

## ANTI-JUDAISM IN THE CHRISTIAN LITURGY: A STUMBLING-BLOCK IN GENUINE WORSHIP

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*'T'en zijn de Joden niet, Heer Jesu, die u cruysten, ...  
Ick bent, ô Heer, ick bent die u dit heb gedaen ...'  
['It ain't the Jews, Lord Jesus, who crucified you, ...  
It is me, oh Lord, it is me who did this to you ...']  
(from 'Hy droech onse smerten' ['He bore our griefs'] by the Dutch Reformed Minister and Poet, Jacobus Revius, 1586–1658)*

### **1 Introduction**

A major drawback to the Christian universal message of salvation is the rise and expansion of anti-Judaism in the course of church history. In the process of Christian alienation from Judaism, the church increasingly regarded itself as the True Israel. In addition, anti-Jewish state legislation came into effect, forced conversions of Jews to Christianity took place, and other discriminatory measures were taken. As for worship, nearly all major Christian denominations espoused in their liturgical enactments anti-Jewish components, that at times even degenerated into anti-Semitic invective. Presently, however, an array of churches have revised the anti-Jewish elements while affirmatively referring to the Jewish legacy and contemporary Jewry. But in some other churches, liturgical anti-Judaism continues, particularly during Holy Week. Today, I will concentrate on the Byzantine rite, home to the Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Catholic Churches. Anti-Jewish polemics, however, are certainly not an exclusive privilege of the Byzantine tradition, because this phenomenon is also to be found in Western rites. However, after the Second World War, under the shattering influence of the *Shoah* and reconsidering the Jewish roots of Christian worship, the Roman Catholic Church and other Western (Protestant) Churches have begun to revise the anti-Jewish statements in their liturgies and assume a more positive attitude towards Judaism. Regrettably, in the official liturgical books of several Byzantine-rite Churches we still meet with drastic and extensive anti-Jewish polemics and occasional torrents of abuse.

My aims in this contribution are, firstly, to explore the anti-Jewish polemics in Byzantine hymnography. I will focus on a variety of Greek liturgical

hymns sung during Holy Week. Solely troparia that explicitly mention the Jews will be discussed; there are also troparia in which only 'the criminals' in general come up, so without names, although, from its context, it is clear that the Jews are meant; and there exist verses in which the 'criminal assembly', viz. the Sanhedrin, or the 'Pharisees' are brought up. My second purpose today is to discuss the urgent question of whether revision of the anti-Jewish texts is actually taking place and, if yes, in what way this occurs.

## 2 *Survey of Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Byzantine Rite*

A first main theme in the hymns concerned is the murder of God (θεοκτονία). As early as on Palm Sunday evening, Jewry is called upon to get ready for the atrocity: 'Prepare, Judea, your priests, make your hands ready for the murder of God.'

In the Byzantine Holy and Great Week, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not just commemorated, but also extensively re-enacted and visually dramatized. Several of these rituals, such as the procession with the cross during Great Friday matins, the deposition of the crucified one during the Great Friday vespers and the stately reading of the resurrection gospel on a podium outside the church during the Easter vigil, are rather recent developments, having been introduced in the Greek Orthodox Church as late as during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, they are now often regarded as essential for the Orthodox Holy Week. By way of this ritual representation, the salvific events are made real in a certain sense; past facts become current events. For that matter, the faithful feel that they become participants themselves and can identify with the protagonists of the liturgical drama. The exhortations in several hymns, older than the ritual dramatic representation itself, foster the process of participation and identification of the faithful. Obviously, the Jews often incorporate the evil characters in this process. It is of note that, contrary to the Jews, the then Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and his Roman soldiers, who are not less guilty of the death of Jesus than the Jewish religious leaders at the time, are *not* described in terms of abuse and invective altogether.

The theme of the murder of God is especially heard on Great Thursday and Great Friday. In several hymns of the popular Great Thursday 'Service of the Holy Passion', also named 'Service of the Twelve Gospel Readings', in which myriads of believers take part, the Jews are branded 'the swarm of the murderers of God and the lawless people', 'the wicked gang of God-haters

and the synagogue of evil committing God-murderers', an 'impious and criminal people'. In particular in the hymns of the popular Epitafios service on Great Friday – during this service, Christ is buried, as it were, but at the same time the paradox of the powerful God who conquers death by his own death is sung – hard statements about the Jews are again found: 'Arrogant Israel, murder-stained people ...', 'Jealous, murderous and revengeful people ...' and '(teeth-)grinding, most malicious race of the Hebrews ...'. In this service one finds also invective verses, such as: 'According to Salomon, the mouth of the felonious Hebrews is a deep hole', 'On the malicious paths of the wicked Hebrews lie thistles and traps' and 'Oh, how insane, the murder of Christ by the murderers of the prophets'. Consequently, the Jews should be ashamed: 'Be ashamed, oh Jews, even of those that the life-giver whom you killed out of envy, raised from the dead.'

Contrary to the hymns of the other Holy Week services, which are, as far as I know, nearly always sung in their entirety, the greater part of the more than 180 verses of the Chants of Praise (ἐγκώμια) – lamentations that belong to the Epitafios service – is not sung, because their number is too high and the choirs solemnly intone in order to stress the mourning character. In liturgical praxis, however, the choice of the verses chanted is rather arbitrary and, consequently, it is not unlikely that in several places the verses about the Jews just quoted are still sung.

The second theme is an important motive for the murder, namely, jealousy. According to the Greek hymnographers, the Jewish envy already began with the raising of Lazarus – not only a prefiguration of Christ's resurrection, but also of the general waking up of the dead at the Last Judgment.

A third main theme heard in many hymns is the absurdity of the Jewish crime. The Jews kill their benefactor! They kill him who has not only always cared for them and healed them but throughout their history also conferred great benefactions on them. For a right understanding of these hymns, one must take, besides the spike of Jewish-Christian polemics, also the Christian identification between Jesus Christ and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity into account. As Logos and Son of God, Christ has already made heaven and earth, led Israel out of Egypt and has spoken to his people through the prophets.

In their picture of the passion events of Christ, the Greek hymnographers like to present the absurdity in question in an antithetical way. It is often formulated as a reproach, and both the Old Testament and the New Testament histories of salvation are referred to. I shall give several examples hereof:

‘Today Jews have nailed to the cross the Lord, who split the sea with the staff and led them through the desert. Today they have pierced with a lance the side of him who vexed Egypt with plagues for their sake and they gave gall to drink to him who sent Manna as fare on them’. (Noticeably, here the piercing of Christ’s side, which is done, according to the Gospel of John, by a Roman soldier – Jn 19: 34 – is ascribed to Jews.)

‘Lord, Jews condemned you, the life of all, to death. Those who went with the staff through the Red Sea nailed you to the cross and those who sucked honey from the rock brought gall to you ...’.

Incidentally, the fact that the hymns one time speak of ‘*the Jews*’ and another time of ‘Jews’ does not necessarily mean that they distinguish between the Jews in general and several Jews in particular. The hymns have to comply by strict rules with respect to metre and style and, consequently, the precise number of syllables; if there is no place for the definite article it is simply left out.

With reference to the controversy between God and his people described in the Book Micah (Mic 6: 1–8), the Jews are called to account. Here we meet with a style that is very similar to the Western *Improperia*, but it is more drastic; moreover, the Jews are now called by name:

‘Thus the Lord speaks to the Jews: My people, what have I done to you or with what have I wearied you? I gave your blind light, cleansed your lepers, raised up a man who lay down on his bed. My people, what have I done to you and what have you given me in return? Instead of manna, gall, instead of water, vinegar; instead of loving me, you nailed me to the cross. I do not endure any longer; I will call the gentiles to me and they will glorify me together with the Father and the Spirit, and I will give them the eternal life.’

‘When you were drawn upon the cross, Lord, you cried: For which deed do you wish to crucify me, Jews? Because I cured your paralytics? Because I raised up your dead as if it were from sleep? Because I healed a woman who suffered from haemorrhages, because I pitied the Canaanite woman? For which deed do you wish to murder me, Jews? However, you will look on Christ, whom you now pierce, criminals.’

It is, therefore, unsurprising that, in various verses, the Jews are called ‘ungrateful’, ‘ignorant’ or ‘unwise’. According to the Great Friday Chants of Praise, this ‘ungratefulness’ is all the more painful because Christ ‘as the giver of life did not kill the Jews when he hung on the cross but also woke up *their* dead’. For the Byzantine hymnographers it is clear that such serious crimes

must be punished. That is why several times one sings: 'Pay them back, Lord, according to their works, because they made vain plans against you'. Properly speaking, the Jews do not exist any longer: 'because when you were lifted up today the race of the Jews perished'.

Some troparia assert that, unfortunately, the Jews are stubborn: 'With the betrayal, the races of the Hebrews were not satisfied, Christ, but they shook their heads, consigning you to mockery and scorn ...' and 'Neither the earth when she trembled nor the rocks when they were split convinced the Jews. Neither the veil of the temple nor the resurrection of the dead ...'.

The felony is passed to the next generations, as the following troparion makes clear: 'Alien for the lawless is the just legal order and strange for the unbelieving is the knowledge of God: the Jews spurned this because of their lawlessness; therefore, notably, they inherited the curse, just as the fig tree.' And also this one: 'The gathering of the Jews ... inheriting the crime of murder-stain ...'

The extreme classic example of Jewish treason is Judas. Also in Greek, linguistically, the names of Judas (Ἰούδας), the tribe Judah (Ἰούδα) and the Jews (Ἰουδαῖοι) are very close. Incidentally, instead of 'Jews', also 'Hebrews' (Ἑβραῖοι) may be said. Judas is denoted as miserable traitor, cheater, pervert and murderer – malicious, niggardly, idiotic, 'thrice wretched', ungrateful, evil, etc.

Several times, Judas and the Jews are almost named in the same breath: 'Judas ... runs to the Jews and says to the criminals ...' Or Judas' deeds are simply attributed to Jews in general: 'For thirty pieces of silver, Lord, and a vile kiss Jews tried to kill you ...'

A further subject matter concerns the incapacity of the synagogue to bring forth good fruits any longer. On Monday of Holy Week, when the fig tree cursed by Jesus and subsequently withered is commemorated, the withered fig tree is likened to the bared synagogue, full with leaves, but without any fruits. The Law is fruitless anyhow, with the synagogue being excluded from spiritual fruits, and we also come across the 'curse of the Law'. Yet it is important to note that the fate of the fig tree symbolizes not merely Judaism, but is also a warning for the 'brothers' (ἀδελφοί) – that is, the Christian monastics – not to stay fruitless and wither. This applies also to the bridesmaids (Mt 25: 1–13) commemorated on Great Tuesday: 'We', so the Christians, should be watchful and prepared like the wise maids, just as we must imitate the servants who traded with the talents entrusted to them and did not hide the

money in the ground (Mt 25: 14–30). ‘We’ should also lead our lives in such a way that, at the Last Judgment, we will be numbered among the sheep, not the goats (Mt 25: 31–46). In addition, on Great Wednesday, when the woman who anointed Jesus is commemorated – in the Byzantine tradition, she is identified with a sinful whore – we meet with a few troparia, according to which ‘I (viz. the Christian cantor or listener) am even more sinful than the harlot’. So, it is our own purification, watchfulness and salvation that are at stake.

Returning to the anti-Jewish polemics, of which many more could easily be quoted, I would like to emphasize that they are not an invention of the Byzantine hymnographers, but have their roots in the Early Church. The Jewish prophetic self-criticism from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc., in the *Tanakh* and the self-criticism in later Jewish tradition were used, indeed abused by Christians and directed against the entire Jewish people. Further, the *Gospel of St John* is very polemical to those Jews who do not accept Jesus as the Messiah. St Paul is also a gold mine for the hymnographers: With respect to the issue of the curse of the Law, for instance, they refer to the *Letter to the Galatians*, where Paul writes about the contradiction between faith and the curse of the Law (Gal 3: 10–14). Unfortunately, the hymnographers do not quote Paul’s positive appraisal of his Jewish mother religion in the *Letter to the Romans* (Rom 9–11). The Byzantine hymnographers draw also from the patristic apologetics and occasional invective against Jewry; let me make mention here only of a variety of writings by Meliton of Sardes, Ephrem the Syrian and John Chrysostom.

It calls for particular attention that even during the Holy and Great Week, the Jews are not merely blackened. There are also several positive statements. Various hymns, for instance, speak of ‘the beloved Israel’. Others wish ‘peace over Israel and salvation for the gentiles’. In the none of the Great Hours on Great Friday, the reader says: ‘Do not turn us over to the end (that is, the Last Judgment or death) because of your holy name, do not dissipate your covenant and do not take away your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, your beloved one, Isaac, your servant and Israel, your holy one’. One must, however, critically remark that these positive statements are not applied to the Jewish people, but to the ‘new Israel’, viz. the church.

The attitude towards Judaism and the Old Testament legacy within the Byzantine rite is not devoid of paradoxes and antitheses. On the one hand, several Holy Week hymns demonstrate harsh anti-Jewish thought, even invective.

tive. Although Easter is the ‘feast of feasts’ – the festival of the resurrection of Christ that brings salvation and forgiveness to all people who believe in this mystery –, the hymns concerned seem to imply that the Jews will never share in the joy of the salvation of humankind. On the other hand, the righteous Jews from the *Tanakh* occupy a prominent place in Byzantine worship. Fact is that we come across the phenomenon that Old Testament saints, the righteous from Jewish holy Scripture, hold a much more prominent place in the Byzantine and other Eastern rites than in the Roman rite. The Byzantine calendar numbers numerous festivals of the Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, etc., who are also commemorated during the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. However, they are hardly perceived as Jews in their own right, but are especially significant because they fit well into the Christian typological design: Like the Jewish Passover, they are ‘types’ (τύποι), ‘shadows’, ‘enigmas’ of the real truth, namely Jesus Christ and his salvific death and resurrection. They belong to the Law, incomplete and faulty without its fulfilment and realization in the Christian era. They are members of the ‘old people of God’, whereas the Christians are the ‘new Israel’ and the ‘new people of God’. The prophets proclaimed the Word of the Lord to the people of Israel, inspired them, called them to repentance and so on but, in the Christian tradition, their primary significance is that they prophesied the coming of Christ and his mother. In addition, the main reason that John the Baptist is such an important saint is that he points directly to Christ and is the mediator between the Old and the New Testaments. He gives testimony of Jesus as the Lamb of God and attests to the revelation of the Holy Trinity: The Son, whom he baptizes, the Spirit who descends and the Father who speaks. All of this does not imply that the Old Testament saints have fully lost their worth in the Christian era, but they refer to another, greater reality. They may still serve as pedagogical examples, but the true pedagogue is Jesus Christ himself.

### **3 Revision?**

We will now attend to the urgent question of whether revision of the indeed very problematic liturgical texts mentioned here is taking place, or not and, if yes, how this happens.

Fact is that several hierarchs of the Orthodox Church have advocated revision of the liturgical texts of Holy Week about Jewry. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, for instance, has declared himself in favour of suppressing the anti-Jewish passages, in particular the invective. The backdrop of his plea is

that the Patriarchate of Constantinople engages in dialogue not only with the other Christian churches and Islam, but also with Judaism. It is difficult to take the Jewish partners seriously and, at the same time, demonize them during worship. During official theological consultations between the Orthodox Church and Judaism, Jewish participants have repeatedly stated that they feel hurt by the anti-Jewish hymns in the Holy Week liturgy and have expressed their wish that these texts be revised. During a congress held by the ecumenical Pro Oriente Foundation in Vienna some fifteen years ago (October 2004), the director of the liberal Jewish Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam and Berlin, Rabbi Walter Homolka, also appealed to the Eastern Churches to follow the example of their Western cognates and recognize God's covenant with the Jewish people. Especially in North America where numerous Jews live, many formal and informal contacts between them and Eastern Christians exist.

Moreover, some Orthodox theologians and liturgists, unhappy with the harsh anti-Jewish statements in their own liturgy, have proposed revision. Noteworthy is that in several English translations of the original Greek Orthodox texts, the invective is simply omitted. Concurrently, however, there are influential groups, such as a chorus of monks of the Athos monasteries, who contend that the liturgical tradition is unchangeable and that all troparia passed down to us are essential for worship.

Closely connected with the reform issue is the intelligibility of the texts. On the one hand, in many places, the liturgical language is hardly intelligible for uneducated faithful; in Greece and on Cyprus, it is Ancient and Byzantine Greek, and in Russia, Church Slavonic. However, in the specific case of Holy Week, in particular the Great Friday 'Chants of Praise', these songs are written in a simple style that is certainly intelligible for present-day ears. Moreover, the current Greek words for 'Jews', 'criminals', 'lawless', etc. are identical with those used in the hymns. An important question is whether people emotionally identify with the anti-Jewish invective or not. Or do they just listen to the singing and immediately forget what they heard? (Or do they not listen at all?) Do they apply what they hear to present Jewry or do they experience the texts as merely something historical? In other words, do the hymns feed anti-Semitism? Empirical research on how people really experience the hymns at stake is necessary.

In contemporary Greece, one meets with anti-Judaism that is often latent, it is true, but at the same time strong. In present-day Russia, anti-Judaism lushly grows. Many Greeks and Russians, for example, – also non-Ortho-

dox – are convinced that the so-called ‘Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion’ are an authentic Jewish document. (This book claims that the Jews will not rest before they have gained dominion of the world. Actually, it is a nineteenth-century forgery made by order of the Russian secret police.) In addition, for many Orthodox and also Byzantine Catholics in the Middle East it is very difficult to positively re-evaluate their opinions about Judaism. The main causes for this are, firstly, their perception that the social and economic position of the Christian and Islamic Palestinian population is most precarious and that this group is discriminated in the State of Israel and in the territories annexed by Israel, and, secondly, the problematic classic substitution theology which argues – from a current perspective, unjustifiably – that Christianity has replaced Judaism. A direct causality between the hymns about the Jews discussed here and Greek, Russian and Arabic Christian anti-Judaism cannot be established, it is true, but an indirect causality cannot be excluded.

Also attempts of reinterpretation are made. In his *Lenten Triodion*, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of the Greek Orthodox Church in Great Britain, literally translates the anti-Jewish assertions, but argues at the same time that the statements against those who have handed Christ over to death refer to the Christian community gathered in worship: we ourselves have often betrayed the Saviour and crucified him again. Further, the Russian Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, thinks that we Christians ought to ask ourselves on Great Thursday and Great Friday if we are not like Judas in his perverted love and if we, too, would not have rejected Christ and killed him either. Then, the Greek Orthodox liturgist Alkiviadis Calivas keeps two tracks. On the one hand, he makes mention of the plot laid by ‘the religious authorities’ and ‘the leaders of all the religious parties and factions’ to kill Jesus, as well as ‘the faithlessness of the Jewish religious classes’. On the other, he denounces, not the Jews, but in general those people ‘who wage war upon God ... And still others, who have been baptized, but ... are negligent or lukewarm in their relationship with Christ and his Church.’ So it is ‘our sins, both personal and collective’ and ‘our own dispositions towards Christ’, our repentance and experience of God’s forgiveness and love that, according to Calivas, are at stake. According to another Greek Orthodox theologian, the ethicist Stanley Harakas, the hymns about the barren fig tree, the unprepared virgins, the greed and betrayal of Judas, and about their positive counter-parts, viz. the good man Joseph, the alert virgins and the repentant sinful woman who anointed Jesus, must be taken as moral appeals to present-day people who sing and hear

these hymns – so the worshippers – to do right and avoid evil, be attentive and repent.

In my opinion, the French Orthodox catechism, *Dieu vivant*, goes a step further and is, in this domain, ground-breaking. The catechism denounces the Christian crimes against the Jews and points out that God has never cancelled his covenant with the Jewish people and that Jesus, the Son of God himself, Mary and the apostles have ‘Semitic faces’. Furthermore, the authors of the catechism state that also Christians, just as Judas, are in danger of being hypocrites and becoming traitors and homicides of Christ by betraying their fellow men.

A few Byzantine Catholic communities have already either left out the anti-Jewish texts in their liturgical books or changed the language form and contents thereof. Let me give two pertinent examples. First, in their current ‘Prayer Book’ (*Molytvoslov*), issued in 1990, the Ukrainian Basilians omit any reference to the Jews as God-murderers, as well as incitements for God to punish Jewry for their alleged crimes. Second, the editors of the Dutch *Byzantijns Liturgikon*, published in 1991, have replaced the words ‘Jews’, ‘Hebrews’ etc. in the hymns which we have been discussing, by expressions, such as ‘evil humans’ and ‘sinners’, without any reference to the Jews. It is obvious that the Decree of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (1965), in which the Jewish people and Jewish religion are positively estimated, has given an important impetus to this revision.

#### 4 Conclusion

Generally speaking, Christian identity and the joy about Christ’s redeeming acts should not be at the expense of others, in this case the Jews. And Jewish prophetic self-criticism is not to be abused by Christians and mobilized against the Jewish people. Unfortunately, in many liturgical texts of the Byzantine rite, the old and new covenants are opposed and the redemption by God’s Son from the old covenant is proclaimed. In my opinion, one ought to be cautious of all substitution theories that reduce Israel and its scriptures to a historical prelude to the coming of Jesus and do thus not give due attention to the continuity of God’s appearance throughout the Bible. The authentic ‘Semitic’ face is an indispensable part of the Christian body. Holding on to God’s holy name and keeping the covenant is a key hallmark of both Judaism and Christianity.

The entwinement of faith, liturgy, ecclesiology, *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, that is, the way in which the church prays and celebrates defines its faith, and its faith constitutes its worship, must be supplemented with *lex vivendi/agendi*. The way in which the church prays and celebrates is not alone in defining its faith, but these two 'laws' must determine the way of living and acting and, vice versa, the right way of living and doing things lays down the correct way of worshiping and believing. The 'Semitic face' is, in consequence, a quintessential part of Christian worship, and is not to be separated from liturgical orthodoxy and existential orthopraxy.

To a positive answer to the pressing issue of reform may also contribute texts in the Byzantine liturgy itself, amongst others, those that accentuate the Lord's command of love, warn against slander or call to moderateness and forgiveness. In the 'Prayer of St Ephrem', for instance, that has its place in the so-called Vespers of Forgiveness on the last Sunday of the Forefast, namely at the beginning of the Great Lent, we pray: 'Lord and Master of my life, ... the spirit of prudence, humility, patience and love give to me, your servant. Yes, Lord King, let me see my own faults and not condemn my brother.'