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BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

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"THE JEWS" IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

It is the feeling of many Christians that the Apostle John, in the Gospel that bears his name, places the blame for the crucifixion of Jesus squarely upon "the Jews" as a people. Thus, an exact definition of the term "the Jews" as used by John becomes one of extreme importance.

The declarations in John 5: 16, "**And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay Him**"; and in 5:18, "**Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill Him, because He had not only broken the sabbath, but said also that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God,**" are pointed to as being direct statements from God's Word concerning the involvement of all Palestinian Jews in the rejection of Jesus. And by some feat of illogical deduction, the term "the Jews" is made to mean all who lived then as well as all who have lived since, which is preposterous and absurd to say the least.

This matter arose recently and was threshed out in a civil court of law in France, in a case that came to be popularly known as "the Jesus trial." In 1967, Monsieur Jacques Isorni, a lawyer, legal historian, and author, wrote a book called *The True Trial of Jesus*. In it he blamed Pilate for the crucifixion. The Rev. George de Nantes, a Catholic priest, became so vehemently bitter in his accusations and denunciations of Isorni, that it led him to sue for libel. De Nantes charged that Isorni had falsified the New Testament, pointing to John 5:18 as proof of Jewish guilt. The trial went on for two months (Nov. and Dec. 1974) and the three justices had to decide whether the Jews or the Romans were ultimately responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. The verdict was that the Romans killed Jesus, and De Nantes was found guilty of libel. Isorni was awarded exactly what he had asked for: symbolic damages of one franc.

Of course, such a trial settles nothing; but it again raises the question that has long needed to be answered: Who are "the Jews" in John's Gospel? What does he mean by this term?

In 1968, Rosemary Ruether, writing in *The Christian Century*, called upon all professing Christians to admit that anti-Semitism "is deeply rooted in the gospel itself," and claimed that it is fairly well established that the New Testament account of the death of Jesus is "an apologetic reworking of history to shift the blame from the Roman to the Jewish authorities."

Mrs. Ruether is one of a rather large company of liberal writers who challenge the accuracy and authority of the New Testament records. Their arguments come in many variations: The Gospels are not consistent in reporting the trial and death of Jesus Christ; the later evangelists play down the Roman involvement and magnify that of the Jews; and the latest gospel (?), John, is the most anti-Semitic of the four, it having been written to provide ammunition in the great struggle that arose between "church" and "synagogue." Thus, as these liberals rightly seek to fully renounce anti-Semitism, they fall into a more complete and wrong rejection of the fourth gospel.

The so-called anti-Semitism of John's Gospel is based upon superficial interpretations of certain passages; and such interpretations are a part of that anti-Semitic theology, the purpose of which is to get the Jew out and get the church in, to clear all Gentiles of any complicity in the crucifixion and place all blame upon the people of Israel, those living then as well as those living now. As a duty to God and out of love for the truth, we owe it to Him to find with accuracy what John meant by the term "the Jews" when he used it in his gospel. A precise understanding is all important.

The meaning of any term or word in Scripture must be determined by its usage. Attempts have been made to fix an exact meaning upon the term "the Jews," but these definitions have always fallen apart when applied to all occurrences in Scripture. One occurrence will often fully support the definition, but another will deny it. This can result in no other conclusion than that the term "the Jews" means whatever is indicated by the immediate context in which it is found. This is also true of all national designations given to any company of people, such as the Americans, the French, the

Japanese, or the Jews.

For example, consider the following statements': "The Americans dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima"; and, "The Americans did not know that an atomic bomb existed." Both of these statements are entirely true, even though they seem to be contradictory. The moment the reader saw them, his mind went to work on them and straightened them out. How good it would be if we would do this on each occurrence of "the Jews" in John's Gospel.

In the first occurrence, John 1:19, we read that "**the Jews sent (*apostello*) priests and Levites from Jerusalem**" to ask John the Baptist, "**Who art thou?**" Here the term "the Jews" must be limited to a very small ruling oligarchy that controlled all life in and around Jerusalem. This group had the power to commission with authority as investigators certain priests and Levites to question the Lord's forerunner. Later we are told that they which were sent (*apostello*) were of the Pharisees, which indicates that it was the Sanhedrin that dispatched them on this official mission.

The second occurrence speaks of the six waterpots which were set after the manner of the purifying of "**the Jews**" (John 2: 6) . This purification process was a Pharaonic custom and was in no way any part of the divine ritual laid down in the Old Testament. Very few in Israel observed it, and in this occurrence the term "the Jews" would need to be severely limited, probably to the aristocracy in Jerusalem.

The third occurrence speaks of "**the Jews' passover**" (John 2: 13), which at first glance would seem to enlarge the scope of this term, but after more careful examination we find that the rulers in Israel had so altered and encumbered "the Lord's Passover" that it had become "the Jews' passover." They had made the Word of God of none effect by their traditions (Matt. 15: 6) .

"**The Jews**" who questioned Jesus in John 2:18 and 2:20 were the rulers who were in the temple at the time He cast out the money changers in the temple. Their questions were formal and serious, and we infer from this that these were members of the Sanhedrin who were accompanied by some of the temple police.

In John 3: 1 the fact that Nicodemus was "**a ruler of the Jews**" must here, in Jerusalem, mean that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. The rule of the Sanhedrin at this time did not extend beyond Judea. They had the authority

but could not exercise it.

The next occurrence is interesting. It says that Jesus and His disciples came into the land of **the Jews** (not Judea, as the K.J.V. has it). He moved from the Judean capital into the Judean country (John 3:22) where the common people were, and away from the priests, Levites, and Pharisees who dominated Jerusalem.

In John 3:25 when the question arose between some of John's disciples and "**the Jews**" about purifying, it is quite evident that this term covered a very small number.

The declaration that "**the Jews** have no dealings with the Samaritans" (John 4:9) was a generalization made by a woman whose knowledge of the Jews was limited. True, certain Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, but this was limited to those living in Judea.

. Our Lord's statement that "**salvation is of the Jews**" (John 4:22) has reference to the fact that "the Salvation;" which is the Messiah, was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea, and would therefore Himself be a Jew.

The "feast of the Jews" spoken of in John 5: 1 is not identifiable. The Jews had many festivals that had no basis in Scripture. And the company referred to four times as "**the Jews,**" on this occasion has to be limited to a very small number of the rulers (5: 10, 15, 16, 18). In John 6:4 the Passover is again referred to as a feast of the Jews. Compare this with Exodus 12: 11, 27, and 48.

The term "**the Jews**" in John 6:41 and 52 must be limited to a very small number who made up part of the crowds that surrounded Him when He spoke. This is also true in John 7: 1, 11, 13, 15, 35; 8:22, 48, 52, 57. There is no way that any of these occurrences can be made to mean the 2,500,000 Israelites who then lived in Palestine. "The Jews' feast of Tabernacles" spoken of in 7:2 shows that this simple celebration had degenerated due to the many symbolic features added in postexilic times.

The student can examine for himself the occurrences of "**the Jews**" in John 9:18, 22; 10:19, 24, 31, 33; 11:8, 19, 31, 33, 36, 45, 54, 55; 12:9, 11, and 13:33 and in every instance he will *see* that this term is limited to a very small number of people.

When we come to the record of the arrest, the trial, and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, we find the term "**the Jews**" twenty-one times in John 18 and 19. In every occurrence it has to be limited to the rulers, scribes, and priests who were the persecutors of Jesus. There is no way it can be spread out and made to mean the 2,500,000 Israelites who lived in Palestine. The overwhelming majority of these cannot in any way be charged with the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus.

In the final occurrence in John's Gospel we find the disciples assembled behind closed doors "**for fear of the Jews**" (John 20:19). We are prone to ask, "Of whom were these men afraid?" Were they afraid of the common people who had heard the Lord gladly? Were they afraid of themselves? Everyone of them was a Jew. The answer is clear. They feared that small aristocracy and hierarchy that controlled all life in Jerusalem and Judea at that time.

If the reader will put his brain to work on any occurrence of the term "**the Jews**" in John's Gospel, he will find that it almost always refers to the enemies of Christ, a small but powerful oligarchy that brought about His crucifixion.

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