

Who Killed Jesus? *Making Jews out of Gentiles*

Over forty years ago as a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural West Africa, I was accosted in a local marketplace by an angry villager. “We hate you Americans,” he snapped. “You killed Kennedy!” I had enjoyed enough local hospitality to be more puzzled than indignant. President Kennedy himself was an American; without Americans, he would never have existed. Still, others around the world clearly felt that Kennedy had participated so essentially in their identity and aspirations that he belonged to them.

To condemn the Jewish people for the murder of Jesus is equally baffling. Jesus himself was a Jew; without the Jews, the Messiah would never have existed. Still, non-Jews around the world clearly have felt that Jesus participates so essentially in their identity and aspirations that he belongs to them.

Biblical history records that Jesus’ fellow Jews did in fact facilitate his death at Roman hands. Rather than sanitize that fact with politically-correct fabrications, Gentile Christians must dare to ask why that happened—not on order to blame others, but in fact to revitalize our faith at its roots. If our faith is alive, that is, the Bible stories which include Jesus’ rejection and murder are not about some ancient, distant people, but about us. To point a self-righteous Gentile finger is to refuse to identify with the people of the Bible, and therefore, miss an essential message for us today.

In Jesus’ time, Rome had conquered and brutalized Israel. Centurions (Roman police) menaced on every street corner, and even in the sacred temple. For those who protested, Roman law was swift and deadly; well-traveled roads were lined as telephone poles with crucified dissidents. As resentment simmered, Jesus and his fellow oppressed Jews were approaching the Passover—which recalled for them a similar historical ordeal, when their ancestors were slaves in ancient Egypt. Passover celebrates the God of the Exodus, who intervened miraculously against overwhelming military odds to destroy the oppressor and deliver His Chosen People into freedom across the parted Red Sea.

When a hopelessly powerful and viciously ruthless enemy stands in your backyards and even in your sacred temple, all this remembering freedom and your God’s saving power stirs not only hostile resentment, but violent reprisal. Passover in Jesus’ time would be like celebrating Fourth of July with foreign armies occupying America. It was a virtual mandate for revolution, and the very air in Jerusalem was electric with anticipation for yet another dramatic, saving act of God.

Into this hair-trigger atmosphere walked a man who promised to set his people free from their fear of death—the very fear which oppressors bank on for their power. This man Jesus preached that death has no power if you trust in the God of the Exodus. If you’ve lived in the shadow of crosses hanging with your brothers in faith, you know that such radical talk can turn an angry people into a mob ready to only to kill but to be killed.

“So the Pharisees and the chief priests met with the Council,” as John’s Gospel notes, “and said, ‘What shall we do? Look at all the miracles this man is performing! If we let him go on in this way, everyone will believe in him, and the Roman authorities will take action and destroy our temple and our nation!’ (John 11:47-48TEV)

Thus, the anguish of Jewish leaders under Roman rule. Yes, Jesus' demonstrated power threatened their authority. Yet the prospect of another fellow Jew's dying at Roman hands was surely at least as offensive. Any moderate voices were silenced by the fact that Rome demanded civil order and was prepared to crush the nation to enforce it. Not only would outward rebellion against Rome be suicidal, but in fact, *any* disturbance at all among Jews could spark a holocaust. Such fear was no demented paranoia; this very cataclysm had befallen Israel centuries before, at the hands of the Babylonians.

The dilemma was as clear as it was agonizing. If Jesus refused to shut up or get out of town, people would gather, tempers would flare—and the people chosen to bear God's heart to this broken world could get wiped out by Caesar's jittery battalions. "He stirs up the people!" as the chief priests agonized (Luke 23:4).

If you want your people to survive here, as a Jewish leader you must be prepared to compromise your anger, if not your faith itself. Thus the High Priest Caiaphas exclaimed to the other leaders, "What fools you are! Don't you realize that it is better for you to have one man die for the people, instead of having the whole nation destroyed? (John 11:49-50 TEV)."

Yes, Jesus had performed amazing miracles and spoke with uncommon wisdom and authority. But the common sense choice was clear: Jesus must go.

I wish I could say, "If I were a Jewish leader in Jesus' time, I don't know what I'd have done." But I do know what I most likely would have done—and it would not have been to risk the life of my entire nation for some carpenter from far-off Nazareth, no matter how impressive his miracles and wisdom.

Today, some 2000 years later, in our comfortable democracy occupied only by stoplights and convenience stores, it's easy for Gentiles to scoff, "Shame on those Jews! Of course, we would never have given Jesus over to be killed!"

Yet Jesus himself excoriated the Pharisees for that very same self-righteousness: "You hypocrites! ... You claim that if you had lived during the time of your ancestors, you would not have done what they did and killed the prophets" (Matthew 23:29,30).

The Story says that the people of God chose apparent worldly security over Jesus. Do we? For all the leaders' attempts to save their nation, not long after this Israel was in fact destroyed, along with the temple. Could this happen to us and our churches? Indeed, when the people of God chose life in this world rather than to risk their lives for Jesus, they abandoned themselves to the powers of death. This is the very real and very terrifying choice facing Christians in every country, in every generation—even our own today.

If indeed, the God of the Bible is our God, then His story in the Bible is our story. As Gentiles, therefore, we can never celebrate ourselves as having the whole part in Christ's life while scorning the Jews as having the whole part in his death. The disciples themselves—not just the Pharisees—denied and disowned Jesus. And it was precisely these unfaithful disciples to whom the Risen Lord first returned, and empowered to bear God's forgiveness to an unfaithful world: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:22,23).

Only those who have abandoned Jesus to die can appreciate the awe-full grace in this act—and the responsibility it bears.

Indeed, only those who have inflicted the pain of Good Friday can know the humbling grace of Easter and faithfully exercise the overcoming power it heralds.

God did not send Jesus to make Gentiles out of Jews, but to make Jews out of Gentiles, as He did first with Abraham.

Today, some Jews and Gentiles alike are startled and even offended by Christian efforts to tell Jews about Jesus. But any Christian who dares enter the Bible story knows that the original followers of Jesus were all Jews, like Him. It's not news that Jews would follow Jesus, but that Gentiles would follow the Jewish Messiah. I like my Jews for Jesus T-shirt that declares,

“Goyim for Jesus.”

. To be a Gentile Christian, therefore, is to know that we ourselves handed Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified. This, indeed, is unsettling news, the sort which can break open your heart to God. As the old African-American spiritual agonizes, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

If you weren't, then you're not in the Story—nor worthy to participate in the reconciling work of His Spirit today.