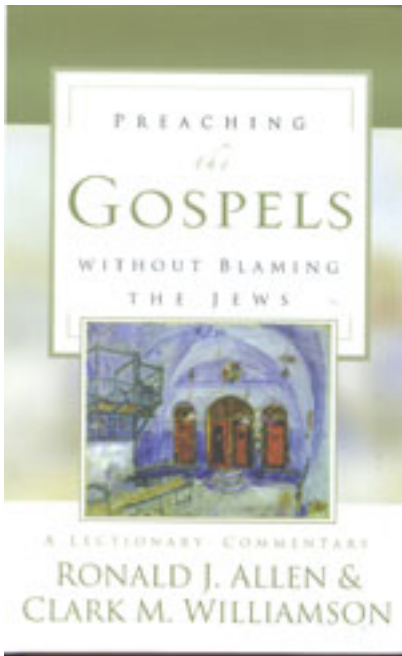


RBL 02/2005



Allen, Ronald J., and Clark M. Williamson

Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004. Pp. xxvi + 261. Hardcover. \$24.95. ISBN 0664227635.

Jonathan D. Lawrence
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN 46556

At one point Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson remind their readers that, “In this book, we try to pay attention to what a text actually says and not simply to traditional interpretation” (197). An admirable approach in and of itself, it is of utmost importance when dealing with Gospel texts that have been used to perpetuate Christian bias against the Jewish people. As many Christians struggle to understand New Testament statements about the Jews, *Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary* offers food for thought.

As a pastor and a scholar interested in early Judaism and Christianity, I am often frustrated by sermons that accept Gospel depictions of the Jews at face value or emphasize stereotypes such as Pharisaic “legalism.” Yet at the same time I am sympathetic to the plight of pastors who cannot ignore the readings in the lectionary and do not have time or access to resources offering a different way of looking at these texts. This book helps answer that need.

Certainly there are many other resources addressing these questions, but few of them address the specific needs of pastors in preparing sermons. Some are too detailed or

specialized; others address the general issue of Christian anti-Judaism without specifically addressing the bulk of the Gospels. Some writers have tried to avoid offense by leaving out problematic passages entirely. While their motive is laudatory, the approach is impractical for pastors who cannot avoid preaching on some of these troublesome texts. Allen and Williamson model a more constructive approach. They acknowledge the anti-Jewish polemics present in the New Testament and reclaim these texts and offer messages that have often been overlooked because of anti-Jewish bias.

In their preface, Allen and Williamson describe the tension inherent in viewing the Gospels as texts heavily influenced by Judaism, yet representing groups that were ultimately in conflict with Judaism. They explain that they are seeking:

to explore the two poles of this tension: (1) We call attention to ways in which the lections are continuous with the theology, values, and practices of Judaism, and (2) we reflect critically on points at which the lections caricature Jewish people, practices, and institutions. We explain these polemics in terms of their first-century settings, but criticize them historically and theologically. We suggest ways that preachers can help congregations move beyond these contentious themes to a greater sense of kinship and shared mission with Judaism. (xiii)

The introduction outlines several ways this commentary differs from other commentaries on the lectionary (xv–xvi). First, it identifies ways in which the texts have been used to perpetuate anti-Jewish prejudice. Second, it highlights common biblical and Jewish themes to put Gospel statements in a wider context. Third, it discusses background information on life under Roman occupation. Fourth, it discusses Jesus' relation to other Jewish groups. Fifth, it emphasizes the mutual love between God and Israel, which is often forgotten by Christians in their criticism of Jewish *law*. Finally, it notes connections to the oral traditions of Mishnah and Talmud, even though scholars cannot be certain that these teachings represent traditions from Jesus' time. Allen and Williamson also note the difficulties in deciding what to call early Christians, given their intricate relationship to Judaism. Ultimately they choose to name the communities by the Gospel they used: Matthean, Markan, Lukan, and Johannine (xxv–xxvi). At the end of the book there are a few pages of notes and a short bibliography. The bulk of this book consists of brief commentaries on the lectionary's weekly Gospel readings in sequence for years A, B, and C. To keep the reflections brief, passages with common themes that have previously been addressed are cross-referenced.

Consider for instance, the entry for Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday (Year A), Matt 21:1–11, 27:11–54 (35–36). Allen and Williamson begin by considering the expectations that the Messiah would come from the Mount of Olives, as seen in Zech 14:1–5, an especially

potent desire given the Roman occupation of Jesus' time. They then discuss the idea that the Messiah would arrive upon a donkey, as in Zech 9:9–10, an image the rabbis took as a sign of humility. Even so, the act of spreading their cloaks in Jesus' path recalls Jehu's anointing as king of Israel in 2 Kgs 9:13. Given this imagery, it should be no surprise that Jesus is convicted and crucified as "King of the Jews," not directly for his teachings or theology.

They continue by considering the "custom" of releasing a prisoner at the crowd's request, unknown outside the Gospels. They see this as an attempt to shift blame from the notoriously violent Pilate, so that Christians could then claim that Pilate had not persecuted them and neither should later Roman leaders. They then tackle the imputed "blood curse" upon the entire Jewish people of Matt 27:25, suggesting "instead that preachers recall the blood of Jesus at the Last Supper, 'poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt 26:28). Indeed that is the gospel" (36). They conclude with a brief comment on practical details concerning Jesus' torture by the guards, the crucifixion of the two "bandits," and the division of Jesus' clothes.

Thus in this brief entry, the writers accomplish several things. First, they show how some of the actions and statements in this reading might have been understood in Jesus' time by readers familiar with Jewish traditions. Second, they discuss elements of Roman practices and culture germane to the text. Finally, they address one of the most important anti-Jewish interpretation arising from the Gospels, the "blood curse," and suggest a new way to interpret it. They did not set out to answer every question about the passage, but they have given preachers many issues to consider as they prepare their sermons.

While I am pleased and impressed with the content of this book, I have several objections with its format. First, readings are omitted for certain holy days not falling on Sundays, such as Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Christmas Eve. Entries for these days would be very useful, especially since they deal with crucial moments in Jesus' life. Second, the cross-referencing is incomplete. Given the number of texts involved, a few missed references could be understood, but there is at least one glaring omission. Specifically, the reading for Ash Wednesday for years A, B, and C is Matt 6:1–6, 16–21. Year C refers back to Year A, but neither Year A nor Year C mention year B, so readers would not know to look at the other entries for further information. Finally, while it makes sense to divide the entries by the lectionary year and then proceed throughout the year according to the liturgical calendar, this order will be useful only for pastors who are following or at least aware of the lectionary sequence. For readers not following the lectionary but looking for an individual text, it will be quite frustrating to try to find that text. An easy solution would be to include the citations in the table of contents, but a citation index would be even more useful, since it could then include references to

passages outside the Gospels and even outside the Bible. The book is very useful as it is now, but these changes would make it even more helpful.

This book will be best suited to pastors and seminary students who are using the lectionary or at least familiar with it. Bible-study leaders and interested laypeople may find it interesting as well, although the indexing issue discussed above may make it less accessible for them. Each entry is packed with information on the passage's Jewish background, its historical and theological context, and suggestions of issues to emphasize in a sermon. With most entries about two pages in length, consulting this commentary will not put an undue burden on pastors, but it should offer even the most seasoned pastors much to consider as they prepare their sermons. Furthermore, the bibliography lists many helpful references for further study should the need arise.

Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews offers an important resource for pastors and laypeople and should help increase sensitivity to the anti-Jewish preconceptions underlying the way many Christians read the Gospels. Hopefully this approach can be extended to other parts of the lectionary.