

## **SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH ALONE—AND THE JEWS?**

You might object, especially from a Lutheran perspective. Does not the Good News of the Gospel also have a downside (Jn 3:16-18)? Is not salvation bound to faith in Christ alone? Do not those (e.g., the Jews) who deliberately reject this faith incur God's condemnation? By and large this was Martin Luther's position. On this basis, along with other motives Luther, toward the end of his life, proposed anti-Jewish measures, some of which prefigured the horrendous acts of terror perpetrated by the German Nazis 400 years later.

Over the last couple of decades, many Christian churches, including the Lutheran church, have learned to read the Bible from a fresh perspective. This has included incorporating new exegetical and historical findings, some of which are outlined above, as well as drawing on insights gleaned from the various Christian-Jewish dialogues. One of the key texts is Romans 9-11, where the apostle Paul deals explicitly and thoroughly with Israel, the church's relation to it and the question of salvation from an eschatological perspective. In light of this rereading of biblical texts, sometimes together with Jewish scholars, the LWF at its Seventh Assembly in Budapest in 1984, revised traditional teachings about the Jews and declared the following:

- The Jews cannot be held accountable for Jesus' execution; they must not be called "God-killers."
- Anti-Judaism is a sin before God which the church and its members need to confess to and repent of.
- As Lutherans we need to distance ourselves from those writings of Luther in which he denigrated Jews and undercut their right to existence.

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*What position, if any, has your church taken on these matters? What should it be saying and doing? What is your own position?*

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## **THE CHALLENGE OF CELEBRATING THE PASSION OF JESUS THE JEW**

We are challenged to celebrate the passion of Christ during Holy Week in ways that acknowledge the Jews as sisters and brothers in the God of Israel, a God disclosed to us Gentiles through Jesus Christ—for the healing rather than the furthering of divisions in the world.

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*How will Holy Week be observed in your church and wider community?*

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**The Lutheran World Federation      REV. DR REINHARD BÖTTCHER, MARCH 2004.**

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## **THE PASSION OF JESUS THE JEW**

During Lent, Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" has been showing in many theaters around the world. I do not intend here to add to the myriad of comments which have already been made about the film itself. Rather, I want to explore a central question the film raises namely, How do we perceive and interpret the role the Jews played in the drama of Holy Week, especially on Good Friday?

Churchgoers are not usually seen as the ones who disowned Jesus and let him down in his final hours, but, instead, the Jews are widely looked upon as those who opposed Jesus to the point of killing him.

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*With what image of the Jews have you been brought up? What is your perception of the Jews with regard to Jesus' crucifixion? How are the Jews portrayed and treated in your community?*

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As a German pastor, I myself am not exempt from certain stereotypes. Today, I am ashamed of some of the sermons I preached 25 years ago, in terms of how I portrayed the Jewish people. It has taken me a long time and considerable effort to rid myself of these distortions.

## **CHRISTIAN ANTI-JUDAISM: A LONG AND POWERFUL TRADITION**

As members of the Christian church, regardless of denomination, we are part of a longstanding and powerful tradition of anti-Judaism. Anti-Judaism asserts Christian identity over against and at the expense of Jews and Judaism on the basis of negative stereotypes. Auschwitz symbolizes the culmination of anti-Judaism: the mass extinction of Jews (and other minorities) in Germany between 1933 and 1945.

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*How is it possible that the Christian faith, so emphatically based on love, could be used to humiliate and destroy another faith community in Jesus' name? How would you respond to this question?*

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## **ANTI-JUDAISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Tragically, this anti-Judaic tradition reaches back to the New Testament itself. Recall Jesus' fierce debates with the Pharisees (Mk 2:23-3:6), his harsh critique of them (Mt 23), or even his denunciation of "the Jews" as children of the devil (Jn 8:44).

The problem becomes even more acute in the account of Jesus' passion and death. Who killed Jesus? Conventional wisdom holds that Pilate, the Roman governor, was involved. But, did he not merely give in to Jewish pressure to condemn and crucify Jesus? Didn't even the crowd yell, "Let his blood be on us and on our children" (Mt 27:25)? If this account is true, what then is wrong with blaming Jesus' death on the Jews and of accusing them of killing the Son of God?

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*How have you understood the passion story in this respect? How has it been interpreted in your church?*

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We must ponder what a faith identity is worth which is asserted and maintained at the expense of others and feels the need to defame those of a different confession.

## THE GOSPELS AND THE JEWS

Biblical scholars agree that the four Gospels, and in them the passion accounts, were written decades after the events to which they refer (roughly between 70 and 100 CE). Two basic insights need to be considered. First, their main purpose was not to attempt an historical reconstruction in the modern sense, but rather to interpret the Jesus story, to confess Jesus as the Christ and to call listeners and readers alike to belief. Second, the way in which events are portrayed is strongly shaped by the historical conditions prevailing at the time of writing, conditions which differed significantly from those at the time of Jesus' life and passion. Between that time and the finalization of the Gospels, the Jewish community and the early church underwent a long, complicated and painful process.

During Jesus' time, the Jewish community embraced many different practices and beliefs, each claiming to be Jewish, somewhat similar to the different Protestant denominations today. One of these strands was the community of those who as Jews professed Jesus, the crucified and resurrected fellow Jew, to be the Messiah of Israel. The very first church grew out of "Israel," understood itself as an integral part of it and did not intend to establish a separate faith community. In the course of controversies over the meaning of law and obedience to it, circumcision, the temple and similar questions, tensions increased between the Christ confessing Jews (and Gentiles) and those Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah. The two camps began to diverge until they finally parted ways.

It was within these tortuous processes that Jesus' discussions with the Pharisees for instance were *ex post facto* inflated to irreconcilable contradictions. Compare the peaceful discussion in Mk 12:28-34 with the much harsher argument, written years later, in Mt 22:34-40. This development reached its climax with John, arguably the latest of the four Gospels, where Jesus is depicted as the light of God standing over against the forces of darkness (ultimately "the Jews," see especially chapter 8).

## JESUS' PASSION AND THE JEWS

There is a dual tendency at work in the four Gospels. On the one hand the Roman governor Pilate's guilt is progressively lessened. Increasingly he is portrayed as being weak, wavering and giving in to Jewish pressure. On the other hand, the guilt of the Jews (more

accurately, of their leading authorities) is brought to the fore. In other words, the responsibility and blame for Jesus' execution is gradually shifted from Pilate to the Jews. Biblical scholars attribute this development to the aforementioned growing tensions between the nascent Christian church and the Jews who refused to accept Jesus as Israel's Messiah. This judgment is buttressed by extra-biblical historical documents suggesting that Pilate was a brutal and ruthless ruler. Moreover, after the failed Jewish revolt against the Roman occupation in 70 CE, the Christian community was eager to present itself as posing no threat to Roman rule. Jesus, their founder, had ended up on a cross, the form of capital punishment meted out to political rebels caught in insurrections against the Roman occupation. Therefore, as the early church sought Rome's favor, the Jews rather than Pilate were increasingly held responsible for Jesus' death in the later passion accounts.

Rather than historically accurate reports on the events to which they refer, the four Gospels and their respective passion accounts are intended as testimonies and confessions of belief in Jesus as the Christ/Messiah. The portrayal of this dramatic story is shaped by a wrestling between those Jews (and increasingly Gentiles) who adopted and accepted this belief and those who did not.

The Gospels remained acutely aware of Jesus' unconditional Jewishness. But as Gentile Christians increasingly constituted the majority of the church, Jewish Christians tended to be relegated to the margins. Jesus, and with him the very roots of the church, ended up being alienated from their Jewish soil. When by the end of the fourth century the Christian church was no longer a threatened minority but a powerful state church, the Jews were perceived as opponents of the one true Christian faith. This perception has had disastrous consequences in subsequent centuries.

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*How does your understanding of the passion narratives relate to the above? Discuss this with one another.*

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## PROBLEMS OF UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION

When we communicate with each other it is important to examine who says what to whom, what our motives are and under which conditions we communicate.

It makes a decisive difference whether Jews of different faith orientations argue with one another on the same footing (during military occupation and political oppression as was the case in the first century), or if Christians pass judgments and impose their views on a vulnerable Jewish minority from a powerful majority position. Thus, "faithfully" repeated, biblically based arguments valid under first century conditions in Jerusalem can become, under much different conditions (e.g., Berlin in the 1930s under Nazism), a gross distortion of the gospel truth. *In view of the changed conditions, we will sometimes need today to say something different from the biblical wording in order to bear witness to the same "old" Gospel.* In light of history we need to be extremely alert when confronted with passages such as Jn 8:44. *In light of the Jews' passion, the passion of Jesus the Jew needs to be listened to, understood, interpreted, preached and taught with utmost care.* There is something fundamentally wrong with the proclamation of a Good News which is bad news for a distinct faith community!