

READING TORAH

THE KEY TO THE GOSPELS

הַאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם
לֵאמֹר כָּל-הַבָּנִים הֵילֹוּ

Τότε Ἡρόδης ἰδὼν
μάγων ἐθυμώθη λίαν
πάντας τοὺς παῖδας
πᾶσι τοῖς ἡμέραις αὐτῆς
κατὰ τὸν χρόνον οὗ τῆς

*Introduction to the Jewish
Character of the Gospels*

Peter van 't Riet

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THE KEY TO THE GOSPELS**

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Preface

Many theologians and interpreters of the gospels practise, what I would like to call, a Night Watch exegesis. They stand as it were in front of Rembrandt's Night Watch without any knowledge of his time, his life and his work. Nor do they have any insight in the art of painting, not even the art of painting in Rembrandt's days. What they do know is that this masterpiece has been called the "Night Watch" for centuries on end. And this title of course opens a wide field of crooked interpretation: aren't the days we live in not as dark as the night? Or isn't it our duty to watch over all our Christian traditions?

Here we can see how our artistic persuasion is based on an alluvium of art history as, of course, the Night Watch isn't a painting of a watch at night at all. Many gospel stories are treated in the same way. The historical circumstances, the methods of literacy of the bible writers, the personality of the evangelist and his own "theological" view, the Jewish environment in and for which the stories were written, the extensive corpus of thought of the Judaism of those days, all this often doesn't play any role at all in the interpretations of many bible interpreters.

The purpose of this book is to show that knowledge of all this is an essential condition for a good understanding of the gospels. However, the size of this book forces me to restrict myself to the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. The gospel of John will be left out of our discussion for the greater part, because it deviates too much from the other three, and because it is of a later date and therefore in need of a separate treatment. I wrote about it in my Dutch publication "The Gospel from the School of Lazarus".¹ The gist of my discourse is that the gospels are original Jewish writings indeed, written by Jews and for Jews. Therefore this book is a plea for a Jewish way of reading the gospels. In the chapters 1 to 5 I will introduce the rules for this way of reading by means of a large number of examples.

How to summarize such a discourse in the title of this book? Without any knowledge of Judaism nobody will understand the gospels? Everybody will agree with such a statement. The point is: what specific

knowledge of Judaism is meant? Or: Without knowledge of Talmud and Midrash nobody will understand the gospels? Today many people will agree with me on this too, but one doesn't need to go beyond Strack and Billerbeck's work. Where then lies the essence of the matter? Won't it be in the Torah, in the heart and soul of Judaism, the foundation of all the Scriptures? Hence: *Reading Torah, the Key to the Gospels*.

This book, then, introduces some basic rules on how to read the gospels. Don't expect a Christian theology on a Jewish basis (if that would ever be possible). Who wants to live and believe as a Christian on the basis of a Jewish reading of the gospels will have to get through a large amount of spiritual effort.

In chapter 6 I will describe how far Christianity drifted away from its Jewish origin in the almost twenty centuries of its existence, with Auschwitz as a dramatic final result. In chapter 7 I will briefly touch on some developments in our own age. I fervently hope that the nadir of the Holocaust will appear to be a turning point in the history of Christianity. Therefore this book is also - several decades after Auschwitz - a plea against all kinds of Christian theology that consider itself able to determine the place of Christianity and Church without devoting just one word on Judaism, the noble olive-tree of which we are no more than a wild branch.

On the whole the Bible quotations are derived from the New King James Version (NKJV). In particular cases I will quote the New English Bible (NEB) or use a translation of my own to allow for a better understanding of the original languages - either Hebrew or Greek - and of the Jewish religious context. And finally, I'd like to point out that this book was written as a twin of my book "Luke, the Jew", which I hope to publish in English soon.² I'll sometimes refer to it in the foot-notes. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible to read this book without knowing the content of the other one.

March 2012

Peter van 't Riet

1 Addressed them in Hebrew

The Hebrew background of the gospels

1.1 The languages of the Bible

Hebrew is the original language of Israel. For the greater part Tanakh (the Old Testament) is written in that language.^a It is still the linguistic heart of Judaism, but nowhere in Tanakh the word 'Hebrew' is mentioned. The language of Israel is sometimes spoken of as 'Jewish' or 'Judean'. This is the case in 2 Kings 18,16. Only much later the word 'Hebrew' began to be used under the influence of Greek and Roman authors. Hebrew, however, is not the only language found in Tanakh. And even in the days of Jesus and the evangelists it was not any longer the common language of the Jews.

Returning from the Babylonian exile at the end of the sixth century BCE the Hebrew language was replaced by Aramaic, the common language then. Aramaic is a twin-language of Hebrew. Both are related like Spanish and Portuguese. Aramaic already was an international language long before the beginning of the Babylonian Exile and its function can be compared with today's English. It was also spoken in the royal court of Jerusalem (2 Kings 18,26). During and after the exile the Jews accepted this language from the Babylonians and Persians as their common language. They even began to write Hebrew in Aramaic characters very much different from the older Hebrew script (see Table 1.1). Hebrew, as the original language of Israel however, kept its religious and liturgical functions. It remained the language used in schools and synagogues. Tanakh was still written in it, although translations in Aramaic were made (the so-called Targums). Only a few parts of Tanakh were written in Aramaic: Ezra 4,7 - 6,18 and 7,12-26, Jeremiah 10,11 and Daniel 2,4 - 7,28.

^a The word Tanakh is an acronym of *Torah*, the five books of Moses, *Nevi'im*, the Prophets, and *Ketuvim*, the Writings.