


WHO
Really
Killed
Jesus?

The Chosen People 
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Who Really Killed Jesus?

by Dr. Mitch Glaser

It is our hope that this publication will bring deeper understanding of God's underlying purpose in the death of Jesus - newness of life in the distinctly Jewish mode in which the story of Jesus unfolds.

The question of who killed Jesus is not one which Jewish people are fond of revisiting. To put it bluntly, for two thousand years Christians have pinned the rap on us for this heinous crime—with no statute of limitations in sight. When is enough?

Now, just when we thought it might be safe to breathe the same air as our Christian neighbors, along comes Mel Gibson with his film, *The Passion*. I am not judging here whether the movie is good or bad. But it is the issue it brings out that always seems to plague the Jewish people. The name of the movie alone conjures up visions of the anti-Semitic extravaganzas that have seemed to us a once-a-decade invitation to commit unrestricted mayhem against Jewish communities throughout Europe. Couldn't he just have made *Braveheart II*?

History's Tale

Who really killed Jesus? Jewish people quite naturally point to the Romans. After all, Israel was under Rome's political sway during the time in question. And doesn't the New Testament record that the Romans killed him? But many Christians just won't have it that way. For one thing, it's hard to find a Roman centurion to hurl insults or rocks at any more. On the other hand, the Jewish people are most conveniently still here.

I recognize that not every person that says he or she is a Christian is a true follower of the Messiah (in fact, it's been my experience that those who really love Jesus love the Jewish people). Some so-called "Christians" point to "the Jews" of the New Testament as the guilty culprits. According to them, the Romans may have pounded the nails in, all right, but it was the Jews who were behind it all. But isn't it true that Jesus' own disciples and his other first followers were Jewish? Somehow, that fact seldom seems to surface. No, it seems that all

Jews everywhere and for all time are deemed guilty of the murder of Jesus. The real question is, what does the Bible have to say on the subject?

The Meaning of Messiah's Death

The importance of who killed Jesus rests on the assertion that he is the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures. The writers of the New Testament were almost all Jewish and it was to the Jewish Bible that they looked for confirmation of the truth. Their expectation of the Messiah was, at first, that he would be a supernaturally empowered Son of David who would free them from the Romans and restore Israel to its place of leadership among the nations.

As Jesus' works and words show, their expectation would be met—but only in part. He did not appear then as the triumphant military victor. He did, however, fulfill the first function of his role as Messiah. He would voluntarily die as the means through which our estranged humanity could be reconciled to the God of Israel.

Looking deeply into the Hebrew Scriptures, the writers of the New Testament discovered a truth that puts the question of Jesus' death in its proper perspective. Although the Romans executed him and some of the Jewish leaders sought this, Jesus went willingly to his death out of obedience to God. He did so for our sake, that through Messiah's death we might be reconciled to God.

Seen in this light, the question, "Who killed Jesus?" becomes clearer. We all—Jew and non-Jew alike—share the guilt. Yet, it is for the guilty that Messiah willingly chose to die.

It is our hope that this publication will bring deeper understanding of God's underlying purpose in the death of Jesus—newness of life in the distinctly Jewish mode in which the story of Jesus unfolds.

A Brief & Incomplete History of Jewish Suffering

325 **The Council of Nicea** rejected the Jewish roots of Christian faith. It separated the celebration of Easter from the Jewish Passover, stating, "For it is unbecoming beyond measure that on this holiest of festivals we should follow the customs of the Jews. Henceforth let us have nothing in common with this odious people..."

415 **St. Augustine's writings fostered anti-Semitism**
St. Augustine wrote, "The true image of the Hebrew is Judas Iscariot, who sells the Lord for silver. The Jew can never understand the Scriptures and forever will bear the guilt for the death of Jesus."



Is the New Testament Anti-Semitic?

by Dr. Robert Vasholz



From the time the Church triumphed over the paganism of the Roman Empire and assumed the mantle of worldly political power, the dark shadow of anti-Semitism has been its lasting shame. This deadly shadow has hovered above the terrible deeds of the Crusaders, the Inquisition, the pogroms and the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust. What is the basis of this horrifying hatred? Does anti-Semitism spring from the New Testament itself?

Anti-Semitism and the Bible

In a quest for the roots of anti-Semitism, many authors have asserted that texts of the New Testament are “tainted with anti-Jewish allegations.” The Gospel of John has often been singled out as particularly guilty. The foremost reason is John’s frequent use of the term “the Jews”—many times in hostile or confrontational settings.

Although this is true, it must also be said that the Gospel affirms that Yeshua (Jesus) is a Jew and that there was a segment of Jews who were supportive of him (John 7:40, 8:31, 10:19-21, 42).

But the question is whether criticism or unflattering descriptions in and of themselves constitute anti-Semitism. If so, then the Hebrew Bible itself must be judged accordingly. For example, the most sacred work of the Jewish community, the Torah, records Moses calling his people “stiff-necked” and “rebellious.” I count no less than eight historical descriptions by Moses of Israel’s absolute defiance of their God in the first four chapters of Deuteronomy.

Moses is the first in a succession of Jewish prophets (including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Amos) who call Israel to task for the profanation of her holy calling. And yet, I am not aware that the Torah or Hebrew Scriptures have ever been labeled “anti-Jewish.” Why? We recognize these struggles as an intra-Jewish religious tension in an attempt to aid Israel toward the goal of her high calling; not as attempts to condemn Israel as the worst people on earth.

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613 **Persecution in Spain**
Jews were given the choice of leaving Spain or converting to Christianity. Jewish children over six years of age were taken from their parents and given a non-Jewish upbringing.

1096 **The First Crusade**
The goal of the Crusades was to liberate Jerusalem from Muslim control. However, the Crusaders killed many Jews as they crossed Europe *en route* to the Holy Land. In the Rhine Valley alone, about 12,000 Jews were killed in the First Crusade. Such persecution continued through the ninth and last Crusade in 1272.

1099 **Crusaders Burn Jerusalem Synagogue**
Having cornered the Jews of Jerusalem in a synagogue, they set it on fire. Those who tried to escape were forced back into the burning building.

Who Killed Yeshua?

by Alan Shore



Growing up Jewish in New York City, I lived in a neighborhood where there were all sorts of churches. I knew there was some kind of difference between Protestants and Catholics, but I had no idea what it was. I certainly knew, though, what they had in common: a dead man, nailed to a cross.

This man was everywhere—on small silver crosses around schoolgirls' necks, on big wooden crosses in art museums, in paintings and in the movies. I actually thought for a time that the huge stone cross that loomed over the graves in the cemetery in Woodside, Queens, was where He was buried. A little later, I learned his name was Jesus. Oh yes, and one other thing. I learned that we Jews had killed him.

Why Us?

There are many expressions of contempt for the Jewish people and right at the top of the list is the epithet, "Christ-killer." It was hard for me to believe that some people could hold me responsible for what seemed like such a distant event, but I knew it was true.

This, I gather, is how the indictment against us reads: "The Jews killed Christ. That's why they are a cursed breed, condemned to wander throughout the earth. That's why they have suffered God's punishment, and we are happy to be the instruments God uses to inflict his judgment upon them." Case closed.

Time and time again this smoldering charge has been whipped into a firestorm of hatred against our people. One of the worst calumnies

is the infamous "blood libel," which accuses the Jewish people of the ritual murder of Christian children at Passover. This baseless charge has proven to be deadly to the Jewish people. In 1903 in Russian Moldavia, a pogrom erupted during Easter that resulted in the death of 49 Jews, with another 500 injured and roughly 2,000 made homeless.

Now, with the publicity surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's new movie, *The Passion*, Jewish people are understandably nervous. When the question is inevitably raised, "Who killed Jesus?" will the fingers that are pointed be pointed directly at us?

Perhaps it is time to reopen the case. Who really killed Jesus? Let's take a fresh look at the suspects, the evidence and the motives.

Finding the Suspects

The most detailed accounts of the death of Jesus are recorded in the Gospels. They agree that, by the urging of the Jewish religious authorities, Jesus was sentenced to death under Roman law and crucified by the Roman military. The Romans employed this particularly gruesome method of execution frequently, not only as a horribly painful punishment, but also as a deterrent to offenders against civil order. So, for whatever reason, the Romans actually killed him.

Searching for Motive

Why was it done? Any inquiry stops short without a look at the underlying reasons for the act itself.

We have an itinerant Jewish rabbi whose following is largely in the hinterlands of Galilee. He is a worker of miracles. He speaks as one of the prophets of old. He comes to Jerusalem,

1190

Death in York Castle

Seeking refuge from Anti-Jewish riots that had started in London, the Jews of York, England, fortified themselves in a castle. Rather than surrender, they killed themselves on the Sabbath before Passover. By 1290, Jews were expelled from England.

1320

The Shepherd Crusade and Massacre in France

40,000 French shepherds went to Palestine on another crusade. This time, 140 Jewish communities in their path were destroyed. The following year, in Guienne, France, Jews were accused of prompting criminals to poison wells. 5,000 Jews were burned alive at the stake.

1348-9

Black Plague

As the Black Plague took its awful toll in Europe, Jews became the scapegoats. Again, they are accused of poisoning wells and are tortured and slaughtered from Spain to Poland.

where the religious authorities try to size him up, according to their own criteria. He refuses to flatter them.

Worse than that, He frightens them. He is a divisive figure. Some are already openly declaring that He is the Messiah who has come to restore the throne of David. Israel is already a political powder keg, ready to blow sky high, and the religious leaders well knew Rome's forceful response to civil unrest.

The consensus is that He must be gotten rid of—Rome must be appeased. The religious status quo must be reinforced. Caiaphas, the High Priest, can even rationalize that the end justifies the means. Addressing the uncertain members of the Sanhedrin, he declared, *"You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish"* (John 11:49-50).

Jesus was condemned and handed over to the Romans by a hastily convened meeting of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish "Supreme Court"). Abetted by an urgent crowd of witnesses, a reluctant Pontius Pilate sentenced Jesus to death. Jesus was pronounced guilty of the trumped-up charge of Roman treason—not Jewish heresy. The sentence was almost immediately carried out. Jesus was crucified, and his tomb was sealed and guarded by Romans at the behest of the Jewish leaders who accused him and who were understandably anxious to keep the body from being taken away.

Only it did not quite work out that way. According to the Gospel accounts, an angel rolled the stone away from the mouth of the tomb, God raised the Messiah from the dead, and a new chapter in history began.

Finding Guilt and Passing Sentence

So who, then, is guilty? The short answer is that the guilt lies with a ruthless system of government which, at the instigation of some corrupt religious officials and aided by the indifference of ordinary people, carried out the deed. Yet this assessment touches only the superficial facts—and leaves the underlying realities unexplored.

The Bible itself paints a far more complex picture of the meaning of the death of Jesus. The most striking fact is that, although human beings conspired to bring it about, it could not have happened apart from his own obedience to the role He was appointed to fulfill as the Messiah of Israel.

The Jewish faith teaches that our guilt before God requires an offering through which we may be reconciled to God. Jesus the Messiah willingly became that offering, so that through faith in him, we might have peace with God.

As the "Servant of the Lord" described in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus was indeed revealed as the "Man of sorrows" who was "wounded for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53).

However, this was part of God's plan to restore us – *"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Are we all, then, guilty? More so than we could possibly know. And this awareness, oddly enough, is the first step toward our exoneration through the risen Messiah who has already forgiven us.

Perhaps it is time to reopen the case. Who really killed Jesus? Let's take a fresh look at the suspects, the evidence and the motives.

1483-97

The Spanish Inquisition

During the Spanish Inquisition, Jews were given the choice of being baptized as Christians or being banished from Spain. In 1492, 300,000 left Spain as paupers. Others converted to Christianity, but often continued Jewish observance in secret. During this period, Jewish people were exiled from Spain, Sicily, Lithuania and Portugal.

1648-49

Cossack Massacres

Massacres were carried out by Bogdan Chmielnicki, leader of the Cossacks. During the peasant revolt against Polish rule in the Ukraine, over 100,000 Jews were killed and 300 communities destroyed.

1881-84

Russian Pogroms

During this period, numerous pogroms occurred in more than 100 Jewish villages in southern Russia with looting, rape and murder. These violent acts prompted a Jewish exit from Russia; many fled to America.

The Death of Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures



I don't remember hearing a lot about Messiah as I was growing up. It was somewhat taken for granted that one day the Messiah would come and bring peace to the world. But very few details about the Messiah were offered.

But actually, there is a lot of information in the Jewish Scriptures about Messiah!

As Jews, we know that the Messiah will be a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 12:1-3); He will come from the Tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10) and be a son of David (II Samuel 7:16). We also can see clearly the promises of the Hebrew prophets that one day the Messiah will reign on Earth and initiate an age of peace (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Jewish scholars have produced a very detailed portfolio of Messianic activities, which includes the resurrection of the dead and the return of all Jews to the land of Israel. But they have left out one vital aspect in their description of Messiah's work and character. It is that Messiah was supposed to die as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of both Jews and Gentiles. Let's take a look at Messiah's death, as predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The purpose for his death is most clearly explained in the 53rd chapter of the Book of Isaiah. In this great passage of Scripture, the statesman-prophet Isaiah describes the coming Messiah. What is especially significant in this passage is to see that Jesus, as the Servant of the

Lord, was born to die as a perfect sacrifice for both Jews and Gentiles. This is clearly pictured in the following verses:

He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:3-6).

Thus, we find a Messiah whose vindication comes only after He has suffered the indignity of death.

Jesus died to fulfill these and many other prophecies—willingly, I might add—as the ultimate sacrifice for sin. And it is through the shedding of His sacrificial blood that you and I have forgiveness of sin.

We must admit that this is not an appealing picture. The scene of the crucifixion of Jesus in Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*, for example, is very realistic and quite gruesome. There is nothing humane or pretty about his death. But it did take place exactly as the Jewish prophets foretold it would.

The question, "Who killed Jesus?" may be answered only in the context of an even larger question, "Why did Jesus die?" It is to the Scriptures that we must turn to discover the truth.

1903

Easter Riot in Moldova

The Jews were blamed for the deaths of a murdered Christian child and a young Christian woman who had committed suicide at the Jewish Hospital. That Easter, violence erupted, resulting in the death of 49 Jews, with 500 injured. It was later revealed that relatives had murdered the child and the suicide had nothing to do with the Jewish people.

1920s

Discrimination in the U.S.

Prejudice against Jews in North America became widespread. Many universities imposed quotas on Jewish students. When Harvard accepted all students on the basis of merit, the Jewish student body was about 15%. In 1941, after quotas were imposed, Princeton University had a Jewish student body of fewer than 2%. Jews were also usually barred from Protestant country clubs, restricted neighborhoods and other Protestant enclaves.



Who Really Killed Jesus?

Now that we have the Biblical answer to why Jesus had to die, we can respond to the question, "Who really killed Jesus?" The answer is that Jesus, knowing that his death would be the fulfillment of prophecy, offered himself as a sacrifice for our sin.

In the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42-44).

Jesus was not forced by anyone to die, but rather He died willingly, in obedience to his Father's will.

Jewish scholars have left out one vital aspect in their description of Messiah's work and character.

Our Response to His Death

Generations of Jewish people have been blamed for the death of Jesus. It is a terrible crime of history that Jesus—Himself a Jew—would abhor.

Yet the death of Yeshua does require a response—and there is only one that we can reasonably make. It is to accept Him as Messiah, to receive his forgiveness, and view His death as our own, because He died in our place.

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Approaching the New Testament

We must approach the New Testament in the same light. The Gospels were written within the context of Judaism. We must recognize this if we are to understand and appreciate them fully. The main subject, Yeshua, was a Jew. The disciples were Jews. His opponents were Jews. The main themes of divergence were Jewish. The sources are Jewish and the authors of the New Testament, with the possible exception of Luke, were Jews.

The struggles portrayed in the New Testament ought to be viewed as taking place within the Jewish family—and not as accusations leveled against the Jews by those outside. Yeshua is portrayed as a prophet in the succession of Jewish prophets of Israel, and as the promised Jewish Messiah. Yeshua's identity as a Jew is affirmed and reaffirmed.

Seen in this way, one thinks of what is sometimes said during heated family discussions. If an outsider were to use the same descriptions, it would be a different matter altogether. Any attempt to isolate the charges that Yeshua leveled against his people for use as justification for persecution or hatred does violence to the Scriptures and is an offense to God.

For it was this same John who also wrote, "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God" (John 3:21).



Our Hands Are Stained with Blood
by Dr. Michael Brown

For nearly 2000 years, the Church and the Jewish people have had a history of pain, anti-Semitism, and hatred. Tragically, few Christians know about it. In this book by Jewish believer, Michael Brown, the tragic story of the "Church" and the Jewish people is laid out for all to see. #3078 \$12.95

1938 Kristallnacht

On the infamous *Kristallnacht* (November 9-10, 1938), Nazi hatred erupted in Germany and Austria and resulted in the destruction of Jewish businesses and synagogues. The attempted extermination of the Jewish people in Europe was under way.

1940 French Jewish Deportation

The Vichy government of France collaborated with Nazi Germany. Before the war had ended, France deported over 76,000 Jews to Nazi death camps. Only about 2,500 are known to have survived.

1939-45 World War II

Approximately six million Jews and six million others were murdered by Nazis. Although there are notable exceptions, particularly in the Netherlands, churches and ordinary Christians in Europe did little to alter the outcome.

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Review of the Passion Play

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, execution and resurrection have gripped the souls of countless millions throughout the centuries. It is understandable that they have been remembered and dramatized by the Church. One of the most famous of these "reenactments" has been the Passion Play at the Bavarian village of Oberammergau.

Just as every drama must have its hero, so too every drama must have its villain. The obvious hero of the Gospels is Jesus. Who are the foremost villains of the Passion Play? For centuries, the villains have been the Jewish people.

The History of the Passion Play

The Passion Play got its start in 1634, during the gruesome days of the Black Plague. When deaths began to occur at Oberammergau in 1633, the town's leaders took a vow that if God would spare their village, they would gratefully tell the story of Jesus. Tradition says that after this declaration, there were no more deaths, and beginning in 1634, a play has been presented every ten years at the start of the decade.

This tradition is still going strong. The performers must be Oberammergau natives or have lived there for at least ten years. The play requires a cast of 2,200 actors and crew members and is almost six hours long. Now world famous, Oberammergau's Passion Play is attended by tourists from around the globe, and has spawned offspring in places as diverse as Toronto, Canada and Eureka Springs, Arkansas. It was last performed in Oberammergau in the year 2000.

Adolf Hitler called the 1934 performance "a convincing portrayal of the menace of Jewry." This is not a hopeful sign. Is it any wonder that Jewish people fear the spark of anti-Semitism that has been so widely popularized in the tradition of the Passion Play for over 300 years?

The Jewish Response

For centuries, the depiction of the Jewish leaders in the New Testament has been overlaid with the ugly

stereotypes of anti-Semitism. This was sadly reflected in the Passion Play script that was written in 1860 and had been in use before 2000. The Jewish characters were seen as money-grubbing Christ-haters. The hated character of Judas was offered as the embodiment of Judaism. The unambiguous message was, "The Jews murdered the Messiah."

However, in recent years the production has seen long-overdue script revisions. Many Christians frankly are ashamed of the ugly stereotypes that marred the story. These welcome changes de-emphasize the Jewish role and stress God's purpose in Messiah's death.

While some references remain, the Anti-Defamation League agreed that "substantial improvements have been made from the 1980 to 1990 production and even more far-reaching ones for the 2000 play." The American Jewish Committee finds "vast improvements over earlier versions." ¹

A Jewish Jesus – The Antidote to Christian Anti-Semitism

The changes wrought for the 2000 Passion Play, perhaps unconsciously, have strengthened the point that Jesus is Jewish and that the New Testament is a Jewish book. The Anti-Defamation League reports with satisfaction that "Jesus is called 'Rabbi,' stressing Jesus' 'Jewishness,' the term 'Old Testament' is replaced by the term 'Hebrew Bible' and Jesus says a blessing in Hebrew." ²

The more Christians understand the Jewish roots of their faith, the more they will appreciate the Jewish people. And the more Jewish people understand that believing in Jesus does not negate Jewish identity, the better equipped they will be to weigh honestly the claims of the New Testament.

For the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament agree on this: that among our frail humanity "there is no one righteous, not even one." It is for our forgiveness and healing that the prophesied Messiah, the Son of Righteousness, came among us.

¹ Maier, Paul. *Christianity Today*. August 7, 2000

² Anti-Defamation Web Site <http://www.adl.org/adl.asp>



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