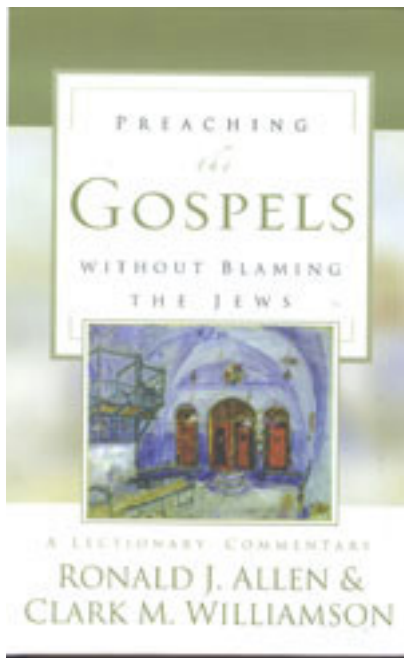


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**Allen, Ronald J., and Clark M. Williamson**

***Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary***

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*Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews* is not an ordinary commentary on the lectionary. Its unique contribution is that it moves the concern for relations between Jews and Christians in the post-Holocaust era directly into the sermon-preparation process. Allen and Williamson accomplish this task by focusing on the effect of the Gospels on contemporary hearers and readers, rather than on the intent of the Gospel writers. In service to their agenda, they emphasize two elements in the Gospels that are in tension with each another: (1) the essential continuity with the theology, values, and practices of Judaism, and (2) the apparent animosity that the Gospel writers had for other Jewish groups, their practices, and their institutions. Combining aspects of Jewish-Christian dialogue with scholarly insights, Allen and Williamson highlight the Jewish context of the lections, while reflecting critically on the anti-Judaism that coexists in the very same readings. Moreover, they suggest ways in which preachers can encourage their congregations to move beyond contentious themes, so that they may develop “a greater sense of kinship and shared mission with Judaism” (xiii).

The commentary is organized according to the triennial cycle of Gospel readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. While this organizational structure is similar to other

lectionary commentaries, its methodology is not. Allen and Williamson clearly point out the possible anti-Jewish ways of “misreading” the text. Of primary concern are the negative images of Jews and Judaism that occur throughout the lections. These “caricatures” of the Jewish people, practices, and institutions are explained in the context of their first-century setting and critiqued from both a historical and theological perspective. The aim of this approach is essential to the authors’ purpose: to prevent the sectarian conflicts of the first century from being a continuous breeding ground for anti-Judaism.

Second, the authors bring to light Jewish and biblical themes, resonances, and echoes in the text. Opposing the criterion of dissimilarity long held by Christian scholars, they elucidate an image of Jesus as a Jew of his time and place. Like other pious Jews in first-century Galilee, Jesus wore fringes (Mark 6:56), went to synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16), and sat down to teach (Matt 23:2). In emphasizing these details of Jewish practice, Allen and Williamson enable their reader to understand Jesus in his Jewish sociohistorical context.

Third, Allen and Williamson are careful to explain the implications of Roman domination (Galilee) and occupation (Judea). They point out that Jesus’ message was delivered to a people who were captive in their own land and subject to Roman taxation, exaction, and expropriation. Governed by a series of emperors who claimed to be god, the people of Israel longed for the coming of a messiah to redeem them from oppression and announce that God and not Caesar was the true sovereign. It is against this background that the modern hearers and readers of the Gospels must understand Jesus, his message, and his ministry.

Fourth, the authors pay particular attention to the relations between Jesus and various Jewish groups, especially the Pharisees. They alert the reader to the polarizing and vindictive rhetoric of the first-century sectarian groups that has found its place in the Gospels and point out how such polemic is at odds with other teachings of Jesus: love of the neighbor, love of the enemy, and forgiveness. In this way, they attempt to liberate preaching from the inherited biases of the Christian tradition.

Elements of the fourfold methodology are applied selectively throughout the commentary as dictated by the contents of each lection. Of particular interest is their treatment of the lectionary’s more contentious passages, such as Matthew’s version of Jesus’ trial (Passion Sunday, Year A). In the Matthean account of the trial, Pilate denies responsibility for Jesus’ death, while the crowd states, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt 27:25). Allen and Williamson acknowledge that the crowd’s outcry has been interpreted as a curse upon the Jewish people that condemns them to suffer for the

crime of deicide. Yet by placing the trial in its Roman historical context, they are able to establish Pilate's responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus *before* they even arrive at this controversial verse. They emphasize the concerns of the Roman government, indicating that it is Pilate's fear of a revolt against Roman rule that ultimately leads to the execution of Jesus in a manner reserved by Rome for political insurrectionists: crucifixion. Moreover, they demonstrate how Matthew's Gospel hides Pilate's historical reputation for excessive cruelty and shifts the blame for Jesus' death from the Roman governor to the Jews (Matt 27:15–26). Allen and Williamson conclude with a theological interpretation of Matt 27:25 that allows the modern Christian to look beyond the contentious theme of deicide. Rather than place emphasis on the blood of Jesus on the cross, the authors suggest that preachers might recall the blood of Jesus at the Last Supper, "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). Theologically, they move beyond the standard interpretation of a particularly problematic passage, transforming a long-held blame of the Jews into a message of Jesus' forgiveness.

Allen and Williamson take a somewhat different but equally effective approach to the account of Jesus' healing of the blind man in John 9:1–41 (Fourth Sunday in Lent/Year A). Here the Evangelist describes the Pharisees as being the ones who are truly blind because they do not recognize Jesus. Commenting on this description of the Pharisees, the authors assert that the Gospel writer deliberately presents a negative caricature of the Pharisees in order to emphasize the superiority of the Johannine community. They further contend that this caricature is part of a systematic identification that is found throughout John's Gospel, in which the Jews and the Pharisees are consistently associated with the world of darkness and blindness. Allen and Williamson denounce this caricature as being "both historically irresponsible and unjust" (33). Furthermore, they eschew the theological implication of the Gospel that the Pharisees are excluded from the circle of God's love and suggest that such a notion contradicts the fundamental message of God's unconditional love for all. They conclude their commentary on the lection with an appeal to the Lenten theme of repentance and a suggestion that the preacher can help the congregation repent of their twofold sin: their continued acceptance of this caricature of the Pharisees (and of the Jews), and their perpetuation of the exclusive claim that God loves only those who believe in Jesus.

The authors of this volume are to be commended for providing preachers with a valuable tool for addressing the issue of anti-Judaism through their sermons. They consistently offer succinct commentaries on the lections that combine scholarly insight with theological innovation. It is unfortunate, however, that they do not thoroughly cite their scholarly resources. This may prove to be frustrating for the preacher who desires access to a more in-depth analysis of recent scholarship as part of the sermon-preparation process. Another weakness in the commentary concerns the use of terminology. In their

introduction, Allen and Williamson carefully explain their unwillingness to use the anachronistic terms “Christian” or “Christian community” to refer to the early Christ-believers. Instead, they make reference to the “Matthean community,” “Markan community,” “Lukan community,” and “Johannine community.” Yet they do not offer any parallel explanation for their use of terminology related to Jews and Judaism. Most of the time, they refer to first-century Jews in an unremarkable manner, but when discussing “the Jews” in the Gospel of John, they almost always add quotation marks (e.g., 60, 113, 143, 208–9). This subtle shift in terminology may be understood in light of scholarly discussions pertaining to the translation of the Greek *Ioudaioi* in the Gospel of John. The recent convention adopted by some Johannine scholars has been to use quotation marks in order to signify that “the Jews” of John’s narrative are not the Jews of history—neither then nor now. Significantly, Allen and Williamson draw attention to the fact that John does not use “the Jews” to indicate “all Jews” (91), but they never explicitly associate this distinction with their own shift in terminology. The authors could have easily legitimized their references to “the Jews” in the context of John’s Gospel at the beginning of the commentary, yet the reasoning behind this preference in terminology is never clarified.

Important as it is, this book could be even more effective if it demonstrated a more accurate awareness of first-century Jewish practices and their rationale, especially those concerned with purity. In one instance Allen and Williamson inaccurately refer to “purity practices” as “identity practices” and minimize their significance by suggesting that these rites were a way “to defy Roman rule and keep alive the witness to faith” (180). At another point the authors discuss how John’s baptism differed from the ritual baths of the temple and Qumran, where people “baptized” themselves (12). Even if one were to put aside the erroneous use of a Christian theological term to describe Jewish practice, there is still the mistaken impression that first-century Jews only observed laws of ritual purification at two locations, an assessment that has been effectively contradicted by both literary and archaeological evidence. Another problematic interpretation of purity practices concerns the story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5:21–43 (Proper 8 [13]/Year B). Here Allen and Williamson fail to differentiate between the purity laws pertaining to the menstruant and the *zabah* when they refer to the women’s hemorrhage as “unrelieved menstruation.” More troublesome is their unqualified assertion that the Jewish community would have placed the woman in quarantine in order to avoid the possibility of spreading communicable diseases carried by her blood. The difficulty with this interpretation is twofold. First, the proposed rationale for isolating the woman is entirely speculative. Second, we cannot assert with any certainty that the hemorrhaging woman was subject to quarantine, since we have no information regarding how the various Jewish communities of the first century C.E. interpreted the two opposing biblical

traditions related to the treatment of the *zabab* (Lev 15:11; Num 5:1–4). To their credit, Allen and Williamson indicate that the alleged practice of quarantine embodied compassion, but this does not take away from the fact that their analysis perpetuates a common anti-Jewish misinterpretation of the narrative: that the Jewish community isolated the woman, while the Markan community was challenged to welcome her and others like her.

Despite these drawbacks, this lectionary commentary is a substantial contribution. It brings awareness of Jewish-Christian discussions and scholarly insights on anti-Judaism in the Gospels to the process of formulating a sermon. In doing so, it calls upon the preacher to teach respect for Judaism, not out of political correctness, but as a legitimate theological expression of Jesus' message.