

# Who Did Kill Jesus, Anyway?

Here's the question that assails us whenever we see a passion play like Mr. Gibson's. We Christians see images of our Lord flayed and skewered, and our emotions cannot fail to engage: grief, sorrow, guilt, joy, gratitude, shame, and yes, even anger. At times in history, similar anger, in the hearts of people who thought of themselves as "Christians" but showed nothing of the mind of Christ in their deeds, has overflowed into action, and horrendous acts of violence have occurred. Seeking an object for their ill-conceived wrath, "Christian" mobs have viciously attacked their Jewish neighbors. In history, passion plays have often resulted in the spilling of Jewish blood. At other times, without overt violence, nonetheless the simple, sinister term "Christ-killer" has been used by "Christians" to ostracize and intimidate Jewish people.

In contrast, Mr. Gibson and the most of the rest of the Christians in America have been steadfast in saying that we are the ones who killed Christ. Our sins nailed Him to the Cross. He died for us. If there is anyone who deserves the blame, it is everyone. So the question cries for an answer: who was responsible for the death of Christ?

## **Was it the Jews?**

Several people have said that the anti-Semitism that is supposedly ingrained in Mr. Gibson's film comes, not from him, but from the New Testament itself. That document, it is claimed, is chock full of statements that place the blame for the Crucifixion on Jews. Is there any truth to that claim?

A quick read of the book will indeed reveal several points at which "the Jews" are presented as having plotted to have Jesus killed. At least three vital points need to be made here, however.

First, the phrase "the Jews," several times in the New Testament but especially in John's gospel, is a kind of abbreviation for "a small but powerful group of high-positioned Jewish men, including the high priest and some of the chief rabbis, both in Judea and elsewhere." The suspicion that laced the phrase was a response to the crucifixion of Christ and to several persecutions of Christians, all instigated by some in the religious establishment of first-century Judaism. The phrase did not mean "every Jewish person alive right now (in A.D. 30 or so)." It certainly does not mean "every Jew who will ever live." To read that into the Bible is to misread it rather badly. Give it an honest, open-minded look, and you'll see what I mean.

Second, the New Testament does teach that, as a solid majority of first-century Jews rejected Jesus' claims to Lordship, they were actually rejecting their own messiah. This teaching of the New Testament is certain to offend, but faithful Christians will stand by it. With malice for no one, we will continue to maintain that Jesus is actually, objectively, incontrovertibly the Son of God, the messiah of the Jews, and the savior of the nations. If that is offensive, it will just have to be offensive. We mean no harm or insult, but we will say what the Bible says.

Third, as to Matthew's assertion that the crowd called a curse on themselves and their children for the shedding of Christ's blood, Bible-believing Christians accept that the event happened in history. Beyond that, we accept that the curse did in fact come upon them and their children – in history. We agree with our own Scripture and the opinion of first-century rabbis that the sack of Jerusalem and destruction of its temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 was an act of God, coming to judge His people Israel. (Of course, the rabbis did not consider it a punishment for the crucifixion of Jesus.) The accounts of that horrific event are so sodden with blood as to make *The Passion* movie seem almost tame. The point, then, is that whatever judgment was due to Israel as a people, God poured it out fully within one generation of the time of Christ, just as He had foretold.

Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians told we should heap our own anger on top of the wrath that God poured out on His people the Jews. Quite to the contrary, we are sternly admonished to pray for them, preach Jesus to them, and always respect them as our elders in the covenants of God (see Romans 9-11). How sternly are we admonished? God says that if we consider ourselves better than those Jews who reject Christ and therefore are excluded from a real relationship with God, we, too, might be cut off. He threatens anti-Semitic Christians with hell in Romans 11:22. (Yes, He does. Read it!) The charge that the New Testament itself teaches Christians to hate Jews is baseless. Only those who have not read the New Testament, or who come to that text looking for hate there, could make the charge.

Far more importantly, though, is the settled fact – taught clearly in the New Testament – that every Jewish leader who plotted against Jesus was merely a player in a script written by Somebody Else. Caiaphas wasn't a big enough man to kill the Messiah. It took help from below and above.

### ***Was it the Romans?***

Of course it was. The man who gave the order and the men who carried it out were all Romans. Was the entire Roman culture in some sense culpable? Sure. They were a famously bloodthirsty, viciously cruel people, for whom the lives of non-Romans amounted to little. But, for all their vaunted power and sovereignty, they were only pawns on Someone Else's board. We should not flatter them by blaming them for the death of the Son of God. By themselves, they weren't up to the task.

### ***Was it the Christians?***

Now here's a more nearly complete answer – yet still inadequate. Mr. Gibson has said, and I have agreed, that we all are guilty of the blood of Christ, because we all are sinners. The Son of God came into the world to save sinners. He would not have died if I had never sinned. I am guilty. So is Mel – which is why in the movie it's his hand that holds the nail that is driven through Jesus' hand. You're guilty, too. On the cross, Jesus bore the full weight of the all the sins of every person who would ever come to Him for forgiveness and salvation.

But let's not flatter ourselves. In and of ourselves, all of us put together aren't important enough to have forced Jesus onto the cross.

### ***So who's most truly responsible for the death of Christ?***

In the movie, near the end of Jesus' death-march, almost up the hill we know as Calvary, there's a scene in which Jesus passes by Caiaphas under the glare of the merciless sun. As the priest's face is eclipsed by the sun, Gibson does another of his flashbacks. Instead of Caiaphas' face reappearing out of the blinding light, we see Jesus's face, as He teaches on a hillside somewhere. He says, "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of My own accord." In other words, this entire gory spectacle was neither Caiaphas' idea nor Pilate's nor mine: it was the Father's, and the Son's. Christ was a willing conspirator with God Himself to see to His own assassination come to pass for the salvation of the world. Who is blame for the Crucifixion? God is – except that He is blameless. So He doesn't get blame for the Cross: He gets the glory.