

A CURRENT ISSUE



# They Crucified Him

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

"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 amoraic 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?

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At this moment it may be relevant to mention a few comments by Paul Winter – known for his book *On the Trial of Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> 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 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?"<sup>2</sup>

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.

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](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.

<sup>1</sup> Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1961.

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



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).