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## Are the Gospel Passion Accounts Anti-Jewish?

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## Are the Gospel Passion Accounts Anti-Jewish?

### Abstract

For teachers and students in a university setting, for religious leaders - and for life-long learners generally - the advent of Gibson's film raises questions like the following. How does this film fit into the history of dramatic presentations, productions like the famous Oberammergau Passion Play or the previous cinematic versions? What has been the social impact of such presentations? How closely does this film reflect the Gospel accounts? How much are those Gospel accounts themselves responsible for their anti-Jewish use? And how accurately do the Gospel accounts reflect what we know of the secular history of early first century Palestine? Well, there are many places to begin this discussion, but it does make sense that any discussion of portrayals of the passion of Jesus should begin with a close look at the first four "scripts" - the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. My charge is to address the stark question, Are the gospel accounts of the passion of the Christ anti-Semitic? My short answer to the question is a measured "Yes and no."

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## Introduction

We are doing an odd thing here. We are giving a series of talks in response to the making of a film that most of us here (including me) have not seen, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. The film is not due to be released until February 25, 2004. Yet the movie has already caused a stir. Some scholars have written responses to an allegedly purloined copy of the script. Others have written in response to private screenings of early editions of the film, one of them hosted by Gibson himself for a gathering of California Jesuits last summer (Boyer). Some Evangelicals who have seen it have heralded it as a triumph of contemporary evangelization. The Pope has seen it, and his response has been variously reported, with an early report quoting him as saying, "It is as it was," followed almost immediately by a disclaimer that the Pope does not comment on works of art. Ironically, a magazine called "Inside the Vatican" has proclaimed Mel Gibson "man of the year." I say "ironically" because Mr. Gibson has associated himself with a group of sectarian Catholics who hold that the Vatican has not had a valid pope since Pius XII. Meanwhile, some Jewish groups, along with some Christian scholars, have become very nervous about what promises to be a vivid portrayal of the trials, suffering, crucifixion, and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is important that people, Christians especially, understand the reason for this anxiety. Most Jews, and some educated Christians, know very well that the past two

millennia provide multiple examples of Passion plays and Good Friday sermons provoking anti-Jewish attitudes and actions, some of them lethal. For people with that awareness, the advent of a vivid cinematic portrayal of the suffering and death of Jesus by an internationally popular director is a matter warranting serious attention. So it makes sense that those of us who care about both religion and the art of film take some time to think and learn about some the issues this film is sure to raise when it is fully released to the public.

For teachers and students in a university setting, for religious leaders - and for life-long learners generally - the advent of Gibson's film raises questions like the following. How does this film fit into the history of dramatic presentations, productions like the famous Oberammergau Passion Play or the previous cinematic versions? What has been the social impact of such presentations? How closely does this film reflect the Gospel accounts? How much are those Gospel accounts themselves responsible for their anti-Jewish use? And how accurately do the Gospel accounts reflect what we know of the secular history of early first century Palestine? Well, there are many places to begin this discussion, but it does make sense that any discussion of portrayals of the passion of Jesus should begin with a close look at the first four "scripts" - the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Others in this symposium will deal with reconstructing the world *behind* those texts and with the *post*-biblical history that the gospel accounts have inspired and provoked. My charge is to address the stark question, Are the gospel accounts of the passion of the Christ anti-Semitic? My short answer to the question is a measured "Yes and no." Let me explain.

If the question means, "Has the reading and dramatization of the gospel accounts *occasioned* anti-Jewish attitudes and actions?" - then the answer is, of course, yes. The gospel caricaturing of the Pharisees, understood as portraits of typical Jews, has surely contributed to Christian prejudice against Jews. The Fourth Evangelist's odd way of referring to the adversaries of Jesus as *hoi Ioudaioi* (usually translated as "the Jews") seems to make the Jewish people as a whole the enemies of Jesus (and, consequently of any followers of Jesus, then and now). Matthew describes the Roman prefect Pilate washing his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. Look to it yourselves." And then he writes, "And all the people, said in reply, "His blood be upon us and upon our children" (27:25). Over the centuries this so-called "blood libel" curse has led many Christians to hear this statement as a self-indictment of all Jews and their descendants; it was an easy step, then, to interpret any subsequent suffering of Jews as God's punishment of them for not accepting Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah. It was another easy step for some to see that statement as a warrant for *adding* to the suffering of Jews. To the extent that the gospels have occasioned Christian anti-Jewish attitudes and

actions, then, they are undeniably anti-Semitic in that sense. Others in this symposium will address that historical reality.

But if the *effect* of documents (rightly or wrongly understood) is one thing; the *intent* of the implied authors, understood in their cultural and literary context, may well be something else. If our question means, "Were the gospel accounts written with the *intent* to provoke negative or hostile attitudes and actions against Jews?" - then the answer could be a careful No. Many New Testament scholars hold that the earliest gospel traditions were written by Jewish messianists for groups that were largely Jewish messianists themselves. For example, Daniel Harrington understands the project of the author of Matthew as the work of a Jew writing for other Jews with the idea of showing them that the way to be Jewish after the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. was to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah and the ultimate interpreter of Torah (80-82). A Jew writing for Jews about a different way of being Jewish cannot be accused of being anti-Jewish, any more than a Democrat campaigning in the Iowa caucuses competing for his or her party's nomination as presidential candidate would be thought anti-Democrat when he or she challenges other candidates' qualifications for that role. Assessed from the point of view of the implied authors of the Gospels, then, they need not be termed anti-Jewish (for a concise summary of this issue regarding the New Testament as a whole see Harrington).

What, then, is the appropriate antidote for the kind of anti-Semitism that the reading of those texts has frequently occasioned? There are two main options: (a) to censor the gospel texts or (b) to teach people to hear and read the Gospels in their full social, cultural, and literary context. While some revision of the Passion accounts read during the Christian Holy Week liturgies may be warranted as pastoral practice, I would argue that censorship of the biblical text (what Raymond Brown called "falsifying the text") cannot be the final antidote to anti-Semitic misunderstandings. Only the teaching of the proper contextual understanding of those texts will correct the misunderstanding that leads to anti-Jewish attitudes and actions. For those of us who teach, preach, dramatize (or *critique* teaching, preaching, or dramatizations of) the Christian story of the last days of Jesus, such "damage control" is crucial. It is crucial not only for healing and fostering the relationships between Christians and Jews; it is crucial for Christians to read our own Scriptures in context. To that end, I will use the remainder of my time touching on three "hot button" issues in the gospel portrayal of the final days of Jesus of Nazareth. First, what is the best Christian understanding of the "blood libel" curse of Matthew 27:25? Second, what are we to make of the Fourth Gospel's way of referring to the enemies of Jesus and his followers as "the Jews"? And third, how do the gospel writers portray the people, the general population, in their accounts of the Passion?

### **Matthew 27:25 - The "Blood Libel" Curse**

“And all the people said in reply, 'His blood be upon us and upon our children.'”

There are obvious reasons why this statement, especially when it has been shouted by a rowdy crowd in a theatrical or cinematic production, can evoke anti-Jewish sentiments. Reports of early screenings of the Gibson movie noted that this incendiary line was blessedly absent from the film; a report of a recent screening for church leaders notes, however, that the “blood libel curse,” spoken not by a crowd but by Caiaphas alone, is back in the current edition of the film. A still more recent report notes that the line has been edited out. Whether the line will still be there in the version to be released on Ash Wednesday remains to be seen. *In* the movie or *out*, this particular verse is a permanent part of the Gospel of Matthew, and warrants fresh scrutiny.

The immediate context makes it clear that the issue is indeed the matter of taking responsibility for the execution of Jesus, for Pilate has just made a public show of taking water and washing his hands; and he has just said, “I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourself.” It is, of course, Pilate himself who “sees to it” that Jesus is whipped and who hands Jesus over to members of the Roman militia, who first mock Jesus as king and then proceed to crucify him. But the cry of the people taking collective blame hangs in the air, and persists in memories and imaginations of readers and audiences. Matthew's “inclusive language” is part of the problem, for he ascribes this statement to “all the people.” It is not hard to understand why it has been an easy step for those who are already hostile to Jews to hear in this verse as an excuse for their hostility. They hear this statement



as uttered by all Jews living *then*, and applied to their descendants ever after, especially those currently available for contemporary hating. And yet, while such a reading may be an easy step for an irrational hater, it embodies some strange consequences of logic. If the statement is understood as *all Jews at that time* taking on the blame for Jesus' crucifixion, it would have to be taken as an indictment that includes Jesus' mother Mary, Jesus himself, all his relatives, and all of the men and women who followed him - i.e. the whole early Jerusalem church; for they were all Jewish! Of course anyone who has heard or read the blood-libel line as an indictment of all Jews is not exercising careful contextual logic. Such a reader or auditor has committed the anachronism of extracting Jesus of Nazareth and his followers from their own people. Such readers have simply taken gospel references to Jews as references to opponents of Jesus. As we will see in a moment, it is the author of the Fourth Gospel, John, who must bear a heavy portion of the responsibility for that anachronism. Whatever the illogic and anachronism of such a reading of Matthew 27:25, there is no denying that this particular gospel verse has been a powerful vehicle for the "teaching of contempt" down through the centuries. Thoughtful Christians should have no trouble understanding Jewish concern about its inclusion in what promises to be the most watched dramatization ever of the Passion of Jesus.

The first step one can take to limit the potential anti-Jewish response to the "blood libel" statement is to show that the immediate referents of the statement are the small group

of Jerusalemites gathered that day outside of the venue of Pilate's inquest, and their immediate children. But surely something more needs to be said.

The Roman Catholic Church is so aware of the volatile potential of Matthew 27:25 that the two thousand bishops gathered at Vatican Council II (1962-65) addressed this verse in the most direct way possible in one of the major documents to emerge from the council. In section 4 in "The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," often cited by its first two Latin words, *Nostra aetate* ("In our age") they wrote,

Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (see Jn 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture.

For Roman Catholics at least, that is our church's authoritative commentary on Matthew 27:25. The same document goes on to spell out some of the implications of this interpretation:

Consequently, all must take care, lest in catechizing or in preaching the word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ.

Indeed, the church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed. Remembering, then, its common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political considerations but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, it deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews.

The church always held and continues to hold that Christ out of infinite love freely underwent suffering and death because of the sins of all, so that all might attain salvation. It is the duty of the church, therefore, in its preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's universal love and the source of all grace.

For those exercising a "hermeneutic of suspicion," this language may sound like a wishful glossing of a vitriolic text. However, a good case can be made that the author of Matthew 27:25 himself wanted it to carry that positive meaning by way of a literary convention commonly used in ancient writing, and increasingly recognized in the gospels - dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is a statement spoken in a drama or narrative carrying a double meaning: (a) the obvious meaning as apparently intended by a person speaking in the narrative and (b) a second meaning that the author wants the readers or audience to hear in ironic tension with the speaker's apparent meaning. One of the most obvious examples of this turns up in the Fourth Gospel, John 11:49-52. This passage describes a meeting of

the Sanhedrin gathered to deal with the excitement and growing popularity of Jesus provoked by the raising of Lazarus.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, "What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation. But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing, nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish." He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God.

There is plenty to consider here - the political motivation of the officials, the implication that one can be an instrument of God without knowing or intending it, the interpretation of Jesus' death as atonement for his people and everyone else - all of which have much to contribute to our understanding of the gospel accounts of the Passion of Christ. But my point here is to provide an example of dramatic irony in a passion account. The evangelist John spells it out for the reader: within the narrative flow, Caiaphas is talking on the level of practical strategy for keeping peace with the Romans; yet John alerts the reader to the Christian meaning that Caiaphas conveys unwittingly, the universal atoning purpose of Jesus' death.

In the full context of the Gospel of Matthew, the incendiary 27:25 can similarly be heard as a powerful piece of dramatic irony. In fact, the whole chapter is full of ironic talk about the blood of Jesus. First there is the irony of the chief priests and elders scrupling about keeping the 30 pieces of silver returned by Judas: "It is not lawful to deposit this in the temple treasury, for it is the price of blood" (27:6). The reader of Matthew is aware that they have already violated the Torah in their gathering of false witnesses and in their plot to have Jesus killed. Next comes the irony that they use the blood money to purchase land for a cemetery to bury "strangers" - thereby fulfilling Jesus mandate to extend hospitality to the stranger (25:35-40). Then comes the irony of Pilate's washing his hands and protesting to be "innocent of this man's blood," when, as the one authority in this situation that can mandate the death penalty, he bears full legal responsibility for the execution of Jesus that follows immediately. The cry of "all the people" - "His blood be upon us and upon our children" - then comes as the fullest irony of all. On the obvious level of the immediate narrative, the crowd at Pilate's praetorium takes on the responsibility for Jesus' death that Pilate refuses, even though he turns out to be in fact the authority ultimately responsible.

However, on the level of the author's communication with his audience, there is an even fuller *dramatic irony*. In the previous chapter, Matthew had narrated the Last Supper. In that episode, Jesus, passing the cup of blessing to his disciples during the Passover supper, said, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be

shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). This has always been understood as an interpretation of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice. "The many" reflects an Aramaic expression for "everyone" including, of course, the covenant people, Jews. Immediately following in the next chapter, and in passages unique to this gospel, are those episodes we just reviewed - the three episodes dealing directly with the responsibility for the blood of Jesus - Judas' effort to return the 30 pieces of silver, the chief priests' refusal to use the money for temple business, the purchase of the "field of blood," and Pilate's hand-washing charade and claim to be "innocent of this man's blood." Then comes what may be the fullest irony of all, the cry of the people, "His blood be upon *us* . . ." Could such a careful author as Matthew have expected his readers to have heard that statement in isolation from Jesus' words over the cup at the supper? I think not. While, the crowd in the narrative shows a reckless readiness to take on the responsibility for Jesus' death (a responsibility legally unavailable to them), the attentive reader/audience can hear the dramatic irony: apparently, intending a claim of responsibility, the people unwittingly invoke a blessing upon themselves. For in Matthew's meaning, the blood of Jesus has an atoning purpose. This dramatic irony, of course, is no consolation to readers who would not subscribe to Matthew's messianic interpretation of Jesus' death as redemptive. But it is there for Christians, to remind them that the death of Jesus is divinely meant for the universal forgiveness of sins. Awareness of Matthew's irony would undermine any anti-Semitic application of 27:25 (this interpretation is developed in detail by Heil).

### **"The Jews" as the Enemies of Jesus in the Gospel of John**

Next to Matthew 27:25, the Gospel of John's peculiar use of *hoi Ioudaioi*, usually translated "the Jews" in English, is perhaps the major New Testament contribution to Christian anti-Judaism. For in the Fourth Gospel those plotting to kill Jesus are frequently called simply *hoi Ioudaioi*. And so, even though the Roman prefect and his soldiers finally do the deed, one can get the impression from the Passion according to John that, from the Jewish side, the Jewish people as a whole share the blame. So John's use of "the Jews" warrants further scrutiny.

First, it should be noted that John gives the reader plenty of clues that Jesus, his relatives, and his followers are every bit as Jewish as these people are in the other three Gospels. Jesus goes to synagogue. He makes pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple on major feasts - Passover, Hanukkah, Succoth. The Samaritan woman identifies him as a Jew (John 4:9). And in that same dialogue Jesus insists that salvation comes from the Jews (v. 22).

In other passages *hoi Ioudaioi* refers to Jews in an equally benign or at least neutral sense, as in references to Jewish institutions like "the Passover of the Jews" (2:13; 6:4; 11:55) or the stone jars used for "Jewish ritual washing" (2:6), or burial customs of the Jews (19:40). When Lazarus dies, "many Jews" come to console his sisters Martha and Mary, and after he is raised from the dead, some come to believe in Jesus as Messiah

(11:45). Some references to the Jews concern groups in which some do and some do not believe in Jesus (8:31; 10:19).

But then there are those places where *hoi Ioudaioi* seems to name Jews as a group fully at odds with Jesus, and Jesus fully at odds with them! That impression is especially strong in chapter 8, where Jesus is presented as taking on Jews generically, referring to "your law" as if he did not keep Torah (when other New Testament passages clearly show that he did indeed keep Torah). But here in John 8 he tells "the Jews" that they "belong to what is from below" whereas he belongs to "what is from above" (v. 23). The Johannine Jesus goes on to tell them, "You belong to your father the devil" (v. 44). It is no wonder, then, that when readers see (or when audiences hear) "the Jews" named as the ones accusing Jesus to Pilate in John's Passion account, they imagine that a big group standing in for all Jews is referenced. A better contextual reading is that *hoi Ioudaioi* in this context is a synonym for the temple authorities opposed to Jesus.

The word *Ioudaios* occurs 71 times in this gospel, more than the other three gospels together, and it is used in a variety of ways. The examples already cited show that the author sometimes uses the plural *hoi Ioudaioi* neutrally and generically to denote the people who share the covenant life mediated by Moses and Torah and are organized around the worship of God in the temple in Jerusalem. When, however, *hoi Ioudaioi* names those



opposed to Jesus, the phrase clearly refers to a subgroup, given that Jesus himself, along with his relatives and followers, are *Ioudaioi* in the covenantal sense.

That *hoi Ioudaioi* sometimes refers to a subgroup becomes obvious in certain passages. The first and the last instances of the word in John provide excellent examples. The first instance is John 1:19, which states that *hoi Ioudaioi* sent from Jerusalem priests and Levites to enquire about John the baptizer's identity. Obviously, since "the priests and Levites are surely Jews in the normal sense of the word (as is John the baptizer), "the Jews" in this case must be a subgroup, and one with the authority to dispatch this embassy of "priests and Levites." In other words, they would seem to be temple officials, the men elsewhere named as "high priests and elders." The final instance of *hoi Ioudaioi* (John 20:19) is even more instructive: "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, *for fear of the Jews*, Jesus came and stood in their midst . . ." Here again, given that those cowering behind locked doors are themselves *Ioudaioi* in the religious and ethnic sense of the term, the label names a subgroup hostile to Jesus and at least perceived as threatening to his followers. To translate *Ioudaioi* as "Judeans" does not quite fit either, since nothing in John has implied that the people in that whole geographical area have ganged up on Jesus and his followers. Again, our best candidates are temple authorities.

Why, then, we must ask, would a writer such as John the Evangelist - who shows himself to be in many ways a consummate wordsmith - use *hoi Ioudaioi* in such a confusing way, sometimes referring to the covenant people of Israel and at other times referring to authorities hostile to Jesus? The only hypothesis that explains this data in a satisfactory way is this. The author of the Fourth Gospel, writing late in the first century (commentators agree that the 90s seem about right), is using *hoi Ioudaioi* in critical points of his narrative in a way that reflects the situation of his community at the time of his writing (the 90s) rather than the time of Jesus' public life (around the year 30). The author's messianic community is no longer welcome in synagogues (see 9:22; 12:42; and 16:2), is more clearly identified as part of a breakaway sect (increasingly comprised of Gentile membership), and they are using *hoi Ioudaioi* in a polemical, or "other-ing" sense, referring to their adversaries, the majority Jewish population who do not accept the crucified craftsman from Nazareth as the Messiah (or "the Christ" in Greek). As a strategy to shore up the identity of his messianic community, he calls the adversaries of Jesus (around 30 C.E.) by the same name, *hoi Ioudaioi*. Though he knew full well that Jesus and his followers were Jews and that the Christian community was all Jewish in the beginning, and continued in the writer's time to include many "Jews for Jesus" (if you will), as a member of a minority that increasingly experienced themselves as "outsiders," he could use *hoi Ioudaioi* as a label for those contemporary "others" (Moloney: 9-11).

I asked a fellow Jesuit if he could come up with an example from U.S. culture of an analogous use of potentially confusing polemical insider/outsider language to strengthen group identity, and he came up with a good one. A second generation Italian-American, Father Alexander recalled his Sicilian grandfather occasionally chiding his children and grandchildren, "Don't be like that! You're acting like the *Americani*!" Though Grandpa Alessandro was a U.S. citizen, an American in the normal use the word, he had a sense of being a member of a minority group that experienced itself, in important cultural ways, in tension with the majority American culture. So he sometimes used *Americani* to underscore that "otherness." Though such usage violated a certain kind of logic, it did support a kind of social logic.

Scholars see John doing a similar thing. The author was apparently not concerned about consistency with his other uses of the phrase. *Nor*, unfortunately, was he aware of how this phrase might be heard and read in other places in the future. Historically, that is profoundly regrettable; culturally, it is at least understandable. I have no doubt that the Fourth Evangelist would write it differently today.

### **"The People" in the Passion Accounts**

It is one thing to describe some temple officials as complicit in the process that resulted in a Roman execution. Given the threat that Jesus' popularity posed to their authority over the people, such complicity is historically plausible. In itself such a portrayal

is no more anti-Jewish than Al Pacino's portrayal of a very nasty Roy Cohn in the made-for-TV production of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America." The Jewish authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls also portrayed temple officials as corrupt and devious. Every group admits it has some "bad guys"; most Italian-American viewers of "The Sopranos" can acknowledge this. However, as our look at the effect of Matthew 27:25 and John's polemical use of *hoi Ioudaioi* has shown, the characterization of Jews as a group is something else; the gospel portrayal of "the people" can provoke, and indeed has provoked, attitudes and actions that we today term anti-Semitic. So it is instructive to look closely at "the people" in the gospel accounts.

### **The "Crowds" in Mark and Matthew**

In the aftermath of Jesus' invasive action in the temple precincts, Mark mentions three times that the chiefs priests and scribes were seeking to arrest Jesus but did not, because they feared the *crowd* who were "astonished at [Jesus'] teaching" (11:18; and see 12:12) or might possible riot (14:1). So the leadership and the people in general had very different attitudes toward Jesus. It is another sort of "crowd" altogether that Mark says came "from the chief priests, scribes, and elders" with swords and clubs. The group gathered around Pilate's venue during the time of his brief inquest, they seem to be a different group than the arresting posse, for their main interest seems to be to claim the customary Passover-time release of a prisoner held in Roman custody. The chief priests

prompt them to ask for the murderous rebel Barabbas. Asked what do they want to do with the "King of the Judeans," they twice cry, "Crucify him!" After this we hear of "passers-by" wagging their heads and joining the taunts, and then "bystanders" who pun on Jesus cry of dereliction, twisting Jesus' Aramaic call "Eli" ("My God!") to mean a reference to Elijah. This is not a pretty picture of passers-by and bystanders; but neither does Mark provide grounds for indicting a whole people for ganging up on Jesus. Meanwhile, of course, there are those brave Jewish women who look on from afar and stay around to see where Joseph of Arimathea puts the body.

With respect to the portrayal of the crowd, the account of Matthew is pretty much like that of Mark, except of course for the famous "blood-libel" statement that we have already examined. It is noteworthy that Matthew emphasizes Pilate's power and authority (and therefore responsibility) in the events leading to the crucifixion. Six times in chapter 27, Matthew calls Pilate *ho hegemon* ("the governor"), something Mark never calls him. It is a strong way to emphasize that the Roman prefect is really in charge here. The governor rather than the governed is finally the responsible one.

### **The "People" in Luke**

A close tracking of "the people" in the Third Gospel, Luke, brings some surprises. Luke focuses the responsibility for Jesus death on some temple officials and distances them even further from the people than they are in Mark. Luke stresses that chasm between the

leaders already in his description of the aftermath of the clearing of the temple: "And he has teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes *and the leaders of the people* sought to destroy him; but they did not find anything they could do, *for all the people* [*pas ho laos*] hung upon his words" (19:47-48). Here Luke uses a special biblically resonant term for the people, *laos*, which is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible for the covenant people of God. In the arrest scene in the garden, Luke (like Mark and Matthew) mentions a "crowd" coming with Judas. But unlike the other Synoptic accounts this crowd is not *from* the Sanhedrin; they are *members* of the Sanhedrin. For after the scuffle issues in the loss and healing of a slave's ear, Luke says that Jesus spoke "to the chief priests and captains of the temple and elders, who had come out against him" (22:52).

Luke's second surprise is that, having distanced the people from their leaders, and focused the blame entirely on the leaders, he proceeds to soften Mark's portrait of those leaders in his abbreviated version of the Sanhedrin's hearing (22:66-71). Simply absent are the false witnesses, the charge about threatening to destroy and rebuild the temple, the judgment about committing blasphemy, and the physical and verbal mocking of Jesus as prophet. In Luke's version, that mockery was delivered by the guards holding Jesus in custody during the night (22:63-65).

In Luke's version, the Sanhedrin's concern is not to find Jesus in violation of Jewish law but to find something that will catch the Roman prefect's attention. Jesus' apparent

acquiescence to the titles of "Messiah" and "Son of God" is enough for them, and without any mention of a formal judgment, they take him to Pilate with a more secular set of false charges: "We found this man misleading our nation [*ethnos*]; he opposed payment of taxes to Caesar and maintains that he the Messiah, a king." Luke omits the mocking of Jesus as king (delegated to Herod's attendants in 23:11?). Special to Luke's account is Pilate's thrice repeated verdict of "not guilty" and the author's preference after 23:4 for referring to the people not as "the crowd" but as *ho laos*. He uses this special word six times. The distance that Luke had established between the people and the temple leadership continues in his story of the final events. The leaders do not stir up the people; and whether the people join the leaders in the cry "Crucify him!" is not clear (23:21, 23). At the cross Luke omits the head-wagging and taunting passers-by of Mark's account; he says simply, "The people [*ho laos*] stood by, watching" (23:35). Finally, after the death and the centurion's declaration of innocence (and righteousness), Luke writes, "When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts" (v. 47). Luke not only spares the people from blame; he reports that Jesus' own final word regarding the Jewish and Roman agents of his death is his prayer, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do."

Clearly, had Luke's version rather than Matthew's been the more popular Passion account, textual opportunities for Christian misunderstanding and anti-Semitism would have been lessened considerably.

### **The Absent Crowd in John**

The biggest surprise I encountered in this comparative look at the crowds in the gospel accounts of the Passion was the discovery that there *are no* crowds (at least *named* as such) in the Passion according to John. We *think* we see a crowd when we read John's Passion, but I submit that we see crowds because we encounter the phrase "the Jews" and recall the crowds in Mark and Matthew and maybe Luke's group of contemplative bystanders. But that is a failure to read John on John's terms. John writes of an ambiguous "they" who bring Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's praetorium (18:28) and accuse Jesus of being a criminal. At verse 31 they are called "the Jews" when they say, "We do not have the right to execute anyone." When Pilate moves from the praetorium on the inside to the group on the outside, the group is called, variously, "the Jews" (v. 38), "them" (19:5), and "the chief priests and guards" (19:6). Finally we are reminded of what we had learned from the beginning of this document: this author, especially in adversarial situations, sometimes uses "the Jews" as a kind of code name for the temple officials (and their attendants). When Pilate tries to release Jesus, "the Jews" cry out, "If you release him, you are not a Friend of Caesar" (19:15). When John says that "the Jews" cried out "Take



him away, take him away! Crucify him!" there is no reason not to think that he is still referring the high priests and the guards.

### **Concluding Remarks**

And so, a careful reading of the four gospels shows that it is not the people as a whole but certain religious leaders joined by a few others who are complicit in the Romans' execution of Jesus. There is no historical reason to doubt that this picture reflects reality. Pilate and certain Jewish leaders were flawed men, each party acting according to their own notion of "homeland security." At bottom, the gospels are not about assessing blame. They are about interpreting the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as a divine act of reconciliation and forgiveness. Any dramatizer of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus must make artistic choices. The director can choose to create the script from a single Gospel, as Pier Paolo Pasolini did in *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, or as in the case of the recent film, *The Gospel of John*, which I understand sticks with the text of the Fourth Gospel. Otherwise he or she must pick and choose details from among the four. Then the possibilities explode. In the presentation of the Sanhedrin's meeting, for example, does one go with Mark and Matthew and place it during Thursday night, or at daybreak (with Luke), or (with John) sometime in the previous week (and without the presence of Jesus)? Do you have Simon of Cyrene carry the crossbeam (as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke), or does Jesus carry it by himself, as in John? And those two bandits who

were crucified with Jesus - do you have both of them join in the taunting (as in Mark and Matthew)? Do you keep them silent (with John)? Or do you have one of them taunt Jesus and the other defend his innocence and ask to be with him when he comes into his kingdom (as in Luke)? As regards what Jesus says from the cross, do you go with Mark and Matthew and quote only the cry of dereliction ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" - the opening verse of Psalm 22)? Or do you include one or more of the three quite different words from the cross conveyed by Luke? Or do you draw from one or more of the three *other* sayings from the cross as told my John? Or do you include all seven statements in your script? Our study of the four gospels has convinced most scholars that these differences are not the random discrepancies one expects from the plurality of witness; rather, they are mainly deliberate choices made by each Evangelist to underscore themes that are consistent with the rest of their respective gospels. Any narrative artist who undertakes a fresh retelling needs to make choices that reflect another coherent vision.

The four gospels are not, finally, about Jewish-Christian relations. They are about Jesus the Jew understood by Christians as God's ultimate revelation of God's self. That gives Christians and Jews plenty to talk about. But the primary conversation piece is not the product of popular culture - stimulating as these may be - but the texts of the Gospels themselves, each heard on its own terms, in its own voice.

Sometimes popular culture does religious educators a service. Dan Brown's fantastic riffs on church history and tradition in his page-turner *The Da Vinci Code* have provided the occasion for a creative teacher at Creighton Prep to send adolescent boys romping around the library and the Internet, zestfully separating fiction from fact. If Mel Gibson's cinematic rendering of *The Passion of the Christ* prompts thousands to open their family Bibles to the last pages of the Gospels, he will have done us all a great turn.

Finally, preparing for this talk has convinced me how important it is for those of us who are Christian to learn better what history can tell us about why Passion plays (on stage or screen) make Jews anxious. And we Christians have much to learn about the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish roots of our Christian faith. That learning will help inoculate our people against the toxic possibilities of our narrative, and better enable us to live the mandate of Jesus (and of the Torah) to love our neighbor.

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