



Does the New Testament Teach Anti-Semitism?

Part 2

In the first part of this article we examined the charge that the Gospel of John teaches Anti-Semitism. We evaluated the argument put forward by Bryan Bruce in his documentary Jesus – the Cold Case, that the Gospel of John portrays ‘the Jews’ as enemies of Christ and therefore enemies of God, and that it is ‘the Jews’ who are responsible for the death of Jesus. Bruce claims that the Gospel of John holds ‘the Jews’ responsible for Jesus death, therefore the Gospel of John is inherently Anti-Semitic.

However, upon investigation we saw that the Greek word *Ioudaios* translated as ‘the Jews’ can be used in three ways. It can mean the Jewish nation, the people of the region of Judea, and the Judean leadership, the chief priests and Pharisees.

It is my contention that Bruce failed to take seriously the context in which the word *Ioudaios* is found, and because of this arrives at an illegitimate understanding of the text.

The second line in Bruce’s argument comes from the Gospel of Matthew where the people gathered before Pilate cry out for the blood of Jesus to be upon their heads (Matt 27:25), but even this passage needs to be read in context.

Firstly, it is the Chief Priests and Pharisees that are reported to have bound Jesus and delivered him to Pilate (Matt 27:1-2). When Pilate offers the crowd the option of having Jesus freed, Matthew records that it is again the Chief Priests and Elders who manipulate the crowd and motivate them to demand the blood of Jesus (27:20).

Clearly Matthew wants to hold that it is the Chief Priests and Pharisees that are driving the whole situation and whipping up the crowd.

Now presumably there were a large number of people present before Pilate, but it couldn’t possibly have been the entire Jewish nation, and as such, the curse that the crowd called upon themselves could only rest on those who were gathered and took part in the oath.

It cannot reasonably be interpreted that the whole Jewish nation is under a blood curse because of the words spoken by a small proportion of Judean Israelites. Clearly this passage cannot legitimately be read as meaning the whole Jewish nation either. Matthew holds the Chief Priests and Pharisees ultimately responsible for their part in the crucifixion of Jesus.

So how does scripture answer the question of who killed Jesus and why?

There are two areas that need to be examined in order to answer this question, the historical and the theological.

When we examine the work of non-Christian historians of or near to the time of Jesus, we see that the Jewish leadership is involved in the execution of Jesus. 1st century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus states in his work *Antiquities of the Jews* that;

“In response to a charge presented by the leading men among us, Pilatus condemned him to the cross”

Josephus, Antiquities XVIII. 63-4

Josephus is a Jew, so when he writes ‘the leading men amongst us’, he means the leaders of the Jewish people; the Chief Priests and Pharisees. This corroborates the Biblical narrative.

In the Babylonian Talmud, a religious text again from the Jewish people, it is written that;

“Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve. For forty days previously a herald went forth and cried ‘He is being led out for stoning, because he practiced sorcery and led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy. Whoever has anything to say in his defence, let him come and declare it.’ As nothing was brought forward in his defence he was hanged on Passover Eve.”

Sanhedrin 43a

According to this Jewish text Jesus was led out for stoning because he practiced sorcery and led Israel astray enticing them into apostasy. Notice that these charges are religious in nature; as such they would need to be laid by the religious leadership.

Again we have a Jewish text corroborating the Biblical narrative which claims that the religious leadership was involved in the execution of Jesus. Is this Anti-Semitic? In and of itself it is not.

It seems that the evidence that is available to us from or close to the time of Jesus confirms that the Jewish leadership were in some way involved in the execution of Jesus. Bruce ignores this evidence when he proposes his alternative theories.

So much for the historical answer to the question of who killed Jesus and why, but is that the whole traditional Biblical Christian answer? No.

The traditional answer of Christian Faith and scripture has always been that there is far more going on here than Jesus' being sent to his death by the Jewish leadership under the authority of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Instead, the answer has always been that God is in some way bringing healing and restoration through the sacrifice of this Jesus; that his death is for all of us in some way.

The message of the scripture as a whole is that the world in which we live is not in the state it was when God made it; it is broken, fractured, and in a state of bondage and sickness. Who is responsible for this brokenness? Well, scripture teaches that the brokenness is the result of choice, the choice of people to serve themselves rather than serving God and others in a loving relationship.

This is clear in the Gospels. In Mark 10:34-45, Jesus talks about giving his life as a ransom for many. In the Lord's Supper recorded in Matthew 26:26-29 Jesus talks about his blood being poured out for the forgiveness of many. In Luke 24:46-48 Jesus talks of his suffering and death and links this to repentance and the forgiveness of sin. In John 3:14 Jesus refers to Moses lifting up a brass serpent in the wilderness (numbers 21:7-9, this act brought healing to the Israelites), and says that he will also be lifted up and whoever looks to him shall have eternal life. Jesus also says that he is being rejected because people prefer darkness to the light because of their own sin.

So clearly in all four Gospels, there is much more going on than Jesus being nailed to a cross at the request of the Jewish leadership. In some way his death brings healing, repentance, forgiveness, and freedom, which are needed because of the brokenness of the world and our own lives.

Who is responsible for the death of Jesus? The answer found in the Gospels is all of us.

This is echoed in Pauls' writing as well. In Romans 3:23 Paul declares that all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and in 6:23, that the wages of sin is death. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 Paul says that Christ died for our sins, and in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 Paul says that he who knew no sin was made to be sin for us that we may be made the righteousness of God in Christ.

The scripture is clear and consistent in its answer to the question who killed Jesus and why. The answer is that all have played a role in the death of Jesus, and that his death was for us in order to bring healing, forgiveness, freedom, restoration, and reconciliation.

Anyone who places the blame for the death of Jesus at the feet of a particular people group, the Jews or otherwise, have not allowed the breadth and depth of the Gospels and the rest of Christian scripture to touch their hearts and minds.

To say that the traditional Christian Faith promotes Anti-Semitism is blatantly inaccurate and to accord the scripture with only the most cursory and surface reading. This is not to deny that various people have used scripture to promote Anti-Semitism and various other heinous attitudes and acts, but it is to say instead that they have done so illegitimately and in stark contradiction to what the scriptures are teaching.

To attribute the thoughts and acts of the few who have illegitimately used scripture to promote this kind of hatred, regardless of how high a position they hold within a particular denomination of Christian Faith, or how influential their teaching has been on other areas of theology for the Church, to the whole of Christian faith is an error of the highest order. But it is also to ignore the witness of so many fine Christians who, motivated by their faith, have performed the most selfless of acts at the cost of their own lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is such an example. He was a gifted German theologian who stood up to the Nazi regime, engaged in smuggling Jewish people out of Germany to save them from the death camps, set up schools to teach what it truly means to be a follower of Christ in accordance with the teaching of scripture, and ultimately was arrested and executed by the Nazi regime for his actions.

Why did he and so many others behave in such a way at the cost of their own lives? Because this is the teaching of scripture, this is the way of love that Jesus recommends to us in the Gospels and through the rest of scripture.

To make the kinds of claims that Bruce does in a vacuum, without acknowledging that there have been many followers of Christ down the ages who would be shocked and appalled by such a suggestion, and whose actions speak out as a testimony to the lie being told, is grossly misleading and serves only to blacken the character of Christians everywhere.

If Bruce really does want to stamp out any Anti-Semitism that has arisen from the misrepresentation of scripture, then he should call Christians to hold true to what the Bible actually says on the issue rather than trying to undermine traditional Christian Faith.

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