

CONTENTS

The Need For Understanding	2
The Historical Perspective	4
<i>The Church Fathers</i>	6
<i>The Medieval Period</i>	8
<i>The Reformation Period</i>	10
<i>The Nazi Period</i>	12
The Biblical Perspective	15
<i>A Trilogy Of Guilt</i>	15
<i>A Conspiracy Of Guilt</i>	17
<i>A Misunderstanding Of Perpetual Jewish Guilt</i>	22
<i>A Misunderstanding Of National Jewish Guilt</i>	24
<i>A Misunderstanding Of Jesus' Forgiveness</i>	26
The Theological Perspective	27
The Practical Perspective	30
Mystery Solved	32

THEY CALLED ME CHRIST KILLER

by Michael Rydelnik

A Personal Perspective On Who Killed Jesus

When I heard Michael Rydelnik's story and heard him describe Christ's suffering with such deep empathy for those who have been called Christ killers, I knew that his voice needed to be heard.

This booklet, however, contains more than I expected. In providing an answer to the question of who killed Jesus, Dr. Rydelnik surfaced recurring themes of church history that many of us would rather forget.

I hope the following pages will help us better understand why many Jewish people become concerned whenever the death of Christ is portrayed in the modern media.

Martin R. De Haan II

Managing Editor: David Sper

Scripture taken from the New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

© 2005 RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in USA

THE NEED FOR UNDERSTANDING

Abraham Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, said, “For almost 2,000 years in Western civilization, four words legitimized, rationalized, and fueled anti-Semitism: ‘The Jews killed Christ.’”

My first introduction to Jesus was as a 7-year-old boy. I was walking to Hebrew school in my neighborhood and had to pass the part of the street that was mostly Gentile. It had snowed and the non-Jewish children had built a snow fort. As I walked past, they began to throw snowballs at me—some with rocks in the center! As I was pelted with snowballs, these kids yelled, “Christ killer! You dirty Jew!” I went home and asked my mom, “Who is it that we killed? And why do they think I killed him?”

Decades later, those memories were very real to me as I considered the controversy surrounding the Mel Gibson film *The Passion Of The Christ*. As a Jewish follower of Jesus, it seemed clear to me that the disputes about the film demonstrated a great deal of misunderstanding on both sides of the debate.

Some in the Jewish community, fearing yet another wave of anti-Semitism, have spoken not only against the film but against the New Testament, which Gibson said was his primary source. They suggested not only that the film repeats the anti-Semitic Christ-killer charge, but that the Gospels themselves make this accusation. Therefore, they have argued that the Gospel records, by allegedly blaming the Jewish people for killing Jesus, are not trustworthy as historical records.

For example, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, director of the L'Chaim Society and host of a syndicated radio show, has called these Gospel records “cheap forgeries, contradicted by all serious history of the time.” He maintains that there was a “deliberate effort on the part of New Testament editors to slander the Jews.”

But it is not only Jewish people who demonstrate a lack of understanding. Christians have also reacted to the alarm sounded by the Jewish community with incomprehension and even resentment. For the most part, Christians cannot understand why their Jewish friends are so upset. While rightly affirming that the Gospels are not anti-Semitic, many followers of Christ have remained only casually touched by the life experience and fears that run so deep in many Jewish hearts.

The Passion Of The Christ, while breaking records at the box office, stirred up old

For the most part, Christians cannot understand why their Jewish friends are so upset about the movie The Passion Of The Christ.

misunderstandings between the Jewish and the Christian communities. While it awed Christians and deepened their affections for the One they believe died for them, many remained unconcerned for Jewish neighbors who saw it as a dangerous threat founded on inaccurate history. Too

many Christians didn't understand what was causing Jewish people to be fearful, and most Jewish people really don't understand what the Gospels actually teach.

Both communities need more understanding. Jewish people need to understand that the Christ-killer accusation is not rooted in Scripture. Christians need to understand the sensitivity and fear that Jewish people have about the film (and the broader issue of the crucifixion of Christ), and why those fears need to be a concern to them as well.

This booklet is an attempt to bring that understanding to both groups. To do so, we will take a deeper look at who is responsible for the death of Jesus. We will view this issue from four perspectives—historical, biblical, theological, and practical.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since the second century, many church leaders have blamed the Jewish people for the death of Jesus. Because Christians believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, those who have blamed Jewish people for His death have frequently accused them of *deicide*. The term literally means “murder of God” and has been used to dehumanize and demonize a people unfairly branded as Christ killers.

The Components Of The Misunderstanding

The first element of the Christ-killer charge is that the Jewish people are *solely* guilty for the death of Jesus. Church fathers propagated this idea so forcefully that even now many people, if asked, “Who killed Jesus and who nailed

Him to the cross?” would unhesitatingly reply, “The Jews.” As a result, one aspect of the misunderstanding is that it is alleged that *only* Jewish people are guilty for the death of Jesus.

A second facet of the misunderstanding is the contention that *all* the Jewish people of Jesus’ day were guilty. Not just some Jews in Judea or some of the Sanhedrin, nor some of the crowd in Jerusalem, but *every* Jew living in the whole world was deemed guilty. A Jew in Rome who had never heard of Jesus of Nazareth was guilty, as was a Jew in Asia Minor who had never lived in Israel, or even a Jew in Galilee who had listened to Jesus with interest and respect. It has been charged that *all* Jewish people, if they did not recognize Him as Messiah, shared the blame for putting Him to death. Thus, allegedly, *all*

Jewish people living at the time of the crucifixion were guilty of deicide.

The third ingredient of the Christ-killer charge is the allegation that the Jewish people are *perpetually* guilty for the death of Jesus. This means that it was not *only* Jews and *all* Jews of Jesus’ day, but *all* Jews for *all* time who are charged with the responsibility for the murder of Jesus. The implication is that your Jewish neighbor, if he or she does not believe in Jesus, is more guilty of the murder of Jesus than your Gentile neighbors who also do not believe in Him. The essence of the misunderstanding and unfair accusation is that only Jews and all Jews for all time are guilty of killing Jesus, and in doing so, murdering God.

The History Of The Misunderstanding

My reason for pressing this unfair accusation that

Jewish people are by nature and fact Christ killers is not to unfairly tag all Gentile people as anti-Semitic. Rather, it is to alert those who are unaware of this sad charge to the way it has been used as a weapon against Jewish people. Although in recent years large numbers of Christians have retreated from the accusation, many still affirm it. In fact, when I was writing my master's thesis on the subject of the deicide charge, students would frequently challenge the value of my research. Many would say, "Why waste your time? Everyone knows the New Testament holds the Jewish people responsible."

Let's review how the history of this charge has so ingrained itself into Christian thought that many mistakenly regard the suffering of Jewish people as something they uniquely deserve.

THE CHURCH FATHERS

Developing The Misunderstanding

How did the Christ-killer accusation develop? The first person to equate Jewish suffering with the death of Jesus was Justin Martyr (c.100–165). This Christian apologist wrote that all the sufferings of the Jewish people were a divine punishment. He said, "Tribulations were justly imposed on you, for you have murdered the Just One" (*Dialogue With Trypho*, ch.16).

By the late second century, Melito of Sardis wrote not just that the Jews killed Jesus, but that the Jews knowingly murdered God. In his *Homily On The Passion* he wrote:

An extraordinary murder has taken place in the center of Jerusalem
And who has been murdered? And who

is the murderer? . . .

The One who hung the earth in space is Himself hanged; the One who fixed the heavens in place is Himself impaled; the One who firmly fixed all things is Himself firmly fixed to the tree. The Lord is insulted; God has been murdered; the King of Israel has been destroyed by the right hand of Israel.

Melito of Sardis brought “deicide” into Christian thought and thus increased the intensity of anti-Semitism. The accusation became part of the church’s doctrine. Christians believed that the Jews were the murderers of Jesus and so the “murderers of God.”

Although many church fathers affirmed this charge, two leading theologians were especially influential in having the deicide charge ingrained into the thinking of the church. These were Augustine and John

Chrysostom, two of the most influential leaders in the early history of the church.

Augustine (354–430) is considered the greatest theologian of the Western Church and perhaps the greatest of all time. Roman Catholics and Protestants both point to him as their patron theologian. Augustine developed the theory of “the witness people.” He said that just as Cain slew Abel and was forced to wander the earth as a testimony of his evil, so God marked the Jews when they murdered Jesus, their brother. They too must wander the earth and cannot be destroyed. Yet their dispersion and misery serve as a testimony of their evil and of Christian truth. They are doomed to suffer and wander the earth as a perpetual witness to divine judgment.

John Chrysostom (347–407) is considered the greatest preacher of

the Eastern Church. He was known as the “Golden-Mouthed Preacher,” and his sermons are still studied and memorized today by men entering the priesthood of the Eastern Orthodox Church. He wrote eight *Homilies Against The Jews*, which form the worst of all anti-Jewish writings in the church. He said:

The Jews are the most worthless of all men. They are lecherous, greedy, rapacious. They are perfidious murderers of Christ. They worship the devil, their religion is a sickness. The Jews are the odious assassins of Christ, and for killing God there is no expiation possible, no indulgence or pardon. Christians may never cease vengeance, and the Jew must live in servitude forever. God always hated the Jews. It is incumbent upon all Christians

to hate the Jews.

The church fathers so effectively entrenched the Christ-killer charge into the thinking of the early church that by the Medieval Period the idea was undisputed.

The church fathers so effectively entrenched the Christ-killer charge into the thinking of the early church that by the Medieval Period the idea was undisputed.

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Mob Violence And The Misunderstanding

By the Middle Ages, the church fathers had so inculcated the deicide

charge into the thinking of the clergy and the laity that active anti-Jewishness became normal. Church historian James Parkes has observed, “A medieval Christian, if he were asked what was the substance of his hostility to the Jews, would undoubtedly place first the crucifixion.” During the Middle Ages, the church applied the teachings of the church fathers and brutalized the Jewish people living around them because they were considered Christ killers. In fact, for medieval Jewish people, Holy Week became the most dangerous week of the year. As Christians remembered the death of Jesus, they leveled horrific false charges against the Jews, resulting in vicious attacks and murders.

One of these false charges was the ritual-murder charge, also known as the “blood libel.” Jewish people were accused of

kidnapping Christian children, especially on Good Friday, in order to reenact the murder of Christ. It was said that Jewish people killed these children so that they could use their blood for making Passover matzoh (unleavened bread). To this day, various anti-Semitic and racist groups use the Internet to promote this outrageous charge. Just last year in Saudi Arabia the official Saudi press published an article describing in graphic detail how Jewish people obtain and use the blood of Christian and Muslim children to make Hamentashen (cookies) for Purim. In both medieval Europe and the contemporary Middle East, individuals have been encouraged to take vengeance on the Jews for the blood libel.

Another false charge was “host desecration.” Jewish people were charged with

sneaking into churches and stealing the host used for the Mass and believed to become, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, the actual body of the Lord. It was said that Jewish people would take the consecrated wafer and pierce it in reenactment of the crucifixion until it would miraculously bleed. Pope Innocent III officially recognized this charge in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council.

As a result of these lies that were taught about the Jewish people, mobs would descend on the Jewish community and wreak havoc on the people—murdering, raping, and pillaging. During the Easter season, it got so bad that Jewish people would hide, attempting to avoid meeting Christians observing Holy Week. Any Jew seen in public was subject to attack or death in retribution for

the alleged Jewish murder of Jesus. Tragically, Holy Week became Horror Week for Jewish people.

Moreover, since the medieval church generally viewed the Jews as a deicidal people, common people generally affirmed anti-Semitic accusations and unleashed unprovoked violence, making daily life for the Jewish person in Christian Europe an uncertain nightmare.

THE REFORMATION PERIOD

Refining The Misunderstanding

One might think that by the end of the Middle Ages, when Martin Luther established the Reformation, that the anti-Jewish actions of the church would have ended. Although Luther did indeed break with the teachings of the established Catholic Church in many respects, he maintained and

taught their hateful attitude toward the Jews. Luther wrote an avidly anti-Semitic treatise, called *On The Jews And Their Lies* (1543), in which he accused the Jews of “their sin of crucifying Jesus.” Luther restated the medieval accusations against the Jews, such as ritual murder, and made many harsh statements and observations about the Jewish people. He wrote, for example:

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming. If we do, we become sharers in their lies, cursing, and blasphemy. Thus we cannot extinguish the unquenchable fire of divine wrath, of which the prophets speak, nor

can we convert the Jews. . . . For, as all can see, God’s wrath over them is so great that gentle mercy will only make them worse and worse, and harshness little better. So away with them at all costs.

Would that Luther were the only reformer that condemned the Jewish people. Tragically, John Calvin also raised his voice against the Jews. In *A Response To Questions And Objections Of A Certain Jew* he wrote:

[The Jews’] rotten and unbending stiffneckedness deserves that they be oppressed unendingly and without measure or end and that they die in their misery without the pity of anyone.

Plainly, the Reformation brought little relief from anti-Semitism to the Jewish people of Christian Europe.

THE NAZI PERIOD

The Final Solution And The Misunderstanding

In modern times, hatred for the Jewish people intensified to unparalleled heights with the onslaught of Hitler and Nazism. Nazi ideology, despite being driven by racial rather than Christian anti-Semitism, still made the Christ-killer charge against the Jews. Hitler used the alleged Jewish guilt for murdering Jesus to stir the German Christian populace against their Jewish neighbors and to bring German Christian acquiescence to his planned genocide of the Jewish people.

Adolf Hitler was enthusiastic about the famous Oberammergau Passion Play, performed in the Bavarian mountain village since 1634. He attended the 1934 production and was pleased to see the

swastikas pervading the area. An active young Nazi played the role of Jesus. Through the strategic elimination of one paragraph, the play appeared to call for the annihilation of the Jews. Hitler continued to stress the importance of the passion play and considered it “vital that the passion play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans.”

My parents came to the United States, both having survived Hitler's concentration camps prior to their marriage. When my mom left Nazi Europe, she brought with her a Nazi reading primer used to teach 7-year-olds how to read. Written by Elvira Bauer and published by the notorious

Sturmer Press, the book was titled *Don't Trust A Fox In The Meadow And Don't Trust A Jew By His Word*. This colorful and beautifully illustrated children's book says:

“From the beginning, the Jew has been a murderer,” so says Jesus Christ. And when the Lord Jesus had to die, He did not know of any other nation that could torture Him, so He chose the Jew. That is why the Jews imagined they are the Chosen People.

The Nazi propaganda machine, the Sturmer Press, made use of the Christ-killer charge in a variety of creative ways. Significantly, children were taught to believe the deicide charge so they would grow up hating Jews. On this basis, Hitler argued, “By warding off the Jews, I am fighting for the Lord's work.”

My dad's first wife was

murdered at Auschwitz with his four sons, as well as an adopted daughter. My mom and dad met and married after the war, having lost all of their families—parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sister, cousins, and virtually everyone they ever knew—to the Nazi Holocaust. They came to America seeking freedom, safety, peace, and an end to anti-Semitism. But they didn't find it. Their young son who was born in Germany, my older brother, was walking to a Jewish school one day and Gentile children threw rocks at him, shouting “Christ killer!” One of the rocks that hit him blinded him in one eye for life.

Blaming Jewish people for the death of Jesus remains pervasive among Christians. Today, even renowned New Testament commentators and apologists condemn

all Jewish people who do not believe in Jesus as being guilty of His death.

In my own life, I have encountered evangelical seminarians and Bible college students who

***I have
encountered
evangelical
seminarians and
Bible college
students who
believed that
contemporary
Jewish people
remain guilty for
killing Jesus.***

believed that contemporary Jewish people remain guilty for killing Jesus. One professor at a Christian college told his class that the New Testament blames all

Jews for all time for the murder of Jesus, sarcastically noting that he would not say that too loudly in a Jewish neighborhood. I have even met anti-Semites who propound the charges of deicide and ritual murder with bumper stickers and T-shirts.

My friends, I have reviewed this history not to heap guilt upon all Gentiles but to give you reason to pause and reflect on the emotions of your Jewish friends and neighbors. If you have heard Jewish people expressing their fears at the possible consequences of the movie *The Passion Of The Christ*, I hope you now understand their concerns. Perhaps you can see that the history of the church has been splattered with Jewish blood—blood that has been poured out as a result of the Christ-killer charge. Although it wreaks havoc on the Jewish people, the

Christ-killer accusation reflects a misunderstanding of the New Testament documents.

So what does the Bible say about the human responsibility for the death of Jesus? Let us now move from the historical to the biblical perspective.

THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Both Christians and Jews have misunderstood what the New Testament actually teaches about human responsibility for the death of Jesus. That makes it essential to examine what the Bible truly does teach. We will begin by first looking at how Jesus predicted His coming crucifixion and then how the early church looked back at human responsibility for the death of Jesus. After that, we will look at some biblical

passages used to mistakenly cast blame on the Jewish people.

A TRILOGY OF GUILT (Mk. 10:33-34)

The Lord Jesus predicted His coming passion and mentioned three specific areas of guilt (Mk. 10:33-34). He said:

We are going up to Jerusalem . . . and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles, who will mock Him and spit on Him, flog Him and kill Him. Three days later He will rise."

In this passage, Jesus foresaw a trilogy of guilt. First, speaking in the passive voice, Jesus spoke of one who would betray Him to the chief priests and teachers of the law, later identified in the gospel as

Judas. This is the very same Judas who had been with Jesus for 3 years, who had served Jesus, and who had been well-respected by the other disciples. This follower of Jesus was the one who betrayed Him to His enemies and incurred the first part in this trilogy of guilt in the death of Jesus.

Second, Jesus named “the chief priests and the teachers of the law,” who would condemn Him and hand Him over to the Gentiles. Jesus was referring to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council in the New Testament period. The Sanhedrin did indeed have a trial or “grand jury” type investigation in the middle of the night, without all their members present. The council ignored the objections of some of their members, both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who did not concur with the majority present.

Nevertheless, the chief priests and the scribes did indeed participate in the decision to condemn Jesus. Deeming Him a threat to their power and authority, they used trumped-up charges, false testimony, and charges of blasphemy to condemn Him.

The Gentiles are the third part of Jesus’ prediction of a trilogy of guilt. He was referring to the Romans. After the Sanhedrin turned Jesus over to the Roman authorities, Pontius Pilate and his Roman soldiers callously murdered yet one more Jew. In their minds, Jesus was nothing special. He was just another troublemaking Jew from a nation of troublemakers—a nation that had not willingly submitted to Rome despite being under Roman rule since 63 BC (some 90 years of occupation at that point). The Romans considered Jewish people to be so

problematic that during the first century they crucified between 50,000 and 100,000. To them, Jesus was only one of a vast number.

In anticipating the cross, Jesus did not fix blame on the Jewish people alone. Instead, He predicted that one of His followers, some Jewish leaders, and some Romans would bring about His death. Did the profile of guilt shift after the crucifixion? Did the early church change its opinion so that the Jewish people alone were deemed guilty for the death of Jesus? The answer is found in the book of Acts.

A CONSPIRACY OF GUILT (Acts 4:27)

In Acts 4:27, the events of the cross and those guilty of Jesus' death are reviewed in a prayer for boldness. It states:

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with

the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed.

This verse identifies a conspiracy of guilt. The Greek word used here for "to conspire against" literally means "gathered together." But it was a common idiom for a conspiracy. So, who conspired together to put Jesus to death?

Herod Antipas. The first-named conspirator was Herod Antipas, the pro-Roman half-Jewish king. His family was from Idumea and had converted to Judaism. He was the son of the infamous Herod the Great, who had enlarged the temple in Jerusalem and was ruling Israel at the time Jesus was born.

Herod Antipas married a Jewish woman and ruled as the tetrarch of Galilee (4 BC to AD 39), presiding over a much smaller area than his

famous father had ruled.

Herod Antipas was known as a selfish, cunning ruler, whom Jesus called “that fox” (Lk. 13:32). He was a man driven by his appetites and characterized by scandalous behavior. John the Baptist had reproved Herod for marrying his own sister-in-law, Herodias. She, in turn, demanded that Herod behead John the Baptist. And he did (Mt. 14:1-13).

When Pilate discovered that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent Him to this Jewish king for judgment because Jesus lived under his jurisdiction. Perhaps Herod was worried by Jesus, thinking that possibly John had risen from the dead (Mk. 6:14). Or perhaps Herod merely wanted to meet Jesus, for he had heard about Him and wanted to see some sign or trick (Lk. 23:8).

When Jesus refused to perform for Herod or even

reply to his many questions, Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus with contempt, mocked Him, dressed Him in a robe, and sent Him back to Pilate (Lk. 23:8-11). Herod incurred his own guilt by remanding Jesus to Pilate when he could have set Him free.

Pontius Pilate. The second conspirator was Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea from AD 26-36. Pilate was one of the most brutal governors in the history of violent Roman officials. History records that, in defiance of all precedent, Pilate set up standards bearing the image of Emperor Tiberias right in the temple area. Later he hung golden shields inscribed with the names of Roman deities on Mt. Zion, which he removed only by order of the emperor to avoid an insurrection. Another time, he appropriated the revenue of the temple to

build an aqueduct, again almost causing a riot.

In Luke 13:1 we're told that Pilate slaughtered Galileans as they presented their offerings in the temple, mixing their blood with their sacrifices. Pilate saw his Jewish subjects as troublesome and was quick to murder them.

Ultimately, even the Roman government considered Pilate too ruthless and violent. It recalled him to Rome in AD 36 for his brutality to the Jewish community, confirming his legacy as one of Rome's most callous and vicious governors.

The following historical background of Pilate's rule confirms the biblical text and highlights Pilate's great guilt. Tiberias came to power at the age of 55 after years of military command. He reigned as Caesar from AD 14–37. He is mentioned in Luke 3:1 as

being in his 15th year when Jesus was baptized. As Caesar, Tiberias lived a life of inactivity, sloth, self-indulgence, and personal study on the Isle of Capri. He wanted time for himself, so he appointed Sejanus, a trusted administrator, as commander of the Praetorian Guard in AD 16.

Sejanus rapidly rose to power due to his excellent administrative ability. Tiberias even ordered a statue in honor of Sejanus erected at the site of the theater in Pompeii. As commander of the Praetorian Guard, Sejanus was second-in-command to Caesar but virtually ruled the empire while Caesar withdrew himself from public office. Tiberias made it clear that he regarded Sejanus as his exclusive representative in Rome.

Soon Sejanus began to consolidate his power over the Roman armies in foreign

lands. He replaced many of the commanders with men loyal to him. It was Sejanus, not Tiberias, who appointed Pilate as proconsul of Judea. Eventually, Sejanus began to plot a revolt to overthrow Tiberias and make himself Caesar.

Tiberias may have been an inactive ruler, but he was not a fool. When he saw what Sejanus was planning, he deposed him from leadership. Tiberias had Sejanus arrested, condemned, and executed for treason on the same day, along with his whole family.

At this point, Tiberias became suspicious of every person Sejanus had placed in office. As a result, Pontius Pilate came under suspicion for treason. When the Jewish leadership said to Pilate, “If you let this Man go, you are no friend of Caesar” (Jn. 19:12), they were using a technical phrase. Any traitor was deemed “no friend of

Caesar.” In effect, they were saying they would report Pilate as a traitor to Rome, a charge that might stand up because of his association with Sejanus.

Pilate was not indecisive out of concern for Jesus or out of a desire to be just. It was only because he cared about preserving his own position. So, fearful for his own life and desirous of saving his own office, Pilate decided to crucify a man he knew was innocent.

Pilate was guilty. Jesus recognized Pilate’s culpability when He spoke to him, saying, “The one who handed Me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (Jn. 19:11). Greater sin implies lesser sin; therefore, Jesus did place responsibility on Pilate for his decision. Likewise, the prayer that was recorded in Acts 4:27 included Pontius Pilate in the list of those guilty for the death of Jesus.

Some Of The Gentiles. The third participant in the conspiracy against Jesus was “the Gentiles,” referring to the Roman soldiers who brutally beat and crucified Jesus. They mocked Him, flogged Him, tore His flesh with a Roman whip embedded with bits of iron and broken glass, and then crucified Him. It was nothing for the Romans to crucify a Jew. As far as they were concerned, the whole population could have been put to death.

Some Of The People Of Israel. Finally, “the people of Israel” are listed among the conspirators. They included the Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin and the crowd of Jewish people who shouted, “Crucify Him!” The Jewish leaders condemned Jesus because they were concerned for maintaining their own position and place. The crowd turned on Him

at the behest of the leadership. Indeed, there were some Jewish people who participated in the death of Jesus.

Nevertheless, not all the Jewish people were guilty. In fact, all of the following Jewish people disapproved of the crucifixion: Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross, all the disciples of Jesus, the crowds who had followed Jesus and believed in Him during His public ministry, the women who wept on the way to the cross, and even Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea of the Sanhedrin. Actually, all the early followers of Jesus were Jewish.

So, not all Jewish people participated in the crucifixion. Rather, it was *some* Jewish people, even as it was *some* Gentiles. According to the Scriptures, the crucifixion was not a uniquely Jewish crime but a universal one. As

A. T. Robertson has said, “There is guilt enough for all the plotters in the greatest wrong of the ages.”

Although both Mark and Acts show that the New Testament does not limit guilt for Jesus’ death to the Jewish people, some still claim that other parts of Scripture do indeed support the view that the Jewish people are uniquely or perpetually guilty. Before concluding this section, let us look at these passages.

A MISUNDERSTANDING OF PERPETUAL JEWISH GUILT (Mt. 27:25)

Perhaps the most well-known New Testament verse cited to support the Christ-killer charge is Matthew 27:25. This passage records the words of the crowd assembled before Pilate. It says:

All the people answered, “Let His blood be on us and on our children!”

Does this verse truly indict all Jewish people for all ages? If so, it would contradict both God’s justice and His Word. A first principle for understanding Matthew 27:25 is that according to the Scriptures, the consequences for sin may affect later generations (Ex. 20:5), but guilt for sin belongs to the sinning person alone. The prophet Ezekiel wrote:

The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him (Ezek. 18:20).

If I were to fail to pay my income taxes, for example, the IRS could garnish my wages, take my home, or even throw me into prison, which could have

serious consequences for my family. But the government could not touch my son's bank account or imprison him. Likewise, only those Jewish people who called for the death of Jesus are guilty, not their descendants.

Second, the people who cried for Jesus' blood did not constitute the entire Jewish nation. In fact, because the trial before Pilate was sometime before 6 a.m. (see Jn. 19:14), it is unlikely that many people were present. Those who were had most likely been specially selected and assembled by the chief priests (Mt. 27:20, Mk. 15:11). At the very least, the mob included plants, impostors, fakes. Moreover, no more than 100-200 people could have fit in the Praetorium of the Antonio Fortress. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that this cry recorded in Matthew 27:25 refers to the entire nation.

Third, although Matthew

gave an accurate historical record of the words of the crowd, he did not give a theological confirmation of their guilt. It was no more possible for this crowd to curse its children with its cry than for Pilate to exonerate himself with a declaration of innocence. His public hand-washing, which preceded the crowd's cry in Matthew's gospel, was as ineffective as Lady MacBeth's attempt to cleanse herself of guilt.

Matthew gave an accurate historical record of what Pilate said, not a confirmation of his innocence. If Pilate's words and actions did not relieve him of guilt (see Acts 4:27), the crowd's acceptance of guilt for its children was just as useless. The crowd's cry certainly did bring guilt on themselves, but it did not cause the blood of Jesus to fall upon all Jews then, nor upon succeeding generations.

A MISUNDERSTANDING OF NATIONAL JEWISH GUILT (1 Th. 2:14-15)

Another verse that is commonly cited to show national Jewish guilt is 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15. In fact, when *The Passion Of The Christ* first premiered, a national news magazine ran a photograph of a sign in front of a church that quoted this passage: “The Jews . . . killed the Lord Jesus.” Unfortunately, for several reasons, only a superficial reading yields the interpretation that Paul believed all Jews were guilty of killing Jesus.

First, the passage is discussing an intra-national dispute. Paul told the Thessalonians that they had become “imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews.”

Just as the Thessalonian Gentile believers suffered at the hands of some Gentiles, so the Jewish churches suffered at the hands of some Jews. So Paul’s words cannot mean that all Jewish people were guilty. How could they be? Jewish people composed the Judean churches.

Second, the phrase “the Jews” does not refer to all Jews but a specific group of Jews, namely the Jewish leaders. This is evident from the fact that, according to the Gospels, the Jewish leadership committed the very actions Paul described here. The Gospels make it clear that the Jewish leaders plotted Jesus’ death (Jn. 11:49-50), accused Him before Pilate (Lk. 23:2) and Herod (Lk. 23:10), and incited the crowd (Mt. 27:20; Mk. 15:11).

Furthermore, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 is clearly dependent on the

parable of the vine-growers (Mk. 12:1-12; Mt. 21:33-46; Lk. 20:9-19) and the condemnation of the Pharisees (Mt. 23:29-36). These demonstrate that Paul was speaking of the leaders, because in each of these passages the same pattern is found.

In the parable, the vine-owner sends slave after slave, each of whom the vine-growers murder. Finally the son is sent and he is murdered also. At the end of the parable it is said that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus was speaking of them (Mt. 21:45-46; Mk. 12:12; Lk. 20:19).

In the denunciations of Matthew 23, Jesus called the Pharisees “descendants of those who murdered the prophets” (Mt. 23:31) and said that they will persecute those whom He has yet to send (Mt. 23:34). The result would be the filling up of the

full measure of their guilt (Mt. 23:32,35) and the destruction of Jerusalem in that generation (Lk. 19:43-44).

The same pattern is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. The Jews who persecuted the Judean churches also murdered the prophets and the Messiah and persecuted His messengers. In doing this, they filled up the full measure of their guilt, which resulted in judgment.

Since Jesus Himself specifically applied these things to the leaders of Israel, it is safe to say that Paul was following the same pattern. Therefore, the best explanation of 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 is that Paul, much in the same way as John, used the words “the Jews” to refer not to the whole Jewish nation but to the leadership of the Jewish people.

A MISUNDERSTANDING OF JESUS' FORGIVENESS (Lk. 23:34)

The church has also frequently misunderstood the words of Jesus from the cross when He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Recently, a professor at a major evangelical seminary told his class that Jesus' words refer only to the Romans and not the Jewish people. Although challenged by fellow professors and students alike, he remained adamant in arguing that the Jewish people knew what they were doing. So they remain guilty.

In fact, Jesus was asking forgiveness for the Roman and the Jewish people. He spoke from the cross to the soldiers who were dividing up His garments, to the Jewish onlookers, and even to the rulers who were sneering at Him (Lk. 23:34-38). Jesus' prayer referred to

all those who participated in the crucifixion, including the Jewish leaders.

Peter confirmed this with his words after the healing of the man at the temple in Acts 3. There, speaking to a group of Jewish people at the portico of Solomon in the temple compound, he said, "Brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders" (Acts 3:17).

The assertion that the Jewish people knew that Jesus was the God-man is incorrect. The leadership, despite their complicity in the death of Jesus, did not recognize Him as Messiah. They honestly believed He had committed blasphemy by claiming equality with God. Paul wrote, "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them," and God the Father

heard His prayer. Tragically, many of Jesus' followers for the past 2,000 years have refused to hear that prayer.

*Jesus said,
"Father, forgive
them," and God
the Father heard
His prayer.
Tragically,
many of Jesus'
followers for the
past 2,000 years
have refused to
hear that prayer.*

THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The crucifixion of the Messiah was not some cosmic mistake. Theologically, the death and

resurrection of Jesus is the absolute core of Christian faith. We have already considered both the historical and biblical viewpoints, but it is also necessary to evaluate Jewish guilt in the death of Jesus from a theological perspective.

The Bible says that even though people were guilty of participating in the crucifixion, they were acting under God's sovereign plan. After describing the conspiracy of human guilt (Acts 4:27), the very next verse states, "They did what Your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (v.28). Plainly, this prayer recognizes the divine decree in the crucifixion.

Peter also noted this when he preached to a crowd on the Day of Pentecost. He said, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23).

Some might think that God did not anticipate the crucifixion. They operate under the idea that a series of bad events came together and caught God by surprise. If this were true, then the Lord Jesus would not have been called “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). When Adam and Eve sinned, God was not taken by surprise.

It was always God’s plan to redeem humanity through the death of His Son. In eternity past, it was decided that God the Son would become a man to be the perfect representation of humanity and thereby redeem the world through His atoning death and resurrection.

In fact, the crucifixion was foretold centuries before it took place. The prophet Isaiah, 800 years before the crucifixion, viewed it as God’s will, saying, “Yet it

was the Lord’s will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer” (Isa. 53:10).

***It was
always God’s
plan to redeem
humanity through
the death of
His Son.***

The Lord Jesus went to the cross willingly because He knew it was the Father’s plan. He said:

No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from My Father (Jn. 10:18).

As Messiah and Lord, Jesus could have stopped the crucifixion instantly. He could have called countless

angels to protect Him, but He chose to die willingly. He said, as He prayed in agony in the garden, “Yet not as I will, but as You will” (Mt. 26:39). Jesus accepted God’s will and He went to the cross.

Why was it necessary for God to send His one and only Son to die? The simple answer is: because of our sin. Not just Jewish people, not just some people, but all people—Jews and Gentiles alike—have sinned and separated themselves from God. God’s eternal plan was to provide atonement for humanity through the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Even the sacrifices in the Old Testament were pictures pointing to the day when God would send the Messiah as the ultimate sacrifice for sin.

Since the atonement was God’s eternal and sovereign plan, it should

affect our perspective of the crucifixion. If God had chosen any other people group as His special people, the Lord Jesus would have been incarnated not as a Jewish man but from some other nation. Therefore, if the Jesus had been Asian or Native American or Nigerian or from any other people group, He would have been rejected by His kinsmen and died as an atoning sacrifice in their land. But by God’s sovereignty, He chose the Jewish people as His unique people and planned to send the Messiah through them.

Since the Lord Jesus was incarnated as a Jewish man living in the land of Israel, it should come as no surprise that some Jewish people participated in His death. If He had come to any other people, that ethnic group would also have participated in His death as part of God’s sovereign plan.

THE PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the film *A Few Good Men*, truth is demanded of a Marine commander testifying in a court-martial. He responds by shouting, “You can’t handle the truth!”

Sadly, I have found that many people who claim to love and follow Jesus cannot handle the truth about the deicide charge. Some resolutely want to ignore or even deny the church’s history of anti-Jewish actions driven by the Christ-killer accusation. Others want to insist that all Jewish people are guilty, even today, despite biblical and theological evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, we must submit to the truth and allow it to change our attitudes and actions.

Practically, the truth should affect our behavior in three ways. First, all of us must recognize our own

responsibility for the death of Jesus. The Lord Jesus died because I sinned, because you sinned, because all have sinned—even the nicest person you have ever known. If only one person had sinned, God would still have sent His Son, the Messiah Jesus, to die a cruel death on the cross. The Lord Jesus did not die because the Jews killed Him. He died willingly for me and for you, according to the eternal plan of God the Father, because we sinned.

Although Mel Gibson is most famous for his acting, he produced and directed *The Passion Of The Christ*. Significantly, the only time Gibson appears on screen is when his hand is seen holding the nail that is being pounded through Jesus’ hand as He is crucified. In this powerful way, he acknowledged his own responsibility for killing

Jesus. We too must affirm our own guilt, recognizing that Jesus died because of us and for us.

A second way the truth should affect us is by recognizing and opposing anti-Semitism. According to a Pew Research Center poll released on April 2, 2004, 26 percent of respondents believe Jews were to blame for the crucifixion—up from 19 percent in 1997. Since 2001, anti-Semitism has risen dramatically in Europe. We need to express, loudly and clearly, our love for the Jewish people and our opposition to this most ancient hatred.

Third, we must proclaim the gospel, the good news. The fact that Jesus died is not good news on its own. It is not good news if we are only aware of the suffering and death of Jesus. Focusing on the crucifixion of Jesus alone results in just one more dead Jewish man at

the hands of the Romans. The good news is that out of the 100,000 Jewish men crucified under Pontius Pilate, only one rose from the dead. Jesus' resurrection is good news.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, God confirmed that He is indeed God in the flesh: "Who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4).

When we think of Jesus, we must remember that He is not still on the cross and He is no longer in the tomb. He has been raised from the dead and has ascended to His seat at the right hand of the Father. We do not need to seek the living among the dead, for "He has risen, just as He said" (Mt. 28:6).

The good news we must proclaim to Jew and Gentile alike is this: Although our sins have separated us from

God, Jesus died as our substitute, taking the punishment we deserved. Then He was raised from the dead, proving that He is God. Now, if we will trust in Him, all our sins will be forgiven and we will experience a new relationship with God.

MYSTERY SOLVED

Agatha Christie's mystery *Murder On The Orient Express* follows her standard approach that every character seems to be the likely murderer. There's a twist at the end, however, when Hercule Poirot proves that all the suspects *are* guilty—that they all joined together to murder their victim.

A detective investigating the murder of Jesus of Nazareth would find a similar result. Who killed Him? Judas Iscariot?

What about the Jewish leaders? Or maybe their mob was responsible? But Pilate condemned Him! Was it not the Roman soldiers who actually crucified Him? All of the above may be true, but ultimately, it was every one of us. All our sins placed Jesus on that tree, and He died willingly to be our Savior.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Michael Rydelnik is Professor of Jewish Studies at the Moody Bible Institute. The son of Holocaust survivors, he was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home in Brooklyn, New York. Ever since Michael trusted in Jesus the Messiah in high school, he has been ministering to the Jewish community. He graduated with a diploma in Jewish Studies from Moody Bible Institute, a bachelor's degree from Azusa Pacific University in Biblical Literature, a Master of Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary in New Testament Literature and Exegesis, and a doctorate in Inter-Cultural Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Get your free Bible Resources catalog!



Discovery Series booklets can be valuable guides to help you learn what the Bible says about a broad range of topics. Each 32-page booklet can be used in your personal Bible study or in a small-group setting.

Your free Bible Resources catalog includes a brief

description of each Discovery Series booklet. To get your copy, write to us at the address below and ask for a catalog. Or follow the link below to request your copy today.

www.discoveryseries.org/catalog

USA: PO Box 2222, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-2222
Canada: Box 1622, Windsor, ON N9A 6Z7