

Issues in the Translation of the Passion Gospel of John

The presenting issue for a contemporary proclamation of the Passion Gospel of John on Good Friday is the repeated use of the term *Ioudaioi*, which commonly has been rendered simply as “the Jews.” But the translation of this word is not so straightforward since it could be used to refer to all the people of the historical area of Israel and also specifically to those from Judea, the urban area around Jerusalem. This word could also refer generally to the cultic practices of the people of Judea, the people we could distinguish as “the Jews.”

Several issues make the term especially difficult to translate:

- In first century Galilee/Judea, *Ioudaioi* could be understood as shorthand for Judean leadership in particular, as distinguished from the people of Galilee and other regions. Jerusalem, in Judea, was the center of Jewish political life and power, so the *Ioudaioi* could be seen by people from other regions as benefitting from their proximity to the political center.
- In the first century, there was no strict distinction between what we would call religion and politics, so *Ioudaioi* could be used to refer both to the people of the area and also to their religious and cultural practices.
- *Ioudaismos* (Judaism, the practices of people in Judah) referred to a whole cultural nexus of religion, political life in light of the values of that religion, customs, holidays, etc.
- Jesus was critical of ways in which he saw the Judean leadership as overly implicated in Roman rule and frequently focused on cultic issues that would not benefit the people as a whole.
- Much of the heat between Jesus and the Judean leadership witnesses to the divide between rural poverty under Roman occupation and the relative well-being of the urban elite.
- As a deeply faithful Jew, Jesus was not critical of Jews or Judaism in general. Rather, he proclaimed a renewal of Jewish life that he hoped could be powerful in bringing about justice for the Jewish people.

Translating *Ioudaioi* as “the Jews” misses out on a central theme of the Passion Gospel, namely Jesus’s betrayal by the Judean leadership who feared that they would lose their own positions if Pontius Pilate and other Roman officials did not see them as fully committed to smooth Roman rule.

More seriously, translating *Ioudaioi* as “the Jews” has caused untold suffering among the Jewish people over centuries of anti-Jewish Christian teaching and practice.

As an example of these issue, in his translation of this gospel, David Bentley Hart retains the ambiguity of the original term *Ioudaioi*, by translating it consistently as “Judeans.”

We have offered a translation that makes some distinctions between “the Jews” as a people with certain practices and customs and “the Judeans” and often more specifically “the Judean leaders” as shorthand for the Jerusalem leadership who opposed Jesus. The choice of this translation also heightens the tension between Jesus

19:3	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	Judaeans
19:7	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jewish leaders	the crowd	Jewish leaders	Judaeans
19:12	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jewish leaders	the crowd	Jewish leaders	Judaeans
19:14	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	the crowd	Jewish leaders	Judaeans
19:19	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	Judaeans
19:20	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jewish people	Jews	Judaeans
19:21 (3X)	Jews (x3)	Jews (x3)	Jews (x3)	Jews (x3)	chief priests, Jews (x2)	Jewish chief priests	Judaeans (X3)
19:31	Jews	Jews	Jews (ambiguous)	Jewish leaders	Jewish people/they (ambiguous)	Jewish leaders	“the Judaeans asked Pilate...”
19:38	Jews	Jews	Jews	Jewish leaders	Jewish leaders	Jewish authorities	Judaeans
19:40 (appropriate here)	[<i>manner of the</i>] Jews	[<i>custom of the</i>] Jews	[<i>custom of the</i>] Jews	Jewish [<i>burial customs</i>]	[<i>how the</i>] Jewish people [<i>bury their dead</i>]	Jewish [<i>burial customs</i>]	custom among the Judaeans
19:42 (Jewish is appropriate here)	Jews’	Jewish	Jewish	Jewish	Sabbath	Jewish [<i>Preparation Day</i>]	Judaeans’