

Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

Prologue: A Survey in Christian Interpretation

History

Jesus was crucified as a Jewish victim of Roman violence. On this, all authorities agree. A gentile Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, condemned him to death and had him tortured and executed by gentile Roman soldiers. He was, indeed, one of thousands of Jews crucified by the Romans during this period.

The New Testament testifies to this basic fact, but it also allows for Jewish involvement in two ways. First, a few high-ranking Jewish authorities who owed their position and power to the Romans conspired with the gentile leaders to have Jesus put to death; they are said to have been jealous of him and to have viewed him as a threat to the status quo. Second, an unruly mob of people in Jerusalem called out for Jesus to be crucified; the number and, for that matter, ethnic identification of persons in this “crowd” is not given, nor is any motive supplied for their action (except to say that they had been “stirred up” by the Jewish authorities).

Theology

The Christian Scriptures are less interested in recording historical facts about Jesus’s death than in explaining the meaning of that

death. Christians claim that Jesus died as an *atonement for sin*. His death is interpreted as a ransom that frees people from the effects of sin (Mark 10:45), as a sacrifice that removes the consequences of sin (John 1:29), and as a loving act that reconciles humans with a forgiving God of love (Rom. 5:6–10).

For Christians, historical responsibility for the death of Jesus is theologically irrelevant. Christians do not believe that Jesus was overpowered by hostile Romans or Jews or anyone else. They believe that, whatever the precise circumstances of his execution, he died because it was God's will for him to give his life as an atonement for sin, and he was obedient to this purpose (Phil. 2:8).

Preaching

Christian preachers usually try to proclaim the relevance of Jesus's atoning death to their immediate audience. They preach not just general theology ("Christ died for the sins of the whole world") but rather specific application of that theology ("Christ died for *our* sins").

Christian preachers usually do not dwell on the literal historical responsibility for the death of Jesus ("The Romans killed Jesus" or "The Jews killed Jesus"), but rather emphasize a nonliteral personal responsibility for the death of Jesus: "We crucified Jesus—you and I. His blood was shed on our account."

Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in Matthew

Certain texts in the Christian New Testament seem to emphasize Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus in a way that goes beyond the historical involvement of a few compromised authorities and an unruly mob. One such passage is 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16. The best-known text of this nature, however, is found in Matthew’s Gospel:

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barrabas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.” Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” All of them said, “Let him be crucified!” Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see

to it yourselves.” Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (27:15–26)

Why would the author of Matthew’s Gospel want to emphasize Jewish guilt rather than Roman guilt in bringing about the death of Jesus and, indeed, extend responsibility for this blood to the descendants (children) of those who were actually present? It seems unlikely that Matthew would want to “let the Romans off the hook,” exonerate them for an obvious act of injustice and sadism.

Most scholars think that Matthew himself was Jewish and that he wrote his Gospel for a congregation of Jewish persons who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Thus Matthew exemplifies a typical theme in Christian preaching, insisting that he and his congregation bear *personal responsibility for the death of Jesus* and so share in atonement through his blood.

Matthew is not saying, “*Those Jews* are to blame for killing Jesus.” He is saying, “*We Jews* are responsible for killing Jesus. We can’t just blame Pilate and the Romans. His blood is on us.”

But in terms of Christian theology, the blood of Jesus is what brings salvation and forgiveness of sins (see 26:28).

Interpretation of Jesus’s Death in an Anti-Semitic World

Presentations of the passion of Jesus in Christian history have sometimes moved from preaching to polemics. In cultures where anti-Semitism runs high, Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus has been emphasized and reinterpreted as conveying blame rather than atonement.

Thus Matthew's Gospel and similar texts would come to be, and are sometimes still, read by gentile Christians not as saying "we crucified Jesus," but rather as saying "they crucified Jesus." The essential theological meaning of the story is lost, replaced by a political and social interpretation that explains why Jewish people ought to be despised by gentiles. Jews are routinely condemned in such cultures as "Christ-killers," and the misfortunes of Jewish people are explained as a consequence of having been cursed by God for their involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah. Such interpretations of the passion have rarely (if ever) found official acceptance among Christian theologians, but they have flourished at a popular level and have been used in attempts to justify centuries of discrimination and persecution of Jewish people.

The most visible representations of these anti-Semitic interpretations were the passion plays that were performed for hundreds of years in Western Christian countries. In an era before television and cinema, such plays were a principal form of entertainment; often they were produced and performed by secular troupes apart from any official sanction of the church. In many countries, passion plays were an

annual amusement. They opened each year on Ash Wednesday and ran throughout the Lenten season (i.e., until Easter). Features of the passion plays that exhibited and encouraged anti-Semitism:

The Jewishness of Jesus and his disciples was minimized or completely ignored; the only characters who appeared Jewish were the “bad Jews” who conspired to kill Christ.

Characterization of these “bad Jews” tended to be melodramatic; they were presented as sinister and demonic figures whose opposition to Jesus lacked any reasonable motive.

Actors playing these supposedly first-century Jews portrayed them in ways associated with contemporary Jewish figures, dressing in garb worn by Jews of the current day, speaking with affected Jewish accents, and drawing for comic effect on negative stereotypes associated with Jewish people in the culture where the play was performed.

The role of the (gentile) Roman government in Jesus’s execution was greatly minimized; Pilate was presented as a sympathetic figure, forced to sentence Jesus by the hostile Jews.

In short, Jesus became a Christian victim of Jewish violence rather than a Jewish victim of Roman violence.

In recent years (especially since the Holocaust of the Nazi era), virtually all Christian churches have repudiated the production of such inaccurate and culturally insensitive passion plays. The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has issued guidelines for dramatic presentations of Christ's passion, in the hope that mistakes of the past can be avoided.