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“In his humiliation justice was denied him”

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THE USE OF THE TERM “JEWS” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

It is often stated that the New Testament condemns the Jewish people. This misconception derives from the usage in the New Testament of the term “Jews”. In this pamphlet we examine the origin of the term and the peculiar variety of uses to which the writers of the New Testament put it. We arrive at the conclusion that the New Testament writers reserve the condemnatory use of the term “Jews” for the priestly establishment in Jerusalem and its various supporters and that they do not use “the Jews” as a term for the race generally.

The term “Jews” – Origin and Significance

The term “Jews” first came into use in the period 600 BCE – 500 BCE. It referred to the people of the kingdom of Judah who passed at the time under Babylonian domination.

The term designated only a part of Israel. To the year 721 BCE “all-Israel” consisted of twelve tribes divided in two kingdoms. The southern kingdom, known as Judah, consisted of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah with a sprinkling of Levites. It was to these people that the term “Jews” was applied. The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom, taken captive to Assyria about 721 BCE, did not return to Palestine. They were still “beyond the Euphrates” at the time of Jesus. The term “Jews” did not apply to these northern tribes and is therefore not a synonym for all-Israel. It is restricted in its application to the people of the southern kingdom and their descendants.

Under Roman domination at the time of Jesus

The ruling body in Jerusalem – particularly from the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the era of the Maccabean Wars (168 BCE onwards) – was concerned equally with the synagogue and with politics. It was a political-priestly junta. Dogmatic theology enforced itself by means of the machinery of state administration. This ruling junta may be described as the Jerusalem Establishment. Under Roman domination it spoke in the name of “the Jews”.

Wide range of meaning in the New Testament

The term “Jews” is used in the New Testament in senses that range from an almost laudatory usage to a usage apparently condemnatory of all Jewish people.

It does not signify a constant quantity or a constant quality. The whole range of usages must be analysed before the various levels of meaning become apparent.

The term “Jews” occurs 69 times in the gospel of John. An examination of these occurrences provides reasonably representative results that should be true for the New Testament generally. Much misunderstanding and anti-Jewish feeling have arisen from a failure to perceive the ways in which John uses the term.

The 69 occurrences may be classified by the following 2 methods

According to the locality referred to in the text:

- No locality, - used in a broad national or general sense. 10
- Not Jerusalem – concerning Jewish customs applied elsewhere 6
- Judaea – people in this locality, opposed to the disciples 3
- Jerusalem – all varieties of people in this city 50

The other gospels indicate that Jesus spent a considerable period in Galilee where there was a Jewish population. But John's account gives emphasis to the events, which took place in, or near Jerusalem and almost ignores Galilee. It is John's gospel also which emphasises the condemnatory use of the term "Jews". The conjunction of "Jerusalem" with "condemnation" is more than coincidence as the text analysis shows:

According to the ethical judgement pronounced:

- "Jews" used in a laudatory or neutral sense 28
- "Jews" used in a condemnatory sense (opposed to Jesus) 41

Of the 41 'condemnatory' texts 36 refer to the Jews of Jerusalem, three to the Jews of Judaea, and two to the synagogue Jews of Capernaum in Galilee.

Conclusions

The term "Jews" is not used in the New Testament as a term of race condemnation. Condemnatory use by John is reserved for those holding power in Jerusalem and persons connected with the temple and / or synagogue. Corroboration from Matthew shows that condemnation was not intended of the Jewish people generally, but of the Priestly Establishment and supporters. Peter and Paul refer to themselves as Jews. "Laudatory" texts indicate Jesus a Jew and that "salvation is from the Jews".