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Presumed guilty: how the Jews were blamed for the death of Jesus

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discussion of scholarly opinions so that, for example, his explanation of Old Testament covenant (pp. 55-6) or sacrifice (pp. 324-5) is barely representative of the more recent discussion informed by crucial Jewish scholarly contributions. Broadening the perception of scholarly voices would then also benefit the corresponding chapter on “Jesus’ death as a sacrifice” (pp. 441-42). Finally, this explicit Christian perspective is the main reason why the “other continuation” of the Hebrew Bible in the form of Rabbinic Judaism is never seriously presented – Drane contents himself with introducing the two parts of the Christian Bible.

Nevertheless, I recommend this valuable and very reader-friendly resource to all lay people interested in the study of the Christian Bible, and to beginning students.

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**Presumed Guilty:
How the Jews Were Blamed for the Death of Jesus**

Peter J. Tomson (translated by Janet Dyk)

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005

160 pages, \$15.00 Paperback

Peter J. Tomson, Professor of New Testament and Patristics in the Theological Faculty at the University of Brussels (Belgium), has chosen an important topic for his scholarly work. In his book *Presumed Guilty: How the Jews Were Blamed for the Death of Jesus*, he acknowledges the deplorable reality of Christian anti-Judaism and investigates its roots in Early Christianity, and particularly in New Testament writings. Aimed at a wider audience, this book is an abridged version of Tomson’s earlier scholarly work entitled *‘If This Be from Heaven ...’: Jesus and the New Testament Authors in Their Relationship to Judaism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

Tomson tries to explain historical phenomena by establishing their historical context. Thus he outlines the development of Judaism from the 6th century B.C.E. to the 2nd century C.E. and shows how the

Jesus movement grew within it. Tomson suggests that the Early Christian church was closely connected to the Jewish religion; the decisive split only occurred as a result of religious and social polarization caused by the war with Rome (66-70 C.E.). Through redaction-critical analysis of the four Gospels, Tomson shows in a concise fashion how the negative depiction of the Jews gradually increases from Mark to Matthew and especially John. He also demonstrates that most of the NT christological and soteriological images – including the resurrection – are derived from the Old Testament, hence are Jewish. In addition, he presents Jesus as thoroughly Jewish; he repeatedly shows how teachings of Jesus are congruent with those of early first century Jewish representatives (Tomson usually compares Jesus to Essenes and Pharisees). In their intention, Tomson's above-mentioned two books can thus be compared to the voluminous commentary by Paul Billerbeck who, between 1922 and 1928, already collected rabbinic parallels to the New Testament in order to demonstrate the Jewishness of Jesus. Billerbeck had wanted to counter growing anti-Jewish sentiments in Germany even before the Nazis rose to power. Since then, the situation has fortunately changed, but Christian church and scholarship still need to be reminded of the danger of crafting one's own Jesus image at the expense of the historical Jewish context.

However, questions remain. Tomson calls the Jesus movement “a reform movement within Judaism” (pp. 38, 77), but since he only depicts Jesus' similarity to fellow Jews it remains unclear what the reform comprised. Does the Jewishness of Jesus necessarily preclude that Jesus held different opinions? Moreover, Tomson certainly corrects the image of all those who consider Pharisees as conservative legalists; but he derives his depiction of Pharisaic Judaism mostly from rabbinic sources, and it is disputed whether these 3rd century texts can be considered representative of early 1st century Pharisaic opinions.

More important, however, is the question whether Tomson succeeds in exonerating the Jews from the blame that forms the basis of Christian anti-Judaism. Through his historical investigations, he attempts to answer the central question of who is responsible for the death of Jesus. His results are surprising, to say the least. An idiosyncrasy of the book is the way in which Tomson effectively *exonerates the Pharisees but never attempts to question any of the charges against the temple authorities in Jerusalem*. Do the latter not

also belong to the spectrum of 1st century Judaism? On the contrary, for Tomson it is beyond doubt that the chief priests and Sadducees alone are responsible for the execution of Jesus (e.g., pp. 1, 50-53, 62-69, 74-75, 105; on p. 71 the temple authorities are called “Jesus’ mortal enemies”). He leaves no doubt about how he views their morality when calling them “greedy” (p. 66, cf. pp. 52, 71) and he relates that they “had the reputation of being very cruel in jurisdiction and did not worry about one execution more or less” (p. 52). Tomson even describes an open conflict between Jesus and the temple authorities: “Jesus’ sworn enemies were thus the high priests, the chief priests, and their followers ... [therefore] Jesus assumed the offensive and challenged the authority of the chief priests” (p. 66). Thus the execution of Jesus came as no surprise; according to Tomson, the temple authorities killed him just as in the past they had killed the Old Testament prophets.

After becoming aware of this aspect of Tomson’s thesis, it is almost disturbing to revisit the book’s subtitle and discover that Tomson himself leaves no doubt that *Jews* – namely Jewish temple authorities – *are to be blamed for the death of Jesus*. Tomson set out to defend the Jews but only succeeds in correcting our perception of the Pharisaic movement. In doing so he perpetuates the typical Christian bias of acknowledging only the prophetic voice as an authentic element of Judaism while disregarding the temple cult as its ritual counterpart. And yet decades of Christian scholarship have not only moved beyond such a narrow perception of Judaism but also questioned the exclusive responsibility of Jewish temple authorities for the execution of Jesus. Does not the *titulus* on the cross indicate that Jesus was ultimately sentenced for sedition, a fact that corresponds well to the political dimension of the Gospel message (Mark 5:1-20)? And was not Pontius Pilate, a ruthless tyrant, in full control of his Roman province including matters at the temple in Jerusalem? Strangely enough, Tomson is aware that the New Testament depiction of Pilate is historically implausible (p. 74) but makes no effort to consequently exonerate Jewish temple authorities.

Tomson has written a book in an accessible style that should engage a wide audience with interest in this essential subject. He succeeds in giving a concise introduction into the history of Early Judaism and the Jewish nature of Jesus’ teachings. His work, however, is only partially convincing in exposing anti-Jewish

stereotypes within Christianity and their biblical roots because, unfortunately, it perpetuates such stereotypes itself.

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Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration

Norma C. Everist

Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004

157 pages, \$18 Paperback

I like this book. It's a slender but concentrated volume, and is surely the product of academic, pastoral and personal experience, thorough research, and ecclesial engagement.

It is timely, accessible to most readers, and gives up no easy answers. While it may be read for individual edification, its true value is indicated by its structure. At every step the reader is drawn into a "panel" of representative views about conflict in the church. As I read on, I found myself being drawn into my own review of past conflicts, intrapersonal and interpersonal, and not liking what I felt. If this is a deliberate strategy, then Everist has succeeded, at least with this reviewer, in exposing the slippery and seductive nature of conflict. Self-awareness seems to be a painful but fundamental component if one is to discover anything redemptive about church wars.

With this awareness of my unwillingness or inability to become emotionally detached from the conversation, I was led into an introductory presentation of the scope and complexity of conflict, particularly as it applies to ecclesial bodies.

Part I utilises recognised research to inform the reader of the nature of conflict. Questions emerge: What images prevail? Is conflict like a war that must be won at all costs? What type of conflict is on stage? Is it primarily inside me, outside me, or both? Is it possible for conflict to be constructive? How does my personal resume of conflict aid or distort the issues at hand? And what role, as a church-leader, am I bound to assume? Everist proposes a climate of trust in which such elusive questions can be addressed.