

ROMANS, JEWS AND SINNERS: WHO KILLED JESUS AND WHY

PAUL BARNETT

*Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, has stirred fresh discussion over the role of Jews and Romans in the death of Jesus. What is the historical evidence for Christ's death? Who was responsible for it? And how does this ancient story inform our self-understanding today, be we Jewish or not?*

Ancient historian Paul Barnett considers evidence inside and outside the New Testament.



Paul Barnett is the author of a dozen books on the history of the New Testament, including *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*.

I have not seen *The Passion of the Christ* and probably won't. From all accounts it is gruesome in its detail. Crucifixion was common in that era. It was an ancient Carthaginian mode of killing that the Romans adapted to suppress troublesome provincials and the lower orders, for example, the slave uprising led by Spartacus.

In Jerusalem a few years ago, the remains of one Yehohanan were discovered, with iron spikes driven through ankle-bones and wrists. His are the only remains of a crucified man from the time of Christ, giving us a fair idea how it was done to Christ. There were various methods. It might be on a pole with cross bar or just on a pole. The victim might be impaled, as Yehohanan was, through feet and hands or through the eyes. The crucified man died slowly through asphyxiation since he could not lever himself up sufficiently to breathe. Soon enough he just hung there, breathless and exhausted. Typically those crucified were left impaled for days and alongside major thoroughfares for maximum effect. Often dogs would rip away at the lower parts. "Do not disturb your Roman masters", was the clear message. Cicero advised his friends



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never to mention the word 'crucifixion' in polite company.¹

By contrast, the Gospels record no gruesome detail. Nothing. They mention (without describing) the flogging beforehand—which was standard practice (allowing full reign to sadist torturers). Then they state without further comment that "they crucified him there" (e.g. John 19:18). Presumably there was no need to describe the horrors since they were well enough known. Crucifixions were not uncommon.

More fundamentally, though, the Gospels see the sufferings of Christ in another realm. His cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" gives us the clue that his sufferings were *relational*. His unique relationship with God was broken. The darkness that fell on the scene—which

is independently attested—pointed to the evil being wrought on this young man but also—again, more fundamentally—it pointed to the barrier that now lay between God and himself—the sin of the world.

Who killed Jesus?

I understand the concerns of Jewish people over the screening of *The Passion*. However, we all must be prepared to face the facts of history, whether in regards to the execution of Christ, the anti-Semitic Pogroms in Russia, the Stolen Generations in Australia, the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the Sandakan Death March or the Rwandan genocide. We must be as objective and clear-eyed about one as about others. If history has lessons for us about those events—as it

surely does—then no good purpose is served by avoiding the facts.

In regards to the death of Christ, the following three things can be stated:

i. *The non-Christian sources* for Christ (Josephus and Tacitus) tell us that it was the Romans who executed him. According to Josephus (a Jew), Christ was executed under Pilate, having been condemned beforehand by high-ranking Jews.

ii. *The Gospels* say much the same as Josephus. Christ was condemned by a collective of upper echelon Jews (for claiming to be the Messiah) and crucified as

High Priesthood was appointed to the highest bidder from one of four or five powerful families. From the time of Herod, these High Priests were not even of priestly lineage descended from Aaron. The appointment was political and pecuniary.

These families were corrupt, exploiting their access to the Temple by blatant trading of the merchandise (animals for sacrifice). They had only a veneer of religious faith for the benefit of the public. In private they were quite pagan. Their alliances were with their Roman masters and they had as little to do with the ordinary people as possible. In return the Romans wanted from them one thing in particular – social harmony. For them, Jesus was a big problem. He did not disavow Messiahship and he set out to fulfil prophecy by riding up to the City on a donkey like a new King David and cleared out the Temple traders. If there was trouble in the City, a High Priest could lose his job, and his sons, sons-in-law, uncles and cousins theirs. And trouble there was with the man from Galilee.

the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the state religion. In the fourth century, a Christian theocracy existed for the first time. Theocracies tend to oppress minorities and Jews were oppressed, not least under Theodosius later in the fourth century.

But anti-Semitism did not begin with the rise of the church. In the Greek East, for example, there was virtual civil war in the great cities Alexandria and Antioch between the pagan majorities and the Jewish minorities. Many Jews were massacred, their beliefs and practices pilloried. Roman authors like Tacitus vilify and mock the Jews, mostly for their standoffishness, for abstinence from pork eating, for the worship of an invisible God (as opposed to the visible gods in the temples), and for doing no work on the seventh day.

Christian anti-Semitism (as from the fourth century) cannot be denied, but it rode on the back of five hundred years of Graeco-Roman anti-Semitism.

I want to encourage sensitivity to Jewish concerns about the Gibson movie. As I



Protester at rally against film in New York.

The way of the world is payback, but Jesus subverts

‘king of the Jews’, that is, for treason by the Romans. Only those whom the Romans appointed (as ‘client’ kings) could be ‘kings’ in a Roman province. So far as the Romans were concerned, the fewer such ‘kings’ the better. ‘Client kings’ were only ever a transitional arrangement paving the way for full Roman Provincial Government. Why did Christ die? He died at the hands of the Roman governor who found him guilty of treason, that is of claiming to be ‘king of the Jews’. There was only one ‘king of the Jews’ and that was Emperor Tiberius.

iii. *The New Testament* attributes the blame for this not to the Jewish *people*, but to that small collective of aristocrats who composed the Jewish Senate and who governed Jerusalem. It was a temple state, analogous to the Vatican. At once a religious and a political entity, but in the case of Jerusalem subject to the occupying power of Rome. This Senate (the Sanhedrin) was dominated by the High Priest of the moment and a small core group (mostly relatives). For the best part of a century the

Background to anti-Semitism

The Gospels, then, make it clear that not the Jewish people, but the tiny sect known as the Sadducees were responsible for handing Christ to the Romans for crucifixion. The crowd that bayed for Christ’s blood was most likely a small ‘rent-a-crowd’, gathered in the grounds of the military garrison in the small hours of the morning when the people of Jerusalem were still in bed.

Under the Roman system the Emperor granted the *Ius Gladii*, ‘the Right of the Sword’, only to his provincial delegate, the governor. Judaea was an occupied country; only the Roman occupying governor tried and executed those guilty of capital offences. As the Jewish leaders said, “It is not lawful for us to kill anyone” (John 18:31). The Roman governor was judge, jury and executioner and it was he who crucified Christ. The Apostles Creed, said in churches every week for nearly 2000 years, has it right. Christ ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate’. That is as true historically as it is true that Jewish people began to suffer under Christians once

understand it, the movie expresses a pre-Vatican II outlook. Anti-Semitism flourished under pre-Vatican II Catholicism, that is, in Europe mostly, where images of the crucified Christ on the cross are dominant. I think, for example, of the large statue of the crucified Christ on the major pedestrian bridge across the river at Prague, passed by many hundreds each day. It bears the Latin title ‘INRI’, the first letters in the phrase, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’. For centuries, passion plays (the most famous is Oberammergau) have been part of European Roman Catholic culture. From all accounts, the Gibson movie is pre-Vatican II and a cinematic passion play. I have time for the objections of Jewish people, even though I gather the movie itself is no harder on Jewish involvement than on Roman involvement.

It may be no coincidence that anti-Semitism occurred in the countries where the image of the crucified Christ is dominant and passion plays were held. On the other hand, in the generally Protestant cultures of England and the USA, Jewish people have

prospered with relatively less suffering from Gentiles. In Protestant religious imagery there is an empty cross with no crucified body. That is deliberate, in order to emphasise the resurrection of the one who died. The empty cross and the empty tomb express Protestant theology, as I understand and believe it. If I

themselves Jews. If they blame anybody, it is an unrepresentative sect of wealthy, Roman-connected aristocrats. The New Testament is not anti-Semitic, but holds out the promise of God's forgiveness and restoration to all people. The universality of Christ's invitation cannot be missed. People of every nation, Jews

benefit from that love. They are called upon to imitate that love—to others, for their good, regardless of benefit. Another key explanation for why Christ died is found in this particular notion of love.

Christ's love shown in his atoning death is a template for human behaviour, for all human behaviour. He, their teacher washed his disciples' feet, to depict the moral washing which his death would effect and to set the example of the greater serving the lesser, the teacher the pupil, the strong the weak. Human history is the tragic chronicle of the powerful using their power for themselves, their family and their cronies. But Jesus exemplified the person of power and authority using his resources, not for himself, but for others.

One other way Christ's death informs human behaviour is seen in his demeanour on the cross. "Forgive them", he said. He taught "turn the other cheek" and though unjustly and cruelly treated, he did not threaten or abuse his killers, but prayed for them. The way of the world is payback, whether in the New Guinea highlands, the football field, the boardroom, the academic common room or between Israelis and Palestinians in the land of Israel. Payback—with interest. Hurt the man who has hurt you. Make him suffer like you have and maybe a bit more. But Jesus subverts this quest for vengeance. He asks God to forgive the very people responsible for his death. And that subversion of human instinct is another plank in the raft of reasons why Jesus died. ©

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END NOTE

1 "How grievous a thing it is to be disgraced by a public court; how grievous to suffer a fine, how grievous to suffer banishment; and yet in the midst of any such disaster we retain some degree of liberty. Even if we are threatened with death, we may die free men. But the executioner, the veiling of the head and the very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things but the very mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man." (*Rab. Perd.* 16)



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this quest for vengeance.



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may surmise, perhaps that imagery pointed away from blaming Jews for the crucifixion.

Reasons for the Passion

Despite the behaviour of some church people throughout history (particularly in Europe), the Gospel writers never engage in a blame game against Jewish people, and were

included, have found in Christ a personal 'friend', one who brings inner renewal through divine forgiveness and joy in the midst of pain. The Gospel of John gives us some idea of the universal application of Christ in its frequent use of the word, 'world': "For God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). One of the reasons Christ died is expressed in the simple saying: "to save the world".

There is another universality that belongs to Christ. It is behavioural. It is summed up in the word 'love'. Before Christ there was in the Greek language a little used word, *agape*. It was not *eros*—love because of the other's attractiveness; it was not *storge*—love of kith and kin; it was not *philos*, love between mates. It was *agape*, love for the good of the other, regardless of worthiness. This rare word in the Greek language is abundant in the pages of the New Testament. Typically it describes God's love in giving his Son for the world's forgiveness. But equally it is required of those who