

Not My Bible

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am not amongst those who consider it a religious crime to live outside Israel. After all, since the days of the Babylonian Exile (actually even earlier the Judean kings established an Israelite garrison and temple at Elephantine) large numbers of us have lived beyond our ancestral borders. But I do believe in the idea of Galut, Exile. And by that I mean the profound sense that one is fundamentally at odds with the prevailing culture. And sadly one can often feel a sense of Galut within present day Israel's borders, where so many seem to want to imitate the very worst aspects of Western pop culture.

But here in America I have recently been feeling it more than ever. Even though for Jews in the Diaspora I cannot think of a better place for us to live in peace and harmony. Although you only need to read "FDR and the Jews" by Richard Breitman and Allen J. Lichtman to realize how vehemently we were hated and excluded even in the USA.

The most popular television show in the US at the moment is the History Channel's "The Bible". It is watched more than the trashiest reality shows, the banal talent competitions, and the series about zombies and vampires (all good reason for banning television from any sane household). The History Channel, on the other hand, usually deals in facts rather than fantasies. Not this time.

My issue is not that the part that deals with our Bible is badly researched and full of anomalies and anachronisms. It is when it gets to the New Testament that I realize why anti-Semitism is still so prevalent and persistent all around the world and why I feel so culturally alienated. The current incremental rise of anti-Semitism is mainly driven by Muslim and neo-fascist thugs. But it is the subtle undercurrent of negativity, perpetuated by holy texts that gives a patina of justification for the antipathy.

I am amongst those who think that Pauline and later Christianity developed a series of myths based on earlier popular ideas rather than on a specific, living human being. There is nothing wrong with that in itself, unless it leads to torturing and killing those who do not agree with you. We too have our earlier Canaanite horror stories. Both Christianity and Islam wanted to supersede what came before. To do this they had to show how their religion was so much better. And to hammer it home they had to present the Jews as primitive, hypocritical, corrupt betrayers of truth which the new religion was going to put right. The very distinction between Old Testament and New Testament that make up the Christian Bible is a clear statement that we oldies are now out of date and out of touch.

In the Christian world, for thousands of years Jews have been cursed and pursued for the "crime" of rejecting Jesus and the greater crime of causing his death. In some quarters we are still blamed for "killing God", ridiculous

as such a claim might sound to you and me. As for the myth of Jesus being accused of heresy, you will not find anywhere in Jewish law any hint that it is heresy to say "I am the King of the Jews," "I am the Son of God," or indeed to claim "I am God." One might think you are a lunatic, but hardly a rational heretic. And if trying to make Judaism more popular and humane were a crime, then the great Hillel who lived a generation before would have been in trouble. So would all the many faith healers who abounded at that time. And if the crime were a political one, like saying I am the President, or King of the Jews, if the Romans had an issue with that, we certainly didn't. The proof of the pudding would lie in achieving the goal of actually getting appointed and then seeing off the Romans. Otherwise he'd be no greater a threat than Bonnie Prince Charlie. It is possible that factions within the Jewish community supported Roman rule and had an interest in suppressing opposition but then why not just say it is was? The whole narrative is so improbable and unhistorical.

The directors of "The Bible" protested that we were not propagating Jew-hatred by having the Jewish priests accuse Jesus of heresy and handing him over to the Romans. But this series inevitably propagates the "official version" of the emergence of a new, clean, honest religion to replace a corrupt, petty, hypocritical one identified with Jews today. This message is hammered home visually by having the Jews wear a modern immediately identifiable tallit. There are not very subtle messages of Jews as the bad guys, the evil moneychangers in the Temple, reminiscent of Wall Street (who in fact were simply currency exchangers providing a service to pilgrims to cash in their local travelers checks to pay for accommodation at the King David Hotel or a quick sacrifice to atone for whatever). But it is now a cliché to accuse Jews of being moneylenders.

I cannot condemn Christians in what is predominantly a Christian country for propagating their myths. Every few years another similar version hits the big screen or the little one. But can you blame me for feeling a cultural dissonance? There are still plenty of crazy missionaries out there, and others, apparently sane, telling us Jews we will not get to Heaven unless we repent.

Perhaps those who identify with Jesus might secretly think I'm one of the Devil's Squad? How else can you explain the persistence of that other myth that around 12 million Jews control the billions of others in this planet? It can't be logic. It must be myth. Who, pray, is responsible for that? Oh yes, they'll tell you, it is all our fault!

The period of mourning called The Omer that we observe between Pesach and Shavuot is a period of mourning largely because historically after Easter the Crusades began and peasants poured out of churches after incendiary sermons against the Christ-killers, eager to avenge the death of their savior by killing as many local Jews as possible. Thankfully, times have changed. But for too many, the narrative has not.

Israel is still the only place on earth where Jews can feel culturally at home and not be aware of the prevalence of competing theologies and myths. But then, of course, we know Israel has other problems.