

‘Rewritten Gospel’: The Case of Caiaphas the High Priest

ADELE REINHARTZ

*Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON,
Canada*

email: areinhar@uottowa.ca

Although the term ‘rewritten Bible’ has been used primarily of postbiblical Jewish retellings of the Hebrew Bible, the phenomenon which it describes extends to the present day, and pertains to the NT as well as the Hebrew Bible. This paper examines two examples of ‘rewritten Gospel’—Dorothy Sayers’s play cycle, *The Man Born to Be King* (1941–2) and Sholem Asch’s novel, *The Nazarene* (1939)—in order to argue that such postcanonical Jesus narratives should be of interest to NT scholarship just as ‘rewritten Bible’ is of interest to scholars of the Hebrew Bible.

Keywords: Caiaphas, rewritten Bible, anti-semitism, Gospels

The term ‘rewritten Bible’ is commonly used to refer to postbiblical Jewish narrative texts, such as Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* or the book of *Jubilees*, that retell all or part of the Hebrew Bible but include ‘a substantial amount of supplements and interpretative developments’.¹ The texts in this genre share a number of characteristics: they are sequential narratives that build on but do not highlight their scriptural sources; they cover a significant portion of material rather than one small narrative segment; they engage in both paraphrase and expansion, often on the basis of extracanonical material.² The phenomenon of rewritten Bible therefore testifies to the profound engagement of postbiblical storytellers with the Bible as a repository of stories that could be told, retold, expanded and embellished in ways that expressed their own beliefs, anxieties and worldviews.

Although the term ‘rewritten Bible’ has been used primarily of postbiblical Jewish retellings of the Hebrew Bible, the phenomenon which it describes has a

1 Geza Vermes in Emil Schürer et al., *A History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 326.

2 Philip S. Alexander, ‘Retelling the Old Testament’, *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars, Ssf* (ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988) 116–17.

far broader application. The impulse to retell biblical stories has persisted far beyond the postbiblical era, and, as recent novels such as *The Red Tent*³ show, it continues to the present day. Furthermore, not only sections of the Hebrew Bible but also NT books, in particular the canonical Gospels, have been told and retold, expanded and embellished from the early second century to the present, in diverse genres including passion plays, scholarly lives of Jesus, historical fiction, and cinema. Like the rewritten Bible of such postbiblical authors as Josephus and Pseudo-Philo, these narratives retell the canonical stories in their own words. In doing so, they explore the gaps in the sources, add extracanonical material and thereby arrive at accounts that are recognizably related to their biblical foundations yet distinct from them in numerous ways. Most important, these retold versions provide insight into the tensions, problems and gaps within their canonical sources even as they also function as vehicles for the individual perspectives of the storytellers themselves.

Just as rewritten Bible is of interest to the field of biblical studies, so too should postcanonical Jesus narratives—'rewritten Gospels'—be of interest to NT scholarship. In the first place, these narratives highlight issues and problems in the Gospels themselves and illustrate a range of hermeneutical possibilities.⁴ Second, and more to the point, postcanonical retellings of the Jesus story testify to the profound impact of the Gospels in history, society and culture.

To illustrate the value of adding the study of 'rewritten Gospel' to the repertoire of NT scholarship, this essay will examine two examples from the same time period: the early years of World War II. The focus of the discussion will be on the most dramatic part of the Jesus story, that is, the Passion, and, more specifically, on the most elusive figure within that climactic episode, Caiaphas the High Priest.

Caiaphas in the NT

Caiaphas looms large in most retellings of the Passion narrative. This may be surprising in light of the fact that the NT mentions him by name only nine times. In Matthew, the gathering of the chief priests and elders, at which the decision is taken to plot against Jesus' life, takes place in Caiaphas's palace (Matt 26.3) and after his arrest, Jesus is taken to the palace for questioning (26.57). Throughout the interrogation the High Priest is referred to not by name but by title, as if to underscore his rank and role in Judean society. At the climax of the scene, the High Priest accuses Jesus of blasphemy, tears his robes, and elicits a guilty verdict from the council (26.65–66). In Luke, Caiaphas is named only in 3.1–2, which situates the evangelist's account 'in the fifteenth

3 Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador, 1997).

4 On the exegetical value of fictional treatments of the Bible, see L. Joseph Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the High Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas'. Luke's passion account, however, like Mark's, refers only to the 'High Priest' without mentioning Caiaphas by name. Acts 4.6 lists Caiaphas, along with other members of the high priestly family, including his father-in-law Annas the High Priest, John and Alexander, among those who arrested and interrogated Jesus' followers.

It is John's Gospel that pays the most attention to Caiaphas. Indeed, five of the nine NT occurrences of the name Caiaphas appear in John. In the aftermath of Jesus' dramatic restoration of the dead and decaying Lazarus of Bethany, the 'chief priests and Pharisees' are alarmed and call a meeting of the council to discuss what can be done about this man who performs many signs: 'If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation'. In response, Caiaphas exclaims, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed'. The narrator comments that Caiaphas 'did not say this on his own, but being High Priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God'. Caiaphas's prophecy prodded the council into action against Jesus: 'So from that day on they planned to put him to death' (John 11.47-53).

This passage draws attention to Caiaphas's high priestly role, but even more, imputes to him a political motivation. A generous interpretation would suggest that Caiaphas is here referring to the unfortunate need to sacrifice one person for the good of the nation as a whole; alternately, it may seem that Caiaphas is motivated not so much by the good of the nation as by the need, for power and survival, of the individuals that make up the council or the classes that they represent.

Like Luke-Acts, John implies a close association between Caiaphas and Annas. According to the Fourth Gospel, it is Annas and not Caiaphas who interrogates Jesus (18.13); although Jesus is later taken to Caiaphas's house (18.24) and from there to Pilate (18.28), the Gospel does not indicate that any conversation between Jesus and the High Priest took place.⁵

From these brief references, it is clear that the Gospels correctly identify Caiaphas as the High Priest during the period of Pilate's governorship of Judea,

5 For discussion of these passages, see Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004); R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 85-9 and passim. For discussion of the meager evidence in Josephus and other sources, see James C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 432-44.

and that they associate him with the events leading to Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion. What remain unclear, and therefore permit expansion and embellishment in later retellings, are issues such as the precise nature of his role in Jesus' final days and his relationships with Jesus, Annas and Pilate.

Modern Examples of Rewritten Gospel

Caiaphas's association with the events leading to Jesus' condemnation and death makes him a suitable vehicle with which later writers could express their views on the Jewish role in Jesus' death and, by extension, on Jews and Judaism more generally. Two examples of rewritten Gospel that illustrate this point are the play cycle, *The Man Born to be King*, by the British author Dorothy Sayers,⁶ and the epic novel, *The Nazarene*, by the Jewish American author Sholem Asch.⁷

These works have three things in common. The first is the era in which they were written. Sayers's play cycle was first broadcast on the BBC in 1941–2; Asch's novel appeared in English translation in 1939 and in the original Yiddish in 1943. Second, both Sayers and Asch were already highly regarded and acclaimed both in their own countries and internationally, primarily though not exclusively for their works of fiction. Third, both works were highly controversial at the time of publication. By examining their respective portraits of Caiaphas it will be possible, first, to discern these authors' attitudes towards Jews and Judaism in an era when the role of Jews as a minority group in modern democratic societies was a fraught issue for Jews and non-Jews alike; second, to examine how Sayers and Asch address, and make the most of, the gaps in the Gospel narrative; and third, to note the ongoing impact of the Gospels in the modern era.

The Man Born to be King

Dorothy Leigh Sayers (1893–1957) was a British author well known for her mysteries and short stories featuring amateur sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey, her translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*⁸ and her plays and essays on Christian themes.⁹ *The Man Born to be King* is a cycle of twelve radio plays written for broadcast on the BBC, one play per month, beginning on Sunday 21 December

6 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ* (London: V. Gollancz, 1943).

7 Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene* (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1939).

8 *Hell* (1949), *Purgatory* (1955), *Paradise* (1962; completed by Barbara Reynolds after Sayers's death).

9 For biographical information, see Mary Brian Durkin, *Dorothy L. Sayers* (Boston: Twayne, 1980); Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 1981).

1941.¹⁰ The play cycle makes for entertaining reading even for those who have never heard it performed. This enjoyment is due not only to the wit and drama of the plays themselves, but also to the detailed notes that precede each play. While originally intended to guide the producer and director, these notes display Sayers's distinctive narrative voice and provide insight into her views of each character.¹¹ Sayers's main focus throughout the cycle is on the complex relationship between Judas and Jesus.¹² Caiaphas, however, has a major supporting role as the leader of the Council. In this capacity, the High Priest plots Jesus' death, hires Judas to betray him, persuades Pilate to have him crucified, exults at the success of his own scheming and is ultimately defeated, spiritually if not physically.

Caiaphas makes his first appearance in the fourth play, entitled 'The Heirs to the Kingdom'. The preliminary notes describe him as 'the complete ecclesiastical politician—a plausible and nasty piece of work'.¹³ His main goal is 'to get rid of [Jesus of Nazareth], without causing a popular uproar that would provoke interference by Rome'.¹⁴ The introductory notes to the sixth play, 'The Feast of Tabernacles', fill out this description:

CAIAPHAS—As before; a smooth and supple politician, and completely unscrupulous. The timid decency of Nicodemus and the passionate insults of Judas slide off him like water off a duck's back... One feels that he keeps a sinister little dossier, in which the names of disaffected or rash persons are carefully noted down for future reference... His one moment of sincerity is when he pays homage to the politician's household god of 'expediency'.¹⁵

Caiaphas's devious nature comes to the fore in his first interview with Judas, whom he hopes to manipulate into betraying Jesus:

CAIAPHAS: The Sanhedrim¹⁶ have been disquieted by rumours—no doubt quite unfounded—that your Master is engaged in political activities of a

¹⁰ Hone, *Sayers*, 103.

¹¹ Sayers draws from all four gospels but has a special affinity for the Fourth Gospel, making extensive use also of commentaries and other secondary sources (*Man Born*, 33–6).

¹² Aliza Stone Dale, 'The Man Born to Be King: Dorothy L. Sayers's Best Mystery Plot', *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (ed. Margaret P. Hannay; Kent, OH: Kent State University, 1979) 80–90. On Sayers's treatment of Judas, see Terrie Curran, 'The Word Made Flesh: The Christian Aesthetic in Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Man Born to Be King*', *Whimsey* (ed. Hannay), 73–7.

¹³ Sayers, *Man Born*, 116.

¹⁴ Sayers, *Man Born*, 116.

¹⁵ Sayers, *Man Born*, 160.

¹⁶ The usual term for the council is Sanhedrin. Sayers uses the term 'Sanhedrim' to refer to council members, as indicated by the use of the Hebrew masculine plural ending 'im' and the plural verb.

rather indiscreet kind, such as might provoke reprisals from the Government. We are very unwilling to believe that this is the case.

JUDAS: You may take my word for it, the story is quite untrue.

CAIAPHAS: Good. We are glad to hear it. It would be a pity that your charitable work among the—the poor, and so on—should be interfered with. But as you know, Rome does not look with favour on group activities which might have a subversive tendency.¹⁷

Judas explodes with rage:

JUDAS: ...You think my Master belongs to the Nationalist party. You think he might encourage Jewry to shake off the Roman yoke. Little you know him! And how little you know of this nation! Rome is the punishment that this people must bear for their sins. Jewry is corrupt, and Rome is God's judgment on her. The Roman rod is laid on the sinner's back, and the Roman axe to the root of the rotten tree... Does that gall you, my Lord Caiaphas?... There was a time when the Lord High Priest could give orders in Israel. Today you must cringe to Caesar. That is the measure of your humiliation, and of your sin.

Annas, who is almost always at Caiaphas's side, upbraids Judas for his insolence but the High Priest ignores Judas's insults, notes his views on Jewish culpability, and articulates his own approach to the political realities of his time: 'Your own views on the subject of national regeneration are most important and interesting. I think myself that a policy of reconstruction and collaboration with Rome is in the best interest of Jewry'.¹⁸

Caiaphas's words to Judas can be read as a fairly straightforward elaboration upon his 'prophecy' to the Council according to John 11, for underlying the notion that it is expedient to sacrifice one man for the good of the nation is a policy of 'reconstruction and collaboration' according to which the Jewish leadership aims to avoid unrest and to remain in Rome's good graces. But it is likely that Sayers is also reflecting Josephus's account of the events preceding the Jewish Revolt against Rome. The words she ascribes to Caiaphas echo the speech that Josephus places in the mouth of King Agrippa I, in which he expresses the conviction that armed revolt against Rome is folly. Only a collaborative and constructive approach will preserve Jewish lives and at least some measure of autonomy in Judea. Agrippa urges the people to submit to Rome rather than rebel: If other, larger groups such as the Parthians saw fit to 'bend to the yoke' and thereby to maintain a truce with Rome, how much more so should the tiny population of Judea (*B.J.* 2.379, 389)? He entreats his people:

Spare the temple and preserve for yourselves the sanctuary with its holy places; for the Romans, once masters of these, will refrain their hands no more, seeing

¹⁷ Sayers, *Man Born*, 175.

¹⁸ Sayers, *Man Born*, 175.

that their forbearance in the past met only with ingratitude... if you decide aright, you will enjoy with me the blessings of peace, but, if you let yourselves be carried away by your passion, you will face, without me, this tremendous peril (*B.J.* 2.401).¹⁹

Sayers acknowledges that her portrait of Caiaphas owes much to the events of her own time. The High Priest, she writes, is the consummate 'ecclesiastical politician, appointed, like one of Hitler's bishops, by a heathen government, expressly that he might collaborate with the New Order and see that the Church toed the line drawn by the State'.²⁰

Yet the views that Caiaphas expresses to Judas also call to mind the pre-war British policy of appeasement towards Hitler and Nazi Germany. Under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, England, along with Italy and France, on 29 September 1938 signed the Munich Pact with Germany. The pact determined the conditions under which the German-speaking Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia would be ceded to Germany on October 1 1938, in exchange for a promise that Hitler would not claim any additional European territory.²¹ That Sayers was very concerned about this issue is evident from her January 1939 presidential address to the Modern Language Association, in which she criticized the role of propaganda in making possible Germany's bloodless conquest in Austria and the Sudetenland.²²

Sayers's Caiaphas does not merely manipulate and deceive Judas, but he also bullies those members of his council who dare to defend Jesus against the High Priest's accusations.

CAIAPHAS: Brother Joseph, and Brother Nicodemus. Do I understand that you admit the claim of Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah? Because that is what he does claim. He does not say he is a prophet: he says he is the Christ. If you propose to support that claim publicly, you may. Of course, there *is* a penalty attached. A person was excommunicated the other day for the same offence. Only a pauper, certainly, but God forbid that the Sanhedrim should be any respecter of persons, however wealthy they may be, Joseph of Arimathea. If anybody takes the view that Jesus bar-Joseph is the promised Messiah and

19 Cf. also Josephus's own sentiments, according to *B.J.* 5.362–419. See Jonathan J. Price, 'The Provincial Historian in Rome', *Josephus and Jewish History in Flavian Rome and Beyond* (ed. Joseph Sievers and Gaia Lembi; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005) 115.

20 Sayers, *Man Born*, 23.

21 For detailed description and analysis of Neville Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement, see Robert J. Caputi, *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University, 2000); Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement, and the British Road to War. New Frontiers in History* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1998).

22 Hone, *Sayers*, 95. Curran, however, sees in Sayers's Caiaphas the echo of a different war-era personality: 'Caiaphas, a conservative Jewish leader, was no less politically motivated in convicting Christ than Marshal Pétain in donating France to the Nazis' ('The Word Made Flesh', 73).

the King of Israel, he had better say so at once, and then we shall know where we are.

NICODEMUS, after a pause: I have no wish to defy the Sanhedrim.

JOSEPH: I am only anxious that an innocent person shall not be victimized.

CAIAPHAS: The word 'victim' always arouses feeling. But I said before, and I say again, that it is better to sacrifice one man, rather than the whole nation. That is not persecution. It is policy.

It is in the tenth play, 'The Princes of this World', that Sayers's antipathy to Caiaphas emerges most explicitly. In the introductory notes to this play, Sayers insists that 'there is in this politician nothing of the priest, as we understand the word. The sight of a soul in torment is to him merely another irritating interruption, wasting precious minutes when he wants to hurry off to Pilate. Nothing of what Judas is saying means anything to him—how should it? since he is totally destitute of any sense of sin'.

Yet Sayers is not entirely without empathy for the High Priest. A slight softening is apparent in the introductory notes to the eleventh play, 'The King of Sorrows', which she calls Caiaphas's apologia: 'For once, he is completely sincere, and speaks as a true prophet. He puts his finger on the central weakness of Jewry, and his speech is that of a man who clearly foresees the failure of his own lifework... At this point, and at this point only, we ought to feel sympathy with Caiaphas'.²³

As the eleventh play draws to a close, Caiaphas shares with his two worrisome council members some reflections on the larger political questions at stake in the current situation:

CAIAPHAS: Joseph and Nicodemus, let me tell you something. Jewry has gone for ever. The day of small nations is past. This is the age of empire. Consider. All through our history we have tried to slam that door. Jewry was to be a garden enclosed—a chosen race, a peculiar people. But the door was opened. By whom?

NICODEMUS: In the strife between the sons of Alexander, when Hyrcanus appealed to Rome.

CAIAPHAS: True. That strife brought us Herod the Great—the creature of Rome, who for 30 years held Jewry together in his gauntlet of iron. And when he died, what? New strife—and the partition of Israel, with Pilate the Roman made Governor of Judaea. Under Herod a tributary nation; after Herod, three tributary provinces. With every Jewish quarrel, Rome takes another stride. One stride—two strides—the third will be the last...I have killed this Jesus, who would have made one more faction; but for one pretender crucified, fifty will arise... One day, the Zealots will revolt and the sword will be drawn against Caesar. Then the ring of fire and steel will close about Jerusalem; then the dead will lie thick in the streets, and the tramp of the Legions will be heard in the inner Sanctuary of the Temple. I, Caiaphas, prophesy.

JOSEPH: What would you have us do?

²³ Sayers, *Man Born*, 289.

CAIAPHAS: Accept the inevitable. Adapt yourselves to Rome. It is the curse of our people that we cannot learn to live as citizens of a larger unit. We can neither rule nor be ruled; for such the new order has no place. Make terms with the future while you may, lest in all the world there be found no place where a Jew may set foot.

JOSEPH: Strange. You echo the prophecies of Jesus. But he, I think, would have enlarged the boundaries of Israel to take in all the world... Is it possible that he saw what you see, and would have chosen to fling the door wide open? Not to exclude, but to include? Not to lose Israel in Rome, but to bring Rome into the fold of Israel?...

CAIAPHAS (drily): Quite mad. It is the duty of statesmen to destroy the madness which we call imagination. It is dangerous. It breeds dissension. Peace, order, security—that is Rome's offer—at Rome's price.

JOSEPH: We have rejected the way of Jesus. I suppose we must now take yours.

CAIAPHAS: You will reject me too, I think... Be content, Jesus, my enemy. Caiaphas also will have lived in vain.²⁴

To the end, Caiaphas asserts that he had only the best interests of his country at heart. When it is all over, Joseph asks him:

JOSEPH: Caiaphas, as man to man, what do you think you have done?

CAIAPHAS: The best I could for Israel.²⁵

Beneath the standard, derogatory contrast between narrow, exclusivistic Judaism and expansive, universal Christianity, can we detect at least some faint sympathy for a man who did what he could, albeit in his own misguided, manipulative and hostile way?

The Man Born to Be King created a huge stir during the first season that it was broadcast. As a non-visual medium, the radio play was not subject to the prohibition against portraying Jesus in a film or play (a prohibition not lifted until 1968).²⁶ The liveliness of Sayers's Jesus, however, raised serious concerns for some segments of the BBC's audience. Imagine a Son of God who joked and laughed, and in colloquial English no less! Some irate listeners held Sayers's plays responsible for the fall of Singapore, and implored the BBC to remove them from the air before Australia was lost as well. Others, by contrast, credited the plays with British victories in Libya and Russia.²⁷

Within the media and in the church, the debate eventually blew over. The play cycle was broadcast in its entirety numerous times, to great acclaim. Certainly

24 Sayers, *Man Born*, 301-2.

25 Sayers, *Man Born*, 334.

26 James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London: Croom Helm, 1985) 74-6, 180.

27 See the Forward by Dr. J. W. Welch, who commissioned the plays as Director of Religious Broadcasting BBC, in Sayers, *Man Born*, 9-16; Janet Hitchman, *Such a Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)* (London: New English Library, 1975).

Sayers's depiction of Caiaphas is to some extent allegorical, pointing to the attitudes of certain British politicians and ecclesiastical leaders in her own era. But the use of a Jewish leader to make these points, and, more generally, the criticisms of Jewry that emerge throughout the play cycle, make it difficult to avoid the question of Sayers's own attitudes to Jews and Judaism at this critical period.²⁸

British anti-Semitism in this period has been well documented. In his 1945 essay entitled 'Anti-Semitism in Britain', George Orwell noted:

The Jews are not numerous or powerful enough, and it is only in what are loosely called 'intellectual circles' that they have any noticeable influence. Yet it is generally admitted that anti-Semitism is on the increase, that it has been greatly exacerbated by the war, and that humane and enlightened people are not immune to it. It does not take violent forms (English people are almost invariably gentle and law-abiding), but it is ill-natured enough, and in favourable circumstances it could have political results.²⁹

Sayers's novels contain a number of Jewish characters whose ethnic identities are mentioned but not belabored.³⁰ *Man Born to Be King*, by contrast, implies a sense of discomfort not so much with respect to individual Jews but the role of the Jewish people in society. Sayers addressed this question directly in her war-time correspondence. In a letter to Sir Wyndham Deedes, dated 16 April 1943, Sayers was critical of what she perceived as the unwillingness of Jews to adhere to British social norms and mores:

The British Jewesses in 1939 dashing to the bank and announcing in loud tones: 'of course, we're sending all our money to America'; the children who cannot learn the common school code of honour; the Jewish evacuee offering his landlady double the rent she asked in order to secure the rooms and then informing against her to the billeting authorities; the inhabitants of a London street complaining bitterly that everybody, from the high-class publishers' staff at one end to the little rookery of prostitutes at the other, eagerly did their turn of

28 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, 'Dorothy L. Sayers: Biography between the Lines', *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration* (ed. Alzina Stone Dale; New York: Walker & Co., 1993) 11–12. Heilbrun laments Barbazon's assessment of Sayers's anti-Semitism, although she acknowledges that Sayers continued to help her own Nazi governess even after the war.

29 George Orwell, 'Anti-Semitism in Britain' (1945), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 3. *As I Please, 1943–45* (ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus; London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 332–3; http://orwell.ru/library/articles/antisemitism/english/e_antib, accessed January 14 2009

30 On Sayers's portrayal of Jewish characters in her novels, see Robert Kuhn McGregor, with Ethan Lewis, *Conundrums for the Long Week-End: England, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Lord Peter Wimsey* (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 2000) 30–1; Nancy-Lou Patterson, 'Images of Judaism and Anti-Semitism in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers', *Sayers Review* 2/2 (June 1978) 17–24; Malcolm J. Turnbull, *Victims or Villains: Jewish Images in Classic English Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University, 1998) 87–94.

fire-watching—all except the houseful of Jews in the middle. They word it in different ways; but it all really boils down to the same thing: 'bad citizens'.³¹

The most important factor shaping Sayers's attitude to Jews was their rejection of Christ. As she wrote to a Mr. Lynx in 1943:

I cannot, you see, bring myself to approach the question as though Christ had made no difference to history. I think, you see, that He was the turning-point of history, and the Jewish people, whose religion and nation are closely bound up with the course of history, missed that turning-point and got stranded: so that all the subsequent course of their history has to be looked upon in the light of that frustration'.³²

In response to Mr. Lynx's persistent requests, Sayers produced an article for a symposium on 'The Future of the Jews'. The article amounted to a complex theological treatise arguing that Jewish misfortune must be seen as 'the sad but inevitable consequence of their failure to recognize their Messiah when he came'.³³ Mercifully, this article, being both too long and too dense for public consumption, was never published, no doubt the outcome that Sayers had intended all along.

Sayers's letters make explicit the attitudes that lurk just beneath the surface of her play cycle. Caiaphas is made out to be the spokesman for Jewish otherness and parochiality, and the beleaguered Pilate, who tried so hard to have Jesus set free, expresses the views that may well have reflected those of Sayers herself: 'I don't trust Jews'.³⁴ Nevertheless, Sayers does not blame only the Jewish High Priest, and, by extension, the Jewish people, for Jesus' death. Rather, she sees humankind as complicit both in that ancient crime and in the catastrophe of World War II. Not only is Caiaphas like one of Hitler's bishops. The elders of the ancient Synagogue, she suggests, 'are to be found on every Parish Council—always highly respectable, often quarrelsome, and sometimes in a crucifying mood'. But, she insists,

Tear off the disguise of the Jacobean idiom, go back to the homely and vigorous Greek of Mark or John, translate it into its current English counterpart, and there every man may see his own face. *We* played the parts in that tragedy, nineteen and a half centuries since, and perhaps are playing them to-day, in the same good faith and in the same ironic ignorance. But to-day we cannot see the irony, for we the audience are now the actors and do not know the end of the play. But it may assist us to know what we are doing if the original drama is shown to us again, with ourselves in the original parts.³⁵

31 James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1981), 217.

32 Brabazon, *Sayers*, 217.

33 Brabazon, *Sayers*, 218.

34 Sayers, *Man Born*, 252.

35 Sayers, *Man Born*, 23.

These remarks suggest that despite Sayers's obvious ambivalence towards Jews, her portrayal of Caiaphas is intended not only to attribute some measure of responsibility to him for the chain of events leading to Jesus' death but also to mount a critique of the political leadership of her own country in the pre-war period and to comment on the experience of the British people in the early war years.

The Nazarene

Sholem Asch (1880–1957) was a Polish-born American novelist, playwright and essayist in the Yiddish language. His novel, *The Nazarene*, is the first and best known of a trilogy of so-called Christian novels that also includes *The Apostle* (1943) and *Mary* (1949). *The Nazarene* presents the life and death of Jesus from the perspectives of three characters: Cornelius, a Roman centurion who had the ear of Pilate; Jochanan, a disciple of the Pharisaic Rabbi Nicodemon, and Jesus' betrayer Judas. These three stories are framed by a narrative, set in 1930s Poland, that features an elderly Pole, Pan Viadomsky, who hires an impoverished Jewish student to help him translate the long lost 'Gospel of Judas'.³⁶ Viadomsky is a virulent anti-Semite who collaborates with a priest on a treatise designed to prove that Jews made use of Christian blood to prepare their Passover Matzot. Yet he develops a love/hate dependency on his young Jewish assistant, to whom he reveals his shocking secret: Pan Viadomsky is himself the Roman centurion named Cornelius. Furthermore, the student too was alive in the early first century, when he was the young disciple Jochanan who became a follower of Jesus.

Although it is very long—close to 700 pages in English translation—*The Nazarene* is one of Asch's most accessible novels. The improbability of the frame narrative contrasts with the vivid detail and realism of the three intersecting stories set in Jesus' era. The book is rich in content, texture and suspense, a real page-turner even now, almost seven decades after its publication.

In contrast to Sayers's work, *The Nazarene* pays attention to both the religious and the political aspects of the high priestly role. Nevertheless, it sets the High Priest apart from the people and emphasizes the Jews' dislike for the office:

The High Priest...was the highest religious functionary, and, at the same time, the uncrowned king. He could send out his messengers to arrest Jews even beyond the frontiers of Judaea. And the Priesthood was like a leech, sucking the blood and marrow out of the people. The High Priests were bloated with

36 Asch's 'Gospel of Judas' is not to be identified with the Gnostic text known by the same name. On the latter, see Andrew Cockburn, 'The Judas Gospel', *National Geographic Magazine* (May 2006) 78–95; April D. De Conick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007); Bart D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (New York: Oxford University, 2006); Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006).

wealth; for apart from the tithes and the first-fruits, payable in kind, they imposed additional taxes on the people.³⁷

The Jews' antipathy towards their High Priest was set aside on the annual Day of Atonement, when he entered the Holy of Holies. As Cornelius narrates:

During these festivals of theirs the Jews were even capable of wild ecstasies of joy. What a sight they were, for instance, on the night of the ending of their most solemn sacred day, the Day of Atonement, when their High Priest issued from the mysterious Holy of Holies unharmed by his contact with supreme sanctity! The bitterness which they felt throughout the whole year against the High Priest and his acolytes was forgotten and forgiven on that day.³⁸

As members of the higher aristocracy, the High Priests were Rome's natural allies but the relationship was tense nonetheless.³⁹ At their first meeting, Caiaphas's attempts to assure Pilate of his loyalty met with an equivocal response:

Pilate's fleshy nose sank downward; he glanced at the [High Priest's] party furtively from under his heavy eyelids and said, briefly:
'That we shall see. It depends on good will'.
'On one side at least that good will always exists', answered the High Priest.
'That will have to be proved by deeds', said Pilate.⁴⁰

Indeed, from the moment of his arrival in Jerusalem, Pilate's disdain for and even hatred of Jews was evident, at least to Cornelius. After Pilate's first confrontation with the High Priest, Cornelius teases him:

'Procurator', I said, 'the first thing you will have to do on reaching the Antonia, is to send for leeches, to have the bad blood drawn from your veins'.
'I am thinking of very different methods for ridding myself of my bad blood'.
'I know it, Procurator. By drawing the blood of the Jews'.⁴¹

In addition to highlighting the tension between the Jewish High Priest and the Roman governor, Asch creates a subplot that involves jealousies and intrigues within Caiaphas's own family. Most troublesome to Caiaphas's peace of mind were the former High Priest Hanan (Annas) and his youngest son, also named Hanan. Cornelius wrote:

Hanan ben Hanan was a born fighter, and there was occasion enough for fighting. It was no light thing either for us Romans or for the Jewish Priesthood to

37 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 70.

38 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 65-6.

39 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 68.

40 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 45-6.

41 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 51.

retain power in Jerusalem, and the boy was hungry for power. Hunger for power shouted from his person, as it did, for that matter, from the person of his father. But while the old man had learned, from long experience, to go about its satisfaction with infinite cunning and patience, contenting himself with the outward show of the civil authority delegated to him by his son-in-law, Hanan ben Hanan was too young, too impetuous, and too inexperienced to conceal his envy of the regnant High Priest.⁴²

The various conflicts and tensions—within the high priestly family, between the Romans and the Jews, and between Pilate and Caiaphas—come to a head in the events leading to Jesus' death. In Asch's novel, however, neither the High Priest nor the Roman governor bears the weight of responsibility for Jesus' arrest. That role belongs to Cornelius. On his deathbed, Pan Viadomsky confesses to his Jewish assistant that it was he, Cornelius, who, in the aftermath of the 'cleansing of the temple', initiated the events leading to Jesus' death:

I am he, the man who laid the first hand on your Rabbi, when our frightened little servants of the High Priest thought that if they but touched him they would be consumed by the fire of his mouth... The fact is that your frightened little Jews did not dare to place a hand on the Rabbi. I have good grounds for believing that even your foxy old Hanan was infected by the terror; he took your Rabbi for a fiery angel direct from heaven. They were frightened out of their wits before I brought the man to them, a prisoner; and even afterwards, in the very court of Hanan, they shied away from him. The fact is that the High Priests gave me a great deal of trouble in connection with your Rabbi, particularly after you [Jesus' followers] proclaimed him the Jewish King and brought him in procession to Jerusalem.⁴³

In Cornelius' version of the story, Caiaphas, far from desiring and plotting Jesus' death, did what he could to forestall Jesus' arrest. His first tactic was to downplay Jesus' importance: 'Kaifa pretended to be very phlegmatic. "Why", he said, "Every year our Jews proclaim a new King-Messiah, and no harm is done; the Roman Government still stands where it did, and Herod's authority is not diminished by a hair. Let them have their little joke"'.⁴⁴

The High Priest insists that Jesus' behaviour in the Temple was just an internal matter but Cornelius disagrees and threatens the High Priest with reprisals.

'What happened in the Temple court', I replied, firmly, 'was not directed solely against the Temple administration. It was an assault on the whole system of laws and a threat against all order in the Province of Judaea. Considering the harm which the man did to your prestige, we cannot but wonder that you extend your protection to him. How can we help suspecting that you have

42 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 92.

43 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 614–15.

44 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 614–15.

your own reasons? We have neither the time nor the means to untangle all the details of your mystical, complicated religious affairs, which so easily take on the aspect of rebellion. Our straightforward Roman commonsense tells us that if the supreme religious authority extends its protection to a man who has delivered such a blow against its prestige, then this same highest religious authority must find it to its interest to make common cause with a rebel and a disturber of the peace. That interest cannot be in consonance with the well-being of the constituted order'.⁴⁵

Caiaphas asks, fearfully: 'Hegemon, do you dare to doubt our loyalty to Rome?' Cornelius presses the point: 'It is not a question of doubting or of not doubting. Can such an attitude on the part of the High Priesthood seem otherwise than suspicious to the legate and the Procurator?'⁴⁶

Cornelius demands that Caiaphas produce Jesus immediately. Despite the Roman's threats, however, the High Priest remains evasive: 'But we assure you that we do not know where the man is; and we promise we shall take immediate steps to discover his whereabouts. The moment we ourselves know, we shall transmit the information to you'.⁴⁷

Here ensues a debate within the high priestly family; the elder Hanan is willing to hand Jesus over, and the younger Hanan insists upon it, but Caiaphas refuses. Eventually, Jesus is found and brought to the council for investigation, a process that is nearly scuttled by the fierce arguments between the Sadducean and Pharisaic members with regard to interpretation of the Law. Finally, Jesus utters the words that even Caiaphas considers to be blasphemous, and the High Priest tears his robe as a sign of mourning (Matt 26.65).

Still, the question remains: Should Jesus be turned over to Pilate as the Hegemon had demanded? Predictably, both Hanan senior and his youngest son argue vigorously that the Council must comply with Cornelius' demands: 'If not, it would mean that we believe [Jesus' claims] to be true, and we would have to prostrate ourselves at his feet and proclaim him the King-Messiah'.⁴⁸ Others object: 'If this man has transgressed against us, against the Jewish faith, then we will be the judges. Since when does Israel admit strangers into his garden, to do the weeding for him?'⁴⁹ Old Hanan prevails, however. Jesus is handed over, and the story ends as it always does: with Jesus dying on the cross.

The length of this novel affords Asch the time and space fully to develop the setting, the characters and the plot. But as a Jewish immigrant to the United States from Eastern Europe, writing in the Nazi era for a primarily Jewish audience, Asch is also motivated to provide a more complex view. Asch draws a

45 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 619.

46 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 619–20.

47 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 619–20.

48 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 643.

49 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 643.

three-dimensional High Priest who is not without his faults but also not blinded by hatred or political ambition. Most important, Asch attributes to Caiaphas the same sort of conflict—between tradition and modernity, adherence to religion and adopting secular ways—that was central to the Jewish experience in Europe in the modern era, and to the experience of immigration to the United States from the late nineteenth century onwards.⁵⁰

This inner-Jewish cultural debate is adumbrated in the novel by the contrast between the high priestly family and Joseph of Arimathea, who became one of Jesus' followers. Like the high priestly family, Joseph was 'a man of great wealth, steeped in Hellenistic culture and in company of Roman officials and circle of Greek philosophers'.⁵¹ Whereas the High Priests kowtowed to Rome, Joseph was engaged in a fierce internal conflict:

The unhappy struggle between the Greek and Jewish worlds found its echo in Joseph's heart. His strict adherence to the tradition of his people had by no means killed in him the inclination toward the brilliant world of the gentiles. He carried on a perpetual if secret war within himself; he dreamed of finding reconciliation with the temptations of Hellenism without at the same time destroying the barriers which the Jewish sages had put up against its spiritual barrenness.⁵²

Whether Joseph's struggle would have rung true to Hellenized Jews like Philo of Alexandria is difficult to say. But Asch's description accurately reflects the dilemma faced by modern Jews in the transition between a closed and intense religious life and the openness of Western culture.⁵³ The emotional tenor of these struggles was heightened by the experience of anti-Semitism, which had a long European history but reached new depths in the Nazi context. At the time Asch was writing, the war had not yet begun, yet in Jewish circles the alarm was already extremely high due to the Nazi persecution of Jews that had begun with Hitler's rise to power.⁵⁴

The Nazarene quickly became a national best seller, ranking ninth in national sales in 1939 and fifth in 1940, and was praised by some prominent Jewish book reviewers such as Clifton Fadiman in the *New Yorker* and Alfred Kazin in the

50 Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CN/ London: Yale University, 2004).

51 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 436.

52 Asch, *The Nazarene*, 440.

53 On the impact of enlightenment and emancipation on Jewish religious life, see David Harry Ellenson, *After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2004); David Rudavsky, *Modern Jewish Religious Movements: A History of Emancipation and Adjustment* (New York: Behrman House, 3rd rev. ed. 1979).

54 This concern is hinted at in the novel, in the repeated references to the German soldiers that Rome had at its disposal and who were fiercely hated by the Jews (Asch, *The Nazarene*, 56).

New Republic.⁵⁵ But in Yiddish literary circles, the novel's highly favourable portrayal of Jesus and his followers created a major storm, and precipitated Asch's fall from his position as the most popular and respected Yiddish writer of twentieth-century America. Asch's long-time editor, Abraham Kahan, refused to serialize the novel in the *Forverts*, the foremost Yiddish newspaper of the era. Kahan accused Asch of currying favour with non-Jews and of proselytizing; he even went so far as to attack Asch's knowledge of history, his mastery of Hebrew and his use of Yiddish in previously published works.⁵⁶ The original Yiddish version of *The Nazarene* was finally published in 1943 by the Jewish communist paper, *Di Frayhait*.⁵⁷ The communist connection did nothing to endear Asch to his Yiddish readership, but at least it meant that they could read the novel.

The sympathetic use of Christian subject matter was certainly not new to Jewish culture or to Yiddish literature.⁵⁸ Asch himself had written previous works about Christianity, and other Jewish writers, scholars and artists had portrayed Jesus in sympathetic terms.⁵⁹ One thinks, for example, of Joseph Klausner's 1922 book, *Jesus of Nazareth*,⁶⁰ and the paintings of Marc Chagall such as *White Crucifixion*.⁶¹ The turn to Christological themes has been described as an 'expression of the hybrid culture in which modern Americans lived, a turn to a figure whose historical significance in shaping Western culture could not be ignored'.⁶² In the early twentieth century in Europe and America, Jesus could be seen as a Jewish brother, and the language of crucifixion and Christian martyrdom could be used to describe the Jewish experience of anti-Semitism and persecution. Theologically, some Jews were ready to reclaim Jesus as a Jew, by emphasizing that Christianity as such was a later development.⁶³ In the immediate pre-war and war periods, however, concerns about the role of Christianity in anti-Semitism were riding high and, parenthetically, still run high among some segments of the Jewish population even today. In writing so positively about Jesus on the eve of the Holocaust, and publishing his novel first in English

55 Hannah Berliner Fischthal, 'Reactions of the Yiddish Press to *the Nazarene* by Sholem Asch', *Sholem Asch Reconsidered* (ed. Nanette Stahl; The Yale University Library Gazette, Occasional Supplement 5; New Haven, CT: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004) 266.

56 Anita Norich, 'Sholem Asch and the Christian Question', *Sholem Asch Reconsidered* (ed. Stahl), 251.

57 Fischthal, 'Reactions', 275.

58 Fischthal, 'Reactions', 255.

59 Asch's earlier Christian works include the story 'In a Karnival Nacht', perhaps written as early as 1907. See Hoffman, 'True Christians', 281.

60 Joseph Klausner and Herbert Danby, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (New York: Macmillan, 1925).

61 Edward N. McNulty, 'Three Artists View Christ: Marc Chagall, Abraham Rattner, and Robert Lentz', *Christianity and the Arts* 6 (1999) 10-16.

62 Norich, 'Sholem Asch', 264.

63 Hoffman, 'True Christians', 279-80.

rather than in Yiddish, Asch, some felt, had betrayed his primary Yiddish audience.⁶⁴

The focus on Asch's favourable depiction of Jesus distracted his Jewish audience's attention from the important ways in which *The Nazarene* differed from most other retellings of the Jesus story. For Asch, Caiaphas is not an unscrupulous politician intent on ridding the world of Jesus, but a complex individual with the unenviable task of mediating between an oppressed and unruly populace and the Empire that would keep them in check. Neither is first-century Judea a society divided between the poor who long for a savior to deliver them from Roman rule and the authority figures—Priests, scribes, Pharisees—who collaborate with Rome in oppressing their people. Asch allows us to imagine our way into the midst of Jewish society, its rivalries and tensions, as well as the seriousness with which it took Jewish belief and practice, in all its solemnity and joy. In doing so, Asch provides a rich medium with which Jews in the twentieth, and, I might add, in the twenty-first century as well, can think through the push and pull between Jewish identity and practice on the one hand, and participation in a free and open society on the other.

Conclusion

The Man Born to be King and *The Nazarene* are straightforward examples of a category of the 'rewritten Bible' genre that we may term 'rewritten Gospel'. Aside from their twentieth-century dates, these imaginative works display the full set of characteristics associated with the genre 'rewritten Bible': they tell the story of Jesus in a sequential way; they are clearly and obviously based on the Gospel accounts; they follow the overall order and narrative thrust of the Gospels while adding and expanding from other sources and the fertile imaginations of their authors.

Both Sayers and Asch use Caiaphas's prophecy in John 11 as the starting point for their depictions of the High Priest as a political figure caught between his Jewish compatriots and the Roman imperial machine. Both authors make the most of the ambiguities and gaps of the Gospels and use Josephus as well as other sources to amplify their depictions of Judea under Roman rule and the role of the High Priest in the decades prior to the first Jewish Revolt against Rome. Both also acknowledge the ambiguity of the Gospels with regard to the roles and responsibilities of Annas the former High Priest during the tenure of his son-in-law Caiaphas. In Sayers's play cycle, Annas is at Caiaphas's side throughout. Asch, by contrast, casts the former High Priest as the central figure in a complex subplot involving jealousy and intrigue in the highest quarters. While the details are Asch's, he uses Josephus' accounts of the tenures of

64 Norich, 'Sholem Asch', 264.

Annas, Caiaphas and the younger Annas as the framework for this subplot.⁶⁵ For neither Asch nor Sayers is Caiaphas a likable figure. Yet both authors acknowledge the difficult situation in which a first-century Jewish High Priest would find himself vis-à-vis the Judean population on the one hand and the Roman governor on the other.

Finally, both authors place the story of Jesus, and the role of Caiaphas within that story, in the broader context of the history of Jewish relations, beginning from the first century down to their own, very difficult days. Despite the profound differences in their ethnic identities and personal experiences, Sayers and Asch both lament the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. Their laments, however, reflect opposing perspectives. Asch argued that Judaism and Christianity were a single culture and civilization,⁶⁶ in his view, anti-Semitism was caused by the decision of Jesus' followers to separate from Judaism.⁶⁷ Sayers, on the other hand, believed that the Jews were tragically mistaken to reject the Christian message and justified anti-Semitism as the inevitable consequence of the Jews' ongoing insistence on difference.

While their creative approach to these problems does not shed light on the historical issues of the first century as such, Sayers and Asch address the same exegetical problems as do commentators, theologians and historians. *The Man Born to Be King* and *The Nazarene*, like other examples of the 'rewritten Gospel' and the larger category of 'rewritten Bible' into which it fits, demonstrate the pivotal role that biblical narrative continues to play as a vehicle through which not only to address historical issues or develop theological positions but also to address the central issues and conflicts of successive generations.

65 According to Josephus, the younger Annas did eventually become high priest (in 62 CE) and is best known for his actions against James, the brother of Jesus (*Ant.* 20.198–203). VanderKam, *High Priests*, 476–82.

66 Matthew Hoffman, 'Sholem Asch's True Christians: The Jews as a People of Christs', *Sholem Asch Reconsidered* (ed. Stahl), 281.

67 Norich, 'Sholem Asch', 253.