

*The dramatic power of these stories makes sensitive Christians uneasy. How can they be proclaimed without adding to the tragic history of their misuse against the Jewish people? Originally published in America, April 1995.*

Part of what makes holy week holy is the solemn reading of two Gospel passion narratives, one from the first three Gospels on Passion (Palm) Sunday, and the one from John every year on Good Friday. It can be fairly claimed that these masterpieces have given more inspiration to artists, musicians, poets and mystics than any other sections of the New Testament. Ironically, however, such dramatic power makes sensitive Christians uneasy about anti-Jewish elements in the passion narratives. How can they be proclaimed without adding to the tragic history of their misuse against the Jewish people?

In 1994 I brought out a very long commentary on the passion narratives, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols., Doubleday), the primary focus of which was the positive message that the evangelists wished to convey to their Christian hearers and readers. In it I gave considerable attention to the danger of anti-Judaism in our reactions, but here I want to concentrate on the evolution of anti-Judaism in New Testament thought about the passion to help us to understand how our oldest religious ancestors approached the death of Jesus. As we come to this Holy Week [1995] in the shadow of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I dedicate this essay to the struggle to appreciate the truth and beauty of the narratives without arousing hostility.

There are two approaches I firmly reject. Throughout the centuries and still today the passion narratives have been read as literal history. Such an interpretation produces a view of the Jewish leaders as scheming liars who knowingly deceived the Roman prefect in order to bring about Jesus' death. Matthew's and John's use of the generalizing description of these opponents of Jesus as "Jews" has too often been heard without historical perceptivity as referring to Jews of later centuries and thus have contributed to ongoing hate. This approach has now been firmly rejected in Roman Catholicism, whether or not all Catholics know this. In 1964 the Roman Pontifical Biblical Commission taught authoritatively that the Gospels are the product of considerable narrative, organizational and theological development and so are not simply literal accounts of the ministry of Jesus. The next year Vatican Council II explicitly condemned an outlook that would blame the passion without distinction on all the Jews then living or on the Jews today. (See the Council's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" [1965], No. 4.)

The other view I judge unacceptable discredits the Gospel passion narratives as almost totally the product of Christian imagination, with little or no foundation in fact. Under the mantle of scholarly objectivity, advocates assert firmly but without proof that the early Christians knew little about how Jesus died and simply invented their narratives on the basis of Old Testament imagery. Indeed, some scholars (of Christian upbringing) would paint them as creating lies precisely to vilify the Jews. If

the literalist interpretation of the passion narratives can produce hate toward Judaism, this interpretation can have the effect of portraying Christianity as a false and hateful religion. Religiously sensitive Jews and Christians recognize that if either group of our respective first-century ancestors is presented as liars who wanted to destroy their opposites, nothing has been gained in the ongoing Jewish-Christian dialogue.

A careful examination suggests that the situation in the first century was far more complex than such overly simple reconstructions allow. Let me attempt to do at least partial justice to the complexities by describing four stages in the development of New Testament attitudes toward the death of Jesus.

STAGE ONE: What happened in A.D. 30 or 33 when Jesus was executed on a cross. Without attempting to repeat all the evidence amassed in *The Death of the Messiah*, a very plausible case can be made for the following. Jesus upset and even alarmed some of his coreligionists by his attitudes toward some legal demands, his assumptions about his own unique teaching authority his association with sinners and his critique of public practices that he regarded as meaningless religiosity. Rumors that he might be the Messiah (whether promoted by friends or opponents) caused tension. This came to a head when in Jerusalem he castigated and/or publicly acted out a critique of the Temple procedures and the sanctuary—a sensitive issue economically, socially and politically. A Sanhedrin or meeting involving the high priest and other important Jerusalem figures decided that he was a dangerous and arrogant (that is to say, blasphemous) nuisance and arranged for him to be seized and handed over to the Roman authorities.

That Jesus could have been manhandled and abused in such an arrest and transferal would be far from surprising. For the Roman governor he was not a major threat. (Pilate's prefecture up to this time saw occasional protests and riots but not the armed revolutionary movements of an earlier or later period, when the Romans sent out troops and executed hundreds without any pretense at trial.) Nevertheless, Jesus was potentially a menace if people thought he was a messiah or king, and so Pilate ordered Jesus executed.

The historical plausibility of this Gospel picture can be supported from Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote his *Antiquities* at the end of the first century A.D. Amid his account of Pilate's governorship (including several instances of crowds assembling to put pressure on him), Josephus refers to Pilate's treatment of Jesus. Serious scholarship would now judge the following on us and on our children—, that other people was taking on the responsibility for the death of Jesus. Indeed, the reference to "children" here and in Lk. 23:28 ("Daughters of Jerusalem... for yourselves weep and for your children") suggests that the Roman defeat of the Jews and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70 were perceived as God's punishment for having put Jesus to death. It is not surprising that Christians would make such a judgment, given that Josephus (*Antiquities* 20.8.5) gave an analogous theological explanation: God turned away from Jerusalem and allowed the Romans

to burn the city because of hate for the impiety, murders and profanation among Jews there in the 50s and 60s.

Some of the alleviating factors in Stage Three were now gone, and the parallel between "the Jews" who were hostile to Jesus and contemporary Jews who did not accept Jesus and were looked on as hostile to Christians became complete. (And one may guess that on the other side among some Jews a parallel was drawn between "that fellow" who caused trouble 40 or 50 years ago and the present troublemakers who were making blasphemous claims about him) One catches elements of that connection in a passage like Mt. 28:12-15, where a lie that the disciples stole the body of Jesus, started through a bribe given by the chief priests and elders, "has been spread among Jews until this day." If at this stage we can finally speak of anti-Judaism, notice that it had taken time to develop, was not intrinsic to the passion itself and reflects the unfriendly relationship between Christians (ethnically Jew or Gentile) and Jews who did not believe in Jesus.

STAGE FOUR was only the beginning of a long history; by the next century Christians would be accusing Jews of deicide (Melito of Sardis X) and Jewish legends (reflected in the pagan Celsus' attacks on Christianity) were portraying Jesus as a wicked magician and the illegitimate son of an adulteress. The effect of the hostile feelings became one-sided after the conversion of Constantine to Christ and the gaining of political power by Christians. This was the beginning of a tragic history that would see the oppression and persecution of Jews continue through the centuries, culminating horrendously in our own. Many non-Christian elements contributed to that history, particularly in the Nazi period; but often the passion narratives were read in a way that fueled hatred of Jews.

In efforts to ensure that this never happens again, what I have contended above may serve well. The recognition that important Jewish figures in Jerusalem were hostile to Jesus and had a role in his death need not of itself have produced anti-Judaism, any more than the fact that the Jerusalem priests and prophets plotted Jeremiah's death would produce such a result. The first Christian attempt to see theological significance in Jesus' death by use of the scriptural portrayal of the just persecuted by the wicked did not of itself have an anti-Jewish tone. Anti-Judaism appeared when the death was interpreted through the optic of the then-existing bad relations between believers in Jesus (often no longer ethnically Jewish) and Jews who did not believe in him.

Good relations between Christians and Jews based on respect for each other are the optic that will most facilitate the reading of the passion narratives without an anti-Jewish effect. Christians who appreciate the great heritage of Judaism will work sensitively to correct the simplification whereby those hostile to Jesus are portrayed without qualification as "the Jews."

We Christians cannot dismiss or deny what happened to Jesus—that is too facile an escapism. In liturgically celebrating the truth and power of the passion narratives,

however, we must be equally energetic in proclaiming, as did Pope John Paul II on the Auschwitz anniversary: "Never again anti-Semitism!"

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