saying that they grabbed him and killed him. That is the end of the story. Thomas concludes: “Let one who has ears to hear, hear.” The story ends with the crime committed. There is, in fact, no “moral” in it.

In Thomas’ Gospel, the story that Jesus told was not about the Jews at all; it was, instead, about the problem of inequity, poverty and suffering, about the potentially violent relationship between wealthy landowners--wealthy absentee landowners--and tenant, or peasant, farmers who worked the land. The story reflects a profound concern about the plight of those tenants, including a strong sense of empathy that their condition could, in fact, lead them to react violently to the landowners demands. They could even be driven by their bitterness and hatred of the landowner to kill his son, should that son show up to take from them what they had worked so hard to produce. What is particularly striking about the Thomas story is that it contains no mention of punishment whatever for the tenant farmers when they murder the owner’s son. There is only a clear call to pay attention to what drives the farmers to such a horrific deed.

Isn’t it possible for the preacher to explain in a sermon the two versions of the story, just as I have here, drawing on both Matthew and Thomas? The anti-Jewishness of the Matthean version is emphasized, and then the story can be seen in a different light. As Jesus probably told it originally, it is not about the Jews, not about condemning them for killing “the son”--a reference to himself that he surely would not have made. The story--and the sermon--evolves into thinking about one of the unrelenting problems of human living, then and now: the landlord-tenant

relationship, a veritable paradigm for issues of power, justice, human self-worth and the motivations of much violence. Can we, with insight, research, and even restraint, still bring this to the pulpit--from this parable? Of course we can. At the same time, we can get rid of the anti-Jewishness of the Matthean story--and still preach powerfully. The point is that there are ways to do this; other ways even than this one. But we must work at them creatively and energetically.

Going through the suggestions I have made will shake us all in how we deal with preaching with the Old--no, the First--Testament as well as our own Second Testament. It will shake us, too, in forming new relationships--and actively helping lay people form them--with the Jewish people and Jewish leaders of our world, our communities. Such a revolution as this, however, is exciting and deeply engaging. It is already upon us, whether we like it or not. We can struggle against it, or we can move with it--even though I know many preachers who are more than ready right now to move ahead into this new world of Jewish-Christian pluralism.

1 Some brief notes about this terminology are made by Ron Allen and John Holbert in the preface to their book, Holy Root, Holy Branches (Abingdon, 1995). They note the emergence of the use of the designation First Testament, a sign, they say, that the language of the church is "unsettled." They add that "none of these patterns of speaking is quite satisfactory." They then make this statement: "We continue to use the term Old Testament. After all, these words have been in the church's vocabulary for eighteen centuries. A part of the church's theological task is to come to a critical understanding of its speech. But we also use the new terms as a way of helping the church explore their adequacy" (p. 13). In my view, much more is at stake here than the church's "speech."

2 This orientation to the demographics of contemporary pluralism is a matter that I discuss at some length in the introduction to my book, Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism (Chalice Press, 1998).

3 The Westminster Press, 1973, p. 163.

4 See Lawrence E. Toombs, The Old Testament in Christian Preaching (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 27. It seems odd that an Old Testament scholar would not know that the Malachi/Matthew relationship is not, itself, purely a Christian creation. Malachi is not the end of the Jewish Scriptures.

5 It is a good omen, too, that the Academy of Homiletics has turned its attention to this matter. And a few homileticians have begun to probe in earnest in this area, foremost among them Ron Allen and John Holbert. Allen and Clark Williamson teamed up earlier to explore this issue in their 1989 book, Interpreting Difficult Texts (Trinity Press International), and have followed it up with other articles since then; see their excellent essay, "Interpreting Difficult Texts" in Removing Anti-Judaism from the Pulpit, edited by Howard Clark Kee and Irvin J. Borowsky (Continuum, 1996).

6 The story of all of this is brilliantly told, in my judgment, by Burton L. Mack in his book, Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth (Harper San Francisco, 1995). See, in particular, his chapter, "Claiming Israel's Epic."

7 Mack, p. 268.

8 In my view, one of the most remarkable books on this subject to appear in the past few years is William Nicholls' nearly 500-page study titled, Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate (Jason Aronson Inc., 1995). This quotation is from page 221. Nicholls is neither a theologian nor a Jew and, as a result, his book will probably not be widely read among theologians. I urge homileticians to find it and read it. He is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

9 Ironically, this viewpoint was given a remarkable shot in the arm in late nineteenth century theology, particularly in the work of Wellhausen. Working in the evolutionary climate of that era--following Darwin, Marx and the social evolutionists--he interpreted the Old Testament as an evolutionary document, culminating finally in the New Testament. It meant that Judaism began as a very primitive religion and evolved gradually from a crude to a gradually more sophisticated monotheism, from a fearful "out there" sense of God to a refined, anthropomorphic God who could, ultimately, arrive in flesh and even embody the flesh of others (i.e., Christ in you, the hope of glory). The bottom line was that, however one interpreted this evolutionary theology, it meant that now one had "scientific" evidence for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, for the assertion that Christianity "superceded" the religion of the Jews. For a full discussion of this idea, see Achtemeier's The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel; particularly the chapter, "How the Old Testament Was Lost."

10 See Williamson and Allen in Kee and Borowsky, p. 36. This is the opening statement of their essay.

11 Nicholls, p. 6.

12 Allen and Holbert. p. 30.

13 See David Tracy's The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (New York: Crossroad, 1991) in particular. Few theologians today can match the richness and texture of Tracy's explorations of religious pluralism.

14 Martin Marty has pointed out that there are fewer Jews in the whole world today than there are members of the Southern Baptist Convention. See his essay, "Removing Anti-Judaism from the Christian Pulpit," in Kee and Borowsky.

15 There is a significant body of relatively new material which laments the continuing loss of Jewish identity in the contemporary world. Alan Dershowitz's The Vanishing American Jew (Little, Brown and Co., 1997) argues persuasively that Jewish identity, both ethnically and religiously, could well disappear before the end of the next century, if not before. Thomas Cahill's The Gifts of the Jews (Doubleday, 1998) argues--with passionate overstatement--that the momentous "gifts" of the Jews to human civilization are so underappreciated that Jewishness itself is in danger of extinction. And a few years ago, a striking book by Ellen Jaffe McClain titled, Embracing the Stranger (HarperCollins, 1995) explored the decline of Jews marrying Jews and its impact on "the future of the American Jewish Community" (as the subtitle of her book put it).

16 Edited by Fredrick C. Holmgren and Herman E. Schaalman (Eerdman's, 1995). It is a smart, but very uneven group of essays, split between Christian and Jewish theologians. What I found missing was some kind of explanatory framework set up by the editors, indicating the book's evolution and rationale: why were these authors selected, what guidelines were they given, etc. Significantly, one of my favorite Brueggemann pieces is in this book; it is titled, "A Night for Crying/Weeping."

17 Holmgren and Schaalman. p. 150.

18 Holmgren and Schaalman. p. 151.

19 Holmgren and Schaalman. p. 153.

20 The Claremont School of Theology is one of these, though I would guess that there are others.

21 In most translations, this is treated as saying number 65. In James Robinson's revised edition of The Nag Hammadi Library in English (Harper San Francisco, 1990 paperback), it is found on page 134.