



# Jesus wasn't killed by the Jews

Nicholas King SJ

Nicholas King SJ has contributed to a new book that has been published in response to the shooting in April 2019 at a California synagogue. His chapter, in which he explains how the New Testament authors made intelligent use of what we call the 'Old Testament' to understand who Jesus was and what he did and said, is called 'The New Testament Was Written Entirely By Jews' – and he outlines it here, on *Thinking Faith*.

*Jesus Wasn't Killed by the Jews: Reflections for Christians in Lent<sup>1</sup> is edited by Jon Sweeney, a Catholic married to a rabbi, who asked various Catholics and Jews to contribute to a volume intended to deal with Christian forgetfulness about our responsibility for what has been done in our name to Jews down the centuries.*



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these Christians started very quickly to apply to Jesus language that hitherto had been reserved to God. A good Jew cannot run around saying that human beings are gods; that is what pagans do. But quite soon the early Christians realised that they could not do justice to their experience of Jesus, without using such language.

## Paul the Jew

Paul, whom we first get to know as 'Saul', was unmistakably a Jew. He writes in Greek, but he was clearly at home in Hebrew and Aramaic; he argues by way of constant quotations from the Old Testament, even in his two surviving letters to the Corinthians, who were on the whole a Gentile audience; and his views on sexual morality come (admirably) from the Jewish tradition. It is true, of course, that he persecuted the infant Christian movement; he says so himself. And it is worth asking why he did so. My suggestion is that there were two reasons, both very Jewish. The first was that in Deuteronomy 21:22-23 it says that 'God's curse hangs on him who hangs on a tree'; he alludes to that text in Galatians 3:13, and it is fair to presume that he cited it against the nascent Jesus movement. The second reason is that

So it was that when Paul met Jesus, he was in no doubt at all that he had done so; immediately he fell in love with Jesus, and realised that if Jesus was no longer dead, then he was indeed part of God's story, because God had raised him from the 'curse'. Not only that, but if God had raised Jesus from the dead, then Jesus was, as the Christians had been proclaiming, indeed God's Messiah. Reading the letters of Paul in the presumed order of their composition, it is possible to see Paul feeling his way towards a fitting language about Jesus, language that placed Jesus very close indeed to God. It is true, of course, that this led some of Paul's fellow-Jews to reject him, and even try to kill him; but Paul's profoundest attitude to his co-religionists is apparent in Romans 9-11, where Paul unfolds his sense of the centrality of Judaism in God's plan.

### *Mark's Gospel: unmistakably Jewish*

Mark invented the gospel form, and this short text cannot be anything but Jewish. It starts with a quotation ostensibly from Isaiah (although in fact the first bit of poetry comes not from Isaiah but from Exodus or Malachi). And Mark's Christology reflects his Jewish roots; you can feel his hesitation about directly identifying Jesus as 'God'. Instead he indicates how Jesus does the kind of things that God does. Look, for example, at the forgiving of sins in the healing of the man on the stretcher at 2:1-12, or the awestruck question of the disciples after the calming of the storm: 'Who is this, then, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' Good Jew as he is, Mark cannot give a direct answer to this question, and instead allows the readers to draw their own conclusion. There is nothing in all this that cannot be grasped from within the basic framework of religious Judaism; indeed it is not out of the question that the author of this gospel was related to Paul and Barnabas, and there is an ancient legend that he was amanuensis to the undoubtedly Jewish Simon Peter.

### *Matthew: Jesus as the fulfilment of Judaism*

What about Matthew? He starts his version (which in large part depends on that of Mark) with his genealogy of Jesus. This gives the reader the Jewish lens through which to read the gospel as a whole, tracing Jesus's ancestry back to Abraham, to whom God's promises were first delivered, then to David, under whom they seemed to be fulfilled, to the exile in Babylon, when many Jews thought that God had forgotten them, and finally to the birth of Jesus, which Matthew presents as the climax of Jewish history. Another addition by Matthew is that of the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). This is a very Jewish composition, with its roots at every point deep in the Old Testament. Right at the centre of this, and giving it structure, comes the Lord's Prayer, which any Jew could recite without a blush, except for the unfortunate fact that it is widely understood as a 'Christian invention'. And what of Matthew's

Christology? He does it very delicately, for Matthew is a good Jew, and knows that this is a tricky area; but the reader might like to read, at 1:23, the verse where Isaiah 7:14 is quoted, with the line 'they shall call him Emmanuel' (which Matthew kindly translates as 'God *with us*'). Then, at the very end of the gospel (28:20), we find Jesus's parting words 'I am *with you* always' and may note the significance of this subtle echo. Another Jewish trait that we find in Matthew is that of a proper caution about using the name of 'God' (Jewish writers in English will often spell it 'G-d'). Matthew often (but alas not always – scholars speak of 'redactional fatigue!') changes Mark's 'Kingdom of God' to 'Kingdom of Heaven/the heavens'.

It must be admitted that Matthew is sometimes regarded as the 'most anti-Jewish' of the gospels. The evidence for this perception is found in the very sharp, almost brutal chapter 23 (which you should only read if you are feeling strong), with its seven-fold repetition of 'woe to you, scribes and Pharisees'. The language here is alarmingly polemic; it probably owes something to what is nowadays called the 'parting of the ways' between Matthew's church and the 'synagogue across the road'. Christians down the centuries have admittedly used it for pouring wholesale obloquy upon our Jewish brothers and sisters; but they have missed the point. What we have here is not an attack on Jews as such, but the familiar tones of religious sibling rivalry, one Jewish group assailing another. There is an interesting and nearly contemporary parallel to this sort of language in the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls; they speak of one or more fellow-Jews as the 'Wicked Priest', 'Seekers after Smooth Things', and 'Men of the Lie'. But it would be absurd to think of them as anti-Semitic. (Recently I heard a Rabbi from one of England's biggest cities explaining why there were so many synagogues in the town: 'you see, we Jews are always falling out with each other', he said). So, what Matthew says in chapter 23 does not make him anti-Semitic.

## *John's Gospel and the 'Jews'*

What about the Gospel of John, then? It is a thoroughly Jewish gospel from beginning to end, and not, as used sometimes to be argued, a 'Hellenistic' production. But there is a major problem, in that the Greek word *'Ioudaioi'*, which is standardly translated as 'Jews', is frequently used for Jesus's opponents, who are arguing with him and planning to kill him and refusing to accept him (this issue is considered in greater detail elsewhere in the book). The usage sounds offensive in places, if you are sensitive to the threat of anti-Semitism; and I was talking recently to a woman who sings in choirs, and who confided how difficult she had found it this year to sing Bach's Passion according to John, with its many references to 'Jews'. When it is sung in German, of course, with all the resonances that language has had since the Holocaust, the problem is even more acute; for 'the Jews'/'die Juden' always seem to be behaving badly in those chapters of the gospel. One solution, which I adopted in my own translation of the Bible, was to translate the word invariably as 'the Judaeans', and many people have spoken of their relief at being thereby spared all those negative references to 'the Jews'. Like most solutions, this one does not always work, since there are times when *'Ioudaioi'* in John's Gospel clearly means, not 'inhabitants of the Southern Kingdom of Judaea', but 'Jews'; but in my judgement this is a price worth paying. I am certain, at all events, that the author of this remarkable piece of writing would be horrified at the notion that his gospel might be used as grounds for killing or persecuting his co-religionists.

### *Ah! But what about Luke?*

What then about the Gospel of Luke, and its second volume, what we call 'Acts of the Apostles'? It is often stated as a matter of fact (though without any evidence) that 'Luke' is a

Gentile. I have no idea why this might be thought to be the case, except that there is a reference at Colossians 4:14 to 'Luke the doctor'. Presumably it is assumed – illogically – that if this person is the author of the third gospel and of its second volume, and if he was a doctor, then he must have been a Gentile. Alternatively, the argument might be that our author writes excellent Greek, in various different styles, and shows little acquaintance with Hebrew. But it is quasi-racist ignorance to suggest that a Jew cannot write good Greek, and indeed there are many Jews whose Hebrew is limited, but who write, for example, beautiful English. Furthermore, this author is entirely at home in the Old Testament in its Greek version, which we call the 'Septuagint' (LXX for short); and he begins and ends his story in the Temple at Jerusalem, which almost functions as a character in his narrative. Likewise, it is only Luke who has Jesus deliver four sad 'oracles' over Jerusalem; and in his second volume there is constant dialogue between the representatives of the Jesus movement and the Jewish authorities. The final example of these is in the very last chapter of Acts. It is true that these encounters are often tense or confrontational, with imprisonment and flogging and killing, and at times a kind of despair that the Jewish people were not responding to the gospel as Gentiles were doing; but that is inner-religious debate, which, as in the case of Matthew above, is often especially heated. It does not follow from that, however, that the author of Luke-Acts is encouraging his readers to hate Jews, still less to kill them, and the author would be astonished at such a conclusion. Some of the loveliest parables of Jesus are found in Luke's Gospel; the stories of the 'Good Samaritan' or the 'Prodigal Son' presume a Jewish background. For these reasons Luke is certainly best understood as a Jewish author from an urban Greek background, who is at home in one or other of the big cities of the Eastern Mediterranean.

## Conclusion

There is no space here to afford this same treatment to the rest of the New Testament; I have argued that the New Testament is best understood as the work of Jewish authors: I could offer you a similar account of the rest of the documents of our New Testament. For example: the Letter to the Hebrews is deeply at home in Jewish religion and writings; the Letter of James is sometimes thought to be a 'synagogue homily'; and 1 and 2 Peter belong in a Jewish setting, admittedly in the Hellenistic world. The three letters of John, though they are not all the same sort of thing as each other, belong in the same world as the Fourth Gospel; and the letter of Jude comes from the same Jewish background, and indeed quotes the very Jewish document that we know as Enoch.

There remains only that extraordinary work with which the Christian Bible ends, what we call 'Apocalypse' in Greek or 'Revelation' in Latin. In this work there are more references to or citations from the Old Testament than there are verses, and the Greek is much closer to an Aramaic dialect than the elegant pen of the author of Luke-Acts, so it is implausible to see this extraordinary vision as 'anti-Jewish'. It is true that at 2:9 there is a reference to the

'synagogue of Satan', and a clear reference at 11:8 to Jerusalem, 'where their Lord was crucified', as 'being called spiritually "Sodom and Egypt"'. This is hardly polite, of course; it is not, however, the language of anti-Semitism, but, in both cases, of inner-Jewish polemic.

In short, I conclude that every word of the 27 documents that this extraordinary library that is the New Testament contains was written by good Jews, and that it is unfounded, even perverse, to call it 'anti-Jewish'. We must however confess, to our shame, that Christians, as well as Jews, have often read the New Testament in this way, with catastrophic results. No religion that peddles hatred and killing can be of God.

*Nicholas King SJ is a Tutor and Fellow in New Testament Studies at Campion Hall, University of Oxford.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Wasn't Killed by the Jews: Reflections for Christians in Lent*, ed., Jon M. Sweeney, Foreword by Rabbi Abraham Skorka, afterword by Amy-Jill Levine (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2020), ISBN 978-1-62698-352-6 pp. 128.