

Who killed Jesus?

On some scenes in his "The Passion of the Christ," Mel Gibson used many cameras. Pro/con responders have been moving in at least as many directions. Here's one....

1 A ROMAN did. The Nicene Creed (AD 325 CE) names him, the (Roman Emperor-appointed) prefect of Judea. Jesus "suffered under PONTIUS PILATE, was crucified, died, and was buried." In the sense that the Roman system executed Jesus, one might say that the Romans (collectively) killed him.

Far from blaming the Jews, this creed (1) doesn't even mention them & (2) diverts attention from them by mentioning the nonJew who had sovereign authority over life & death in the province & therefore--as the Gospels, Josephus, Philo, & Tacitus concur--bore responsibility for the execution of Jesus.

2 Especially since Shoah-Holocaust, Christians have been at pains to exculpate the Jews from the death of Jesus, the Vatican II statement being especially important (& said an eminent Catholic historian [Michael Novak, 8.25.03 THE WEEKLY STANDARD; ZION'S HERALD 177.5], "Gibson's film is wholly consistent with the Second Vatican Council").

But instead of always denying responsibility, the Jews have a tradition of claiming it. E.g., Epistle to Yemen: "Jesus of Nazareth....The sages...meted out fitting punishment to him." In Sanhedrin 6:4, Rabbi Eliezer in Mishnah (ca. AD 200 CE)--the earliest stage of the Talmud--speaks of Jewish-executed (by stoning) criminals being crucified (hung on crosses after death). (Our sources do not answer the question whether, after Pilate's agreement to his crucifixion, Jesus was crucified by Romans or Jews.) The passage says Jesus was executed for teaching Jews to serve false gods, "enticing [them] and leading [them] astray." As late as the 12th c., Mishnah Torah (Maimon, in Egypt) says "Jesus of Nazareth, who imagined that he was the Messiah, but was put to death by the [Jewish] court [i.e., the Sanhedrin]."

However, by the 16th c., Jewish scribes (copyists) were bowdlerizing the Talmud to eliminate Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death. Current critical editions of the Talmud print the excisions in small print at the end of each Talmud section. Apparently the unexpurgated copies of the Talmud were being used by antisemites (Jew-haters) to incite pogroms.

CONCLUSION: Earlier Jews didn't mind taking credit for Jesus' elimination....

3and the earliest extant statement of Jesus' death--within 20 years of the event--says "THE JEWS...killed the Lord Jesus" (1Thes.2.14-15 NRSV). Since this author makes the NT's most generous statement about the Jews (viz., Ro.11), some find it hard to believe that the 1Thes. passage is not an antiJewish interpolation. But textual criticism is unfriendly to their case (their being no manuscript evidence to support it; a few "secondary" MSS have a change Marcion may have made, viz., from "the" to "their own" in front of "prophets"). But notice:

(1) In making this statement, Paul is not accusing "the Jews" of something they were claiming to be innocent of. He was not saying something he considered debatable. Paul's view, some 30 years before the first of the written Gospels, represented "the settled beliefs of the first generation of Christians" (Novak, *ibid.*).

(2) "The Jews" here (as elsewhere in NT eristic passages) does not mean all Jews but only anti-Jesus-movement Jews. Note the whole text (vv.14-16): "The Jews" persecuted the churches "in Judea". They "killed both the Lord Jesus and the [Christian] prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have been constantly filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last [footnote: or "completely" or "forever"]." (I left off 14b, which says the (Gentile) Thessalonian Christians have been persecuted by their Gentile fellow-citizens.)

4 No one should be surprised that the NT gives indications of unconverted Jews' fear that the gospel will spread. Of course it's in our 1Thes. passage, & Paul's pre-conversional efforts to wipe out the followers of Jesus (Gal.1.13 NRSV: "trying to destroy" the church). Hear him further: (1) Jews refusing to believe in Jesus are "enemies of God" (Ro.11.18); (2) "I persecuted the church of God" (1Cor.15.9); (3) "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we [Christians] who are the circumcision, who worship in the

Elliot & Minifshets

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville, MA 02632
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 \$20 per year
elliottw1@comcast.net

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Spirit...and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil.3.2-4 NRSV).

What about our earliest Gospel? In M.10.33-34, Jesus says "the chief priests and the scribes" "will condemn him to death" (then "the Gentiles" will kill him, & he "will rise again").

What about the Acts of the Apostles? To the people "of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem," Peter says "you crucified" "this Jesus," who "God has made...both Lord and Christ" (2.14-36 NRSV). The same author says "the chief priests and leaders...crucified him" (L.24.20 NRSV). And again in Luke's vol.2: "you...Israelites...crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law" (Ac.2.22-23 NRSV). And in the Fourth Gospel, the Jewish leader who turned Jesus over to the secular authority for execution "is guilty of a greater sin" (Jn.19.11 NRSV). Jesus himself anticipates Jewish-leaders' guilt (Mt.12.1-7: "the Pharisees....condemned the guiltless").

5 The Jewish desire to drive a wedge between "Jesus" and "Christ" is clear in the NT & continues to this day, e.g. in Jewish-NT-scholar Paula Fredriksen's FROM JESUS TO CHRIST (on which a four-part PBS series was based). The fraudulent thesis: Jesus was only a man, but gradually he gained full honors as Messiah & God (by AD 325 CE!). The truth: The NT's earliest book has Jesus' fully developed name--"Lord Jesus Christ" five times (1Thes.; = nine times in the soon-to-follow 2Thes.). She hastened to condemn the movie before seeing it, as did another female Jewish NT scholar, Amy-Jill Levine--both on a panel (including a few Christians) assembled by a male Jew, Eugene Korn of the Anti-Defamation League. Subsequently, "the U.S.Conf.of Cath.Bishops publicly apologized and distanced itself from the group" after having been suckered into rushing to judgment against Gibson's video-witness to Jesus. Some would call me antisemitic for pointing out the plain fact that Jews fear the spread of the gospel & hope for the failure of evangelism (& now, of the effect of the Gibson-Event on Jews, especially young secularists). (The quote? 7.26.03 CHRISTIAN CENTURY p.15.)

6 Again, no one should be surprised when an eminent Jewish public intellectual publicly hopes Gibson's Jesus is a failure in the public sphere, publicly (yesterday's LAT) objecting to its presence in the public square: religious stories possibly offending some religious groups should be confined to the private sphere. So down with the First Amendment, up with censorship & intolerance! Gertrude Himmelfarb: "Passions and emotions appropriate to the home and church may not be appropriate to the public sphere." (She admits to not having seen it: some scholar!) The intolerant secular religion now dominant in U.S. higher-ed. faculties (as Victor Davis Hanson detailed in yesterday's three-hour BookSpan interview) hates Christianity, including Gibson's Jesus. For its roots in an earlier animosity, see Julien Benda's THE BETRAYAL OF THE INTELLECTUALS (WM/28; Beacon/55; from "La Trahison des Clercs," 1924-27).

Who killed Jesus? The intelligentsia (& the Jews & the Romans & everybody). In the Paulist/ABC film, "Judas" (primiered 3.8.04), Pilate says to the Jewish leaders "YOU crucify him." The Jewish police may have done so, "under Pilate."

LILOTT THINKSHEETS
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville MA 02632

