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“They Crucified Him”

Comments on ‘The Passion’, The New Testament and anti-Semitism

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“The Passion of the Christ is as anti-Semitic as the New Testament and Johann Sebastian Bach. We have to acknowledge that and cannot ignore it.” This is a statement put forth by a well-known Christian debater in Denmark during the controversy over Mel Gibson’s film about the last 12 hours of Jesus’ life. So the question of whether the New Testament is anti-Semitic – or contains anti-Semitic or anti-Judaistic elements – is not just a topic between Jews and Christians; it is also a topic between Christians and Christians.

It is no wonder that some Jews fear that the movie may add fuel to the fire of anti-Semitism when we consider how New Testament texts through the ages have been misused for anti-Semitic purposes. That some Christians call the New Testament anti-Semitic could be a way to atone for the misdeeds that the church has committed against the Jewish people in the name of the New Testament. The statement, however, shows that parts of the Christian church are in crisis.

Personally, I could easily have done without nine tenths of the violent scenes in the film. And I would have liked to see those scenes replaced with (even more) flashbacks to the life of Jesus, so there would be a clear connection to the things in his life which led up to his death. But as a Christian I cannot do without Jews in the context of the Passion of the Christ. For me as a Christian it is of the utmost importance that it is Israel’s God who acts with and through Jesus for the good of Israel – and consequently for the good of all other people.

So who crucified Jesus?

When Mark writes “they crucified him” (Mark 15:25), the subject is the Romans. No doubt about that. But what share did Jews have in the death of Jesus? For a Christian to raise this question is to expose himself to criticism due to the sins of the church against the Jewish people through history.

According to the gospels there is no doubt that some of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem wanted to silence Jesus. After the arrest and interrogation of Jesus he is beaten with fists and sticks. Nor is there any doubt that representatives of the Jewish council handed him over to the Romans, and that it was the Romans who had him flogged before his crucifixion. The inscription on the cross – composed by the Romans – makes it clear that Jesus is hanging on the cross as a political rebel, as “the king of the Jews.”

It is possible to look at the events that lead up to the crucifixion in a variety of ways. Some believe that the Gospel writers tried to exonerate the Romans from guilt and instead place the main responsibility for the death of Jesus on the Jews. Why? Because, (the argument goes) it would have been easier to preach the gospel in a Roman world if Jesus’ death sentence had not been passed by Pilate, the Roman governor. Therefore, it is said, the Romans’ guilt is toned down in the gospels. And as a consequence, Jesus the Jew is “cleared” or “whitewashed,” while the Gospel writers are to blame.

If this was the Gospel writers' intention, they certainly bungled the job! Pilate is not portrayed as a competent examining judge. He is corrupt and spineless, goes against his own conviction and thinks more about his own political career than about upholding justice. Is that the way Romans would like to see a Roman governor portrayed?

Pilate has Jesus flogged. The New Testament does not go into detail about it. At that time people were well aware of the brutality of such a flogging, the torso being slashed and bleeding. In the scene where Jesus is crowned with thorns – in the gospel as well as in the movie – we see sadistic Roman soldiers who take pleasure in tormenting an already broken human being. In some Roman sources there are examples of flogging before crucifixion that were so brutal that the condemned died – and yet the body was hung up on the cross – as a deterrent! Does that put the Romans in a favorable light?

It is also remarkable that some Roman emperors who sentenced people to death by crucifixion do not mention this in their biographies. Everyone knew that crucifixion was a thoroughly cruel manner of death. However, the Roman elite preferred not to mention or write about it, for it did not fit into the general picture of the Roman empire as a humane society.

Some early Roman sources mention that Christ “was executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius” without mentioning that Jews were involved (Tacitus in *Annals* 15:44). There are Jewish sources that say: “On the Eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu ...” (*b Sanhedrin 43a* – a baraita, i.e. a tannaitic text in an amoraitic context) – without mentioning that Romans were involved. Most scholars agree that such Jewish sources do not give reliable information about the historical Jesus and his death. But one thing can be deduced from this: None of these Jewish sources attempt to deny that Jewish leaders were involved in the death of Jesus. The reason given for his execution is that “he practised sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray.” Is it anti-Semitic to observe that in the Jewish tradition there is an acknowledgement that the leaders in Israel acted correctly against one whom they believed was trying to lead the people of Israel astray?

Paul Winter: Who is without guilt?

At this moment it may be relevant to mention a few comments by Paul Winter – known for his book *On the Trial of Jesus*.¹ In connection with a 1967 German TV program about the trial of Jesus, he was asked to elaborate on the question of guilt in connection with the death of Jesus. He began by saying that whether one looks on Jesus as the son of God, the savior of mankind, or just as a great human being and a wise rabbi, the sympathy is on Jesus' side, not on the side of his enemies. But as a historian one does not do Jesus' adversaries justice in this way. It is true that Pilate was a cruel man, but it was his duty to prevent rebellion. The Jewish rulers may very well have held a grudge against Jesus, but then again it was their duty to maintain peace in the country so that the Romans would not have an excuse to deprive the Jews of their last bit of autonomy. Paul Winter continues:

Looking back from a centuries-removed perspective, it is easy to fault those who were involved in the verdict. But it is better to refrain than to look for the culprits. Roman as well as Jewish officials had a hand in the trial of Jesus. Whose guilt is heavier and whose is lighter cannot be weighed on any scales. But when we read

¹ Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1961.

the gospel accounts, we also have to admit that besides the Romans and Jews there was a third guilty party: Jesus' own followers, among whom one betrayed him, another disowned him and all the rest left him to his fate. Actually I am surprised that you, a Christian, ask me, a Jew: "Who was guilty?" The question you should ask – not me but yourself – is: "Who is without guilt?"²

Paul Winter's question is – theologically speaking – well put. And we could add one more party in the trial of Jesus, the most important one, namely the God of Israel, who wanted the death of Jesus.

Dennis Prager: Gibson's two movies

Among the many reviews of Gibson's film by Jews, I have particularly noticed what American radio host Dennis Prager has said (http://www.beliefnet.com/story/135/story_13565.html). Under the heading "Mel Gibson's Two Movies" he observes that "Jews and Christians are watching two entirely different films. For two hours, Christians watch their Savior tortured and killed. For the same two hours, Jews watch Jews arrange the killing and torture of the Christians' Savior." After an almost 2000-year long history of Jews being attacked as "Christ-killers," one should not declare them paranoid when some fear possible anti-Semitic use of the film.

I agree. As a Christian I am challenged to (continue to) remind myself and the Christian church of the church's anti-Semitism and sin against the Jewish people.

But Prager has more to say. He also addresses Jews and says that

most American Christians watching the film do not see 'the Jews' as the villains in the passion story historically, let alone today ... most American Christians – Catholic and Protestant – believe that a sinning humanity killed Jesus, not 'the Jews' ... To the Christians, God made it happen, not the Jews or the Romans.

Prager also says: "many Jewish groups and media people now attacking 'The Passion' have a history of irresponsibly labeling conservative Christians anti-Semitic." These are very good words from a Jew about a very sensitive but important question, which should provoke soul-searching for Christians and Jews alike.

The next step on the road is to get both Jews and Christians to understand that there is no Christian Savior unless Jesus was and is the Messiah of the Jews.

The passion story is based on human sin. Without exception we are *all* participants. God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us *all* (Rom 8:32).

Kenneth L. Woodward: Christians should be shocked

And now to another reaction to *The Passion*, from Christian quarters, which has also made an impression on me, namely Kenneth L. Woodward in *The New York Times*, February 26, 2004.

Under the headline "Mel Gibson's 'Passion'" Woodward begins like this: "Watching 'The Passion of the Christ', Mel Gibson's new movie, I keep thinking the

² Werner Koch, *Zum Prozess Jesu* (Köln: Verlag DER LÖWE, 1967, pp. 49-50).

following: It is Christians, not Jews, who should be shocked by this film.” Why? “Gibson’s raw images invade Americans’ religious comfort zone, which has long since been cleansed by the Gospels’ harsher edges.” Gibson does not “teach that we all possess an inner divinity, as today’s nouveau Gnostics believe. One cannot imagine this Jesus joining a New Age sunrise Easter service overlooking the Pacific.” No! “Like Jeremiah, Jesus is a Jewish prophet rejected by the leaders of his own people, and abandoned by his handpicked disciples.” Jesus “dies in obedience to a heavenly Father who, by today’s standards, would stand convicted of child abuse. In short, this Jesus carries a cross that not many Christians are ready to share,” says Woodward. And he continues:

“Significantly, the Passion and death of Jesus is the chief element in the Gospel story that other religions cannot accept.” Woodward does not find the film anti-Semitic, but he does think it presents Christian with a “teaching moment”. “But the lessons have more to do with forgotten Christian basics than with who killed Jesus.”

What, then, are these “forgotten Christian basics”? Woodward writes: “More than 60 years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr summarized the creed of an easygoing American Christianity that has in our time triumphantly come to pass: ‘A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross’.”

Challenges to Jewish evangelism

As a Christian I am challenged by these words. I do not just see them as a characterization of an easygoing *American* Christianity today; the same attitude can be found in many other places, certainly in a Danish context. For my own part I am not unaffected, and I will not rule out the possibility that it may be relevant in a Messianic Jewish context, regardless of which wing in the Messianic movement one sees oneself. These observations sharpen our awareness about what is essential in our faith and who God is.

No, I am not going to take these comments as a call to change the message, to stop preaching the loving God and instead preach the God of wrath, or to begin to preach about judgment instead of salvation in Jesus. The God of Israel is *not* the God of wrath. The God of Israel *is* love. This is the very starting point for *biblical* theology. In Jesus God does not *become* love, but in him he shows his love in the strongest possible way. However, the God of Israel – the Father of Jesus – is not *a God without wrath*. The wrath may flare up in God when the people of Israel live by its own rules.

It is true that the Hebrew Bible is the story of God’s love for Israel, but it is also the story of how God reacts to unrequited love. One story after another tells about the people’s rebellion against the God who chose them to be his holy people. Israel’s prophets tell about the people’s adultery, how they lust after the idols and are unfaithful to God. I wonder if it is possible to point to a people that has produced writings which are so critical of the people itself as the Jewish people has? To declare that these writings are anti-Semitic is – seen in a Jewish perspective – an absurdity, and should also be so in a Christian perspective. And if Christians declare that these writings are irrelevant for an understanding of who God (still) is, the creation is about to amputate the Creator and stands in danger of becoming a new Marcion.

However, I agree with Marcion, the second-century heretic, that there are sides of Israel’s God that I do not like. But I do not have the courage and faith in myself that

Marcion had. I cannot, like him, declare that what I do not like about Israel's God must be evil. I am attracted to Israel's God and at the same time repelled by him. Even in the way he has made himself known in Jesus – not least when he handed over his son to an appalling death on a cross. I am not proud of this, but there are sides of God that repel me. But surely it must be better to admit and confess that it is like that – and then ask God's grace to live with it – than to lie. And who knows? Perhaps such a confession could help others who are struggling with the same problem. That is, if there are such others! I wonder if it would be damaging to Jewish evangelism to admit and confess – perhaps even proclaim – that Israel's God draws *and* repels. Not just in the way he is revealed in the Hebrew Bible but also in the way he acted in the passion of the Messiah, Jesus. We would do ourselves and all evangelization a big favour if we would allow God be God on his own terms, instead of adapting him to our own needs. The God that we want to have power over, that we want to have in our hands, is far smaller than the God who wants to have us in his powerful hands.

In his love Israel's God let his wrath and punishment come upon his own son. He was hanged upon a cross in order to break the power of sin and death and bring salvation to all men. To tell this salvation drama today without adding fuel to the fire of anti-Semitism is a challenge to us all, Christians as well as Jesus-believing Jews.

I was appalled when, in *Jerusalem Report* (March 22, 2004) I saw a picture of a sign outside Lovingway United Pentecostal Church in Denver, which invites people to services with these words: “Jews Killed the Lord Jesus’ 1 Thess. 2:14,15.” I assume that we who are gathered here agree that this is a reprehensible way to create interest in the gospel – even if it is a quotation from the New Testament! The reason is that the quotation has been isolated from its context. It is typical of an anti-Semitic use of the New Testament that scriptures are taken out of their contexts, both the overall biblical context and the narrower historical context. The majority of the harsh words against Jews in the gospels reflect an internal debate among Jews about the Jew Jesus and are to be seen in this historical light.

Let me give you a few examples of the terminology from First Maccabees. How do the Jewish Maccabees refer to other Jews who do not fight for the same cause? We find terms like “lawless” (3:5) and “godless” (7:9). There are “renegade Israelites” (6:21), “a number of renegades, enemies of their own people” (11:21) and “All the godless renegades from Israel” (7:5). Harsh words but not words that make the Maccabees un-Jewish or anti-Semitic.

The Qumran community use similar language about their enemies. Here are just a few examples from *Pesher Habakkuk* – we need not here identify the enemies. The main adversary of the Teacher of Righteousness is the “wicked priest”. His heart became “proud” (8:8-9); he “rebelled” (8:16) and “forsook God and was faithless to the laws for the sake of wealth, and gathered in the wealth of men of robbery who had rebelled against the Lord” (8:10-11). The false teacher “despised the Law” (5:11) and “misled many ... for the sake of his glory” (10:9-12). The community consists of the children of light, those outside are the children of darkness. These are under Belial's dominion. Belial is Satan. Harsh words but not words that make the Qumran community un-Jewish or anti-Semitic.

In the Johannine writings there are equally sharp antitheses: light-darkness, truth-lie, life-death. “You belong to your father, the devil,” says Jesus according to John 8:44.

We are appalled by the sign in Denver with the inscription: “‘Jews Killed the Lord Jesus’ 1 Thess. 2:14,15,” but it would be just as shocking to see a sign with the words: “Jews belong to the devil John 8:44.” And for the same reason: it has been taken out of its context. In the same gospel we find the words: “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). And really, I do not think Jews have a monopoly of the sentence: “You belong to the devil”! It applies to all of us, also us who are not Jewish.

When this has been said, the question arises if we who are involved in Jewish evangelism dare go on using such expressions when we consider how they have been misused in the past. Is there a “tone” in the gospels which, although it can be explained in terms of the historical context, does not help the cause of the gospel among Jewish people today, if it is trumpeted abroad? I’ll leave the question open. The same applies to how we understand God’s judgment of Israel – and how it should be presented. While we all dissociate ourselves from an anti-Semitic use of the New Testament and want to fight anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism as such, we have to ask ourselves if there in our writings is a theology and a language which others can only construe as anti-Judaism, because we have not tidied up our terminology. I have a feeling that in the past quite a few writings on mission – authored by both Jesus-believing Jews and Christians – use a terminology that some of us would not use today. I wonder if there are some among us who have worked with this complex of problems?

What I have just said does not change the fact that if you want to engage in Jewish evangelism today, you must be prepared to be labeled anti-Judaistic. This is how some Christians see it. To pray for the salvation of Israel is also viewed as anti-Judaistic. It may be different if you “just” pray for the state of Israel. But we in Jewish evangelism have got on the slippery slope if the prayer for the salvation of Israel is replaced with prayer for the survival of the state of Israel.

Well, I do not think that we have to – or can – “save” Jesus by passing on the buck to the gospel writers, or some of them, and then make them responsible for a “Jew-hostile” attitude while we let Jesus represent a “Jew-friendly” attitude. But then I do not think that Jesus of Nazareth had much in common with the picture of him painted in some parts of Christian theology and preaching, namely that he was a mild and gentle person who did not have much else to say on the banks of the Sea of Galilee than: okay, when all is said and done we are all God’s dear children, so why don’t we sit down and enjoy a good meal?

If this is so, then he does not have much in common with those Jews in his day who fought for Israel. No, like the prophets, like the Maccabees, like the Qumran community he fought for a cause. When we do not question that these other Jews were in opposition to their fellow Jews, why then doubt that Jesus was? All were engaged in a struggle for Israel – in different ways and with different means. They all wanted the best for Israel. Jesus also fought for the cause he had become convinced about. It cost him his life. Together with the first witnesses we confess that God raised him from the dead, that the messianic era has come, that God’s forgiveness is offered to all, Jews as well as non-Jews.

But we do not present a gospel for Jews with a Messiah/Christ without a cross. And we are not content with presenting a Jesus, dripping with blood, without pointing out what led Jesus to the cross and without preaching that the relationship to God has been restored through Jesus’ atoning death.

Theology should be tested on its relationship to the scandal of the cross. In Martin Hengel's words:

“The theological reasoning of our time shows very clearly that the particular form of the death of Jesus, the man and the messiah, represents a scandal which people would like to blunt, remove or domesticate in any way possible. We shall have to guarantee the truth of our theological thinking at this point. Reflection on the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity may help us to overcome the acute loss of reality which is to be found so often in present theology and preaching.”³

And I add: also Messianic Jewish theology must be tested on its relationship to the scandal of the cross.

³ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion - In the ancient world and the folly of the message of the cross* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977, p. 90).