

The Johannine Passion of Jesus in its Historical Context

A public presentation by Dr. Samuel Torvend at Christ Episcopal Church
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If you and I were to enter the ancient Roman Forum from the southeastern entrance and walk up the Via Sacra, we would find the Arch of Titus at the crest of a small hill. On the inside of that arch, erected as a monument to Rome's imperial and colonizing power, a power supported by military force and economic coercion, we would encounter a bas-relief of the Roman general, Titus Flavius, who destroyed the Temple and much of Jerusalem in the Summer of 70, some forty years after Jesus of Nazareth was executed by soldiers of the Roman imperial army in the same city. The bas-relief portrays the spoils taken from the Temple: the menorah, trumpets, fire pans for removing ash from the altar, and the table of showbread.

The arch served as a form of political and religious propaganda: "If you publicly question or engage in revolt against Rome and the gods who guide Rome, you will be crushed on a cross or killed in the streets." The Jewish revolt began in the year 66 as a protest against injurious Roman taxation and Roman disrespect for Jewish religious sensibilities. It prompted Roman plundering and the execution of 6000 Jews. This military action in turn galvanized a full-scale rebellion that would last four more years. By the end of the revolt in 70, thousands of Jews had died by starvation, through armed conflict between moderate and radical Jewish groups, and at the hands of the Roman army.

With the Temple, the center of Jewish worship and national life, destroyed by Rome, the critical question quickly emerged: *How will Jewish faith and life survive in the future?* The answer emerged over the next few decades. Deprived of the Temple and the priests who served there, Jewish life focused increasingly on the synagogue, the study of Torah, with the rabbi (the "master" or "teacher") serving as a principal leader. This model of Jewish religious life has continued for 2000 years. Amid the shock of Jerusalem's destruction, there emerged a concern for a strong and cohesive sense of Jewish identity; after all, many Jews had fled Roman Palestine for the Diaspora and Roman tolerance seemed in short supply.

At the same time, the Christ followers in Roman Palestine and throughout the Mediterranean Basin were struggling with a number of challenges. While Jesus, his mother, and his first followers were all Jewish, the movement that emerged after his death was now welcoming Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews) into its company. Paul, the missionary leader, notes in the 50s (some 15 years before the destruction of the Temple) that there are both Gentile and Jewish Christ followers in the city of Rome, located at first in the neighborhoods with strong Jewish concentrations. Within the mixed Christian house churches of the city, there appeared to be conflict over dietary regulations and the religious calendar. In a similar manner, Paul found tension in the Christian communities of Galatia (in what we know today as south central Turkey). Should Gentile males, who want to become Christ followers, first be circumcised and then keep the festivals of the Jewish calendar? Jewish Christ followers,

who considered themselves faithful adherents of the Law of Moses and the traditions of the elders, proposed a positive response to the question. Gentile Christ followers disagreed, suggesting that baptism was the sufficient “marking” of a Christ follower.

Just as 1st century Jews struggled with survival and the desire to encourage a healthy cohesion in the face of Jerusalem’s destruction and Rome’s subsequent vacillation between intolerance and tolerance, so, too, 1st c. Christ followers, both Jewish and Gentile (and with gentiles drawn from many religious traditions), also struggled with survival and were caught up in the question of self-definition.

After 70, we see two groups – rabbinic Judaism and the Christian movement – growing out of the common matrix of Palestinian Judaism, itself no monolithic entity but also marked by diversity and tension. In the period between 70 and 100, we find some evidence of conflict between adherents of emerging rabbinic Judaism and adherents of the emerging Christian movement. Some Christian scholars suggest that rabbinic Jews were the first to separate from Jewish Christ followers. The claim that a Galilean Jew crucified by Rome was the exalted messiah of God seemed unbelievable. Some have suggested that Jews were the first to expel Jewish Christ followers from the synagogue with the warning to stay away. The New Testament scholar, Amy Jill Levine, proposes caution in the face of such charges. Is it possible, she asks, that Christ followers had sought to replace Torah with Jesus as the center of synagogue worship? Might Christ followers have encouraged gentiles interested in Judaism (“God fearers”) to leave the synagogue and join the church, an example of 1st c. member poaching? Might Christ followers have interrupted Jewish worship with ecstatic displays of glossolalia, dancing, or attempts at miraculous healing? Her caution is worth our notice lest, without questioning, we take at face value the claims made by scholars who have not considered Christian activities that would have prompted Jewish concern. Perhaps, at best, we can say this: that the literary evidence suggests a growing separation between these two groups (although the artistic and archeological evidence suggests some cooperation); that an intense family quarrel had emerged between rabbinic Jews and Jewish Christ followers; and that this quarrel would eventually lead to acrimony and separation. It was in this increasingly volatile and conflicted context – some 70 years after Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by Roman imperial soldiers – thus in the 90s – that the Gospel of John entered into its final revision: a gospel that has inspired some of the most beautiful poetry and music created within and without the Christian community; a gospel that has been used to inspire anti-Judaism in the subsequent history of Christianity.

On Good Friday, Christians throughout the world hear the proclamation of the Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus according to the Gospel of John. It is thus important to grasp the context in which John’s gospel emerged, a context that is not available to contemporary Jews and Christians except – except – through the work of scholars who have constructed the context. The final editing of this Gospel was completed in the latter third of the 1st c., between 80 and 110. During that time period – between Jesus’ death and the completion of John’s gospel – the followers of Jesus became visible in the Roman Empire. Let us remember that Jesus and his disciples, both women and men, were Galilean Jews. Scholars suggest that some Jews were attracted to the Jesus movement while others were not. Some Greeks and Romans (gentiles) joined the movement centered on Jesus; others did not. Thus, the emerging Christian movement experienced tolerance and skepticism, rejection and acceptance among Jews and Gentiles. In the midst of their commitment to Jesus, his followers lived among people open to, skeptical of, and opposed to the Christian way of living in the world. But again, let us note that Jews, faithful to the Law of Moses and the traditions of their elders,

also lived among people open to, skeptical of, and opposed to their way of life. But, then, tension and conflict mark human life precisely because one's vision of life and the subsequent practice of that vision matter so deeply. Thus, it should not surprise us that the vision of life proposed by Jesus and its practice would inspire acceptance, questioning, and rejection.

The Gospel of Mark (the first gospel to be written and dated to the mid-60s) narrates conflicts between Jesus and demons, his hometown neighbors, scribes, unclean spirits, members of his family including Mary, his mother, Pharisees, his disciples, priests, and the Roman authorities. The many sources of skepticism or criticism aimed at Jesus in Mark's gospel become *narrowed* in the Gospel of John. For instance, in the Passion account, which is the focus of these comments, Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of the province of Judea, asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replies, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answers, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews" (John 18: 34-36).

Did you hear Pilate's comment, "Your own *nation* handed you over to me"? Did you hear how Jesus, the Jew, refers to his countrymen and women as "*the Jews*," as if they were a *different* people, as if he himself were not a Jew? Or this: Pilate announces, "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shout in reply, "Not this man (i.e., Jesus), but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit" (John 18:38-40). It would appear that the crowd was less interested in the release of Jesus and far more interested in the release of their rebel hero, Barabbas. Or this: John writes, "It was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor'" (John 19:14-15). Note again that John seems to speak in global terms. He does not say a small group of Judeans who lived in Jerusalem or a few Temple priests unnerved by Jesus' demonstration in the Temple. Rather, at this critical juncture in the life of the Jewish Jesus, we gain the initial impression that "the Jews," all Jews, were opposed to Jesus. But was this the case?

Here I suggest that we pay attention to the scholars who have aided in the construction of the context in which the Gospel of John came to completion at the end of the 1st c. (and in making this suggestion, I hope you recognize that there is not universal agreement on the construction of John's context). For instance, Raymond Brown, the Johannine scholar, suggests that the community in which the Gospel of John was completed and to whom it was directed was itself marked by conflict at the end of the 1st c. In brief, he suggests that this community included *some Jews who accepted Jesus as the Davidic Messiah* as well as other Jews who brought with them *an anti-Temple bias*, a critical view of priests who may have collaborated, willingly or unwillingly, with the Roman authorities. In this second group, a view of Jesus as the pre-existent Word of God developed – this view is witnessed in the prologue to John's gospel and draws on the first creation story and the figure of Wisdom who is portrayed in the Book of Proverbs as an agent in the creation of the world (Proverbs 8-9). Brown suggests that rabbinic Jews who knew of these Jewish Christ-followers became alarmed with their Christology, their understanding of Jesus, because it seemed an abandonment of Jewish monotheism. If they persisted in this view, how could they continue in the synagogue where a strict monotheism was nurtured, a monotheism I might add, that

stood in stark contrast to the polytheism of Greco-Roman culture? Brown and others suggest that verbal hostilities erupted between the two groups: Jewish Christ followers upset with Jewish believers in Jesus who did *not* leave the synagogue, and rabbinic Jews who wanted Jewish Christ followers expelled from the synagogue.

Here is the point. The conflicts of the last third of the 1st c. (70s-100s) appear in the Gospel of John and thus in the Passion of Jesus *as if such conflicts took place during the life of Jesus* in the first third of the 1st c. (10s-30s). In other words, an intra-Jewish conflict around allegiance to Jesus the Jew appears to be projected into the life of Jesus. The members of the Johannine community who were part of the matrix in which this gospel came into existence could discern the conflict for they were embroiled in it. In John 16, we hear Jesus say to his disciples, “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so, they are offering worship to God.” Does this warning reflect the experience of Jesus and his first disciples? *Probably not*. But it *does* reflect the intra-Jewish conflict concerning Jesus the Jew at the beginning of 2nd c.



Who killed Jesus? Imperial Rome, a colonizing power that did not abide criticism of its oppressive control over its colonies. Keep in mind that the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus was *not* the Kingdom of Caesar.

A careful reading and hearing of John’s gospel can lead us to recognize “good news” for contemporary Christians. Indeed, the promise and experience of “life” and “light” – woven throughout the gospel – is remarkably good news, good news also well-known to Jews. And yet genuine gratitude for John’s good news should not blind Christians to the ways in which the depiction of Jews or Judeans – Jesus’ own people! – has been used to inspire Christian discrimination, intolerance, and persecution of Jews during the last 2000 years. There is both good news and, from the perspective of the 21st century, unfortunate stereotyping with tragic consequences in this gospel: not one without the other.

For additional reflection

Brown, Raymond. “Echoes of Apologetics and the Purpose of the Gospel,” in *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, Francis Moloney, ed. New York Doubleday, 2003 – *Brown discusses the complexity of the term “the Jews” in John’s gospel and the history of anti-Judaism*

Crossan, John Dominic. *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*. San Francisco: Harper One, 1996. *An insightful study that questions and corrects Christian assumptions concerning the death of Jesus.*

Lathrop, Gordon. *The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011 – *Highlights recent scholarship linking John to the synoptic gospels and recognizing John as a gospel of and for the worshipping assembly*

Malina, Bruce and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. – *Breaking new ground on the social context in which Jesus lived, their discussion of John’s “anti-language” and “anti-society” illuminates the gospel and asks readers to consider the great difference between that culture then and American culture now*

Powell, Mark. "The Gospel of John," in *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998, 112-138 – *an accessible and solid overview of John*

Sloyan, Gerard. *Why Jesus Died*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. *A distinguished biblical scholar, Sloyan discusses how misinterpretations of the gospel texts led to antisemitism.*

Afterword. I was ordained a deacon in May 1985 and then left the United States to pursue doctoral research in the city of Rome. Upon my return later in the year, I began a period of service at the University of Minnesota Newman Center, the Catholic center adjacent to the university. I preached once a month at the Sunday liturgy and once a week at the daily Eucharist. The Center attracted many people from the region who held high expectations of preaching, teaching, liturgical music, and social action. The first months of Sunday preaching left me sopping wet underneath the vestments I wore so nervous was I about preaching in the presence of people well-tutored in the Scriptures and in Catholic social teaching, a group acutely sensitive to an all-male clergy and not happy about it.

As we came to the beginning of August in the following year, I was scheduled to preach on a portion of John 6, what Christians refer to as the Bread of Life discourse, a text that begins with the feeding of 5000 people in the wilderness, a clear connection to the wilderness feeding of the Hebrews with manna. But here was the problem. Wedged next to this feeding story was a reading from the letter to the Ephesians in which the author says: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church ... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:21-25). At the staff meeting in which we previewed the Sunday readings, the music, and the prayers, my colleagues said: You cannot ignore the Ephesians reading. If you do, there will be a whole lot of angry people waiting to meet you at the door." So, I worked diligently, zealously I'd say, to place what is a troubling text for many (including me) within its historical context, noting how husbands were culturally formed to treat their wives, a cultural formation that would never ask husbands to be subject out of love to their wives. Well, I preached and, honestly, I thought I offered a helpful interpretation of the text. But, then, as the assembly kept silence after the sermon, a man stood up and said loudly and, to my ears, angrily, "How much longer do we have to put up with this crap. This text should be banished from public use because it only, only leads to the degradation of women." There was some mild applause and then another man stood up and said, "I'd like to disagree with my friend. My wife and I came out of a literalist, fundamentalist church in which this text is used to beat up women and is never interpreted with any historical nuance so that its strength and weakness can become apparent. *If we do not hear it in worship and if we do not hear a better interpretation of the text, we are impoverished* whenever we hear people using this text to push women or wives into second-class citizenship in the church and society."

I mention the text, the sermon, and the comments made by these two men because the desire to expunge what some may consider difficult texts from public use continues. And I am mindful of the second person's urgent plea that a troubling text not be left to fundamentalist or literalist interpretations. I have argued elsewhere with only mild success that the leaders of Christian communities do a terrible dis-service when they fail to provide an interpretive framework for any and every biblical text whether that text is proclaimed aloud in worship, sung at a concert, taught to children, or expressed in the visual arts.