

The Question, Not the Answer, Is the Problem
Stuart S. Miller

In advance of the release of Mel Gibson's controversial film, we heard all sorts of well-worn arguments about who actually was responsible for the death of Jesus. Jews have been understandably defensive, mostly out of fears that the film could serve to rekindle anti-Semitic sentiment. Many Christians have relished the Gibson depiction of "truth," and are grateful to him for providing a film that allows them to vicariously empathize with the "historical" Jesus. For them, the Jews' role is depicted accurately, but that hardly matters since Jesus would not want humankind to harbor anti-Semitic notions.

The renewed, public debate about "who killed Jesus" is actually an absurd and irrelevant exercise that reveals a pathetic ignorance of the entire two thousand year history of Jewish-Christian relations. Sadly, and perhaps more importantly, the manner in which the discussion has been framed also reveals incredible ignorance of Christianity's origins *within* Judaism.

By couching the question in "Them vs. Us" terms, we (Christians and Jews) lose sight of the fact that in the time of Jesus, "Christianity" did not yet exist. What did exist in first century Israel were many sectarian, revolutionary, and prophetic groups, many with their own leaders and ways of life, but all professing *Judaism*. The followers of Jesus, including his apostles, were Jews, who like Jesus, thought of themselves as Jews and not as the originators of an altogether different religion.

This matters. It matters because it was not until after the death of Jesus that a Gentile form of Christianity would begin to take root, one that distanced itself from Judaism by renouncing many of the rituals and laws that until then had defined Jewish-ness — for just about all Jews. Indeed, "Christians" of Jewish origins who practiced Jewish traditions and rituals would continue to exist for several centuries until they would be swamped by the non-Jewish form of Christianity that became the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century.

Christians who view the Gibson film (and many a Christmas film) anachronistically identify with some nebulous followers of Jesus. The original followers of Jesus, however, were Jews, for whom the Temple, Jewish festivals, circumcision, and other observances were essential. Only with time would the Sabbath of the Jews that was (and continues to be) celebrated on the seventh day of the week in accordance with Genesis be severed from its biblical origins by Christians who replaced it with Sunday and eventually identified it with the "Lord's Day." Early on, bishops of Rome would insist that Christians not observe the Jewish Sabbath and instead consider fasting on that day. Many Gentile Christians had continued to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, even as late as the third century, when the Church sought to further distance itself from its Jewish roots. Similarly, the Roman Church (as opposed to the Eastern) would fix its calendar so that Christians would not be dependent upon the Jewish calendar and its reckoning of Passover to determine when Easter should be observed. Christians were no longer to be reminded of their Jewish origins when commemorating the Passion, and, more importantly, when celebrating the central event of Christian belief, the Resurrection. The Jews were now the "Other."

The SBL Forum
www.sbl-site.org

Unfortunately, it would not end here. What ensued was the demonization of the Jews that took place in medieval Europe, making it fertile ground for the horrors of the twentieth century. Blood libels, ritual murder charges, depictions of Jews as the devil, the Crusades, expulsions, the Inquisition, and ghettoization were Christian Europe's legacy. All of these were only possible because the Church had repressed its Jewish origins. Having separated itself from the people and the faith that spawned Jesus, Christians would see themselves as the "True Israel" whose "New Testament" had replaced the "Old Testament," that is, the Torah (or more accurately, the "Tanakh") that first century Jews, including Jesus and his followers, turned to in order to learn how man was to live in the image of God.

The question, "Who killed Jesus?" perpetuates the myth of Christian origins as a faith that had little to do with the Jews or Judaism. It implies that aside from the "Jews" and Romans there were others, more righteous, and, therefore, more deserving, who played a role in the life and remaining hours of Jesus' life. Christians thereby are able to see themselves in these early devotees of Jesus. But alas, *these* devotees did not exist.

This is why the very premise of the question, "Who killed Jesus?" — much more so than the answer, which is much more complex than most Christians or Jews today realize — is anti-Semitic. The question reflects Christianity's repression of its roots in Judaism and its adherents' determination to define the new religion that emerged after the crucifixion over and against Judaism. However, the earliest followers of Jesus continued to identify as Jews long after the crucifixion, which is precisely why they initially responded to Paul's determination to take the teachings of Jesus to non-Jews with shock and consternation. They simply could not imagine themselves and Jesus, who primarily preached to Jews, as disassociated from the Jewish people and religion.

Contrary to what most Jews and Christians believe, the question of whether Jesus was or was not the messiah, which is seen as the issue that divides Christianity and Judaism today, was not the defining point in the first century. There were other figures in *Jewish* history, before and after Jesus, who were thought to be the messiah. Once they failed to reign as the King of the House of David, bring the ingathering of the exiled Jews, and establish the utopian, peaceful Israel and world that recognized the One God, they lost credibility among most Jews. A Jew who had come to regard such a person as the "messiah," however, did not lose his or her identity as a "Jew." Indeed, a century after the crucifixion, many Jews would believe that Bar Kokhba, who led a major revolt against the Romans in 132 C.E., was the earthly king they were expecting who would usher in the period they believed that Isaiah predicted. That, however, did not happen. Bar Kokhba fell in battle before accomplishing what was expected of him as a "messiah." Despite the fact that one of the great sages of the time, Rabbi Akiva, recognized Bar Kokhba as the messiah, the rabbis and many disappointed Jews would conclude that indeed he could not have been and indeed went on to point out his faults. Akiva, meanwhile would remain one of the most revered rabbis in Jewish history, his mistaken view notwithstanding! It was the renunciation of what the rabbis call *halakhah* ("the Way"), that is, Jewish

practices, laws and customs, that defined Christianity as an altogether different religion. This process, which began with Paul — after the death of Jesus — enabled

The SBL Forum
www.sbl-site.org

"Christianity" to spread among Gentiles, and ultimately become the religion of the Empire. This was truly the "Parting of *the Ways*." The wedge between the two faiths would grow larger with each passing century. The more Christians saw themselves as distinct from the Jews, the easier it was for them to cast the Jew as the Devil who, because of his "stubbornness" in rejecting Jesus, deserved to be kept, by law, in a downtrodden condition. Medieval Europe would transform the Jews from the Chosen People of the Torah who were expected to bring knowledge of the One God to others, to the Rejected People. With the increased emphasis on the divinity of Jesus, which was foreign to Jewish notions of a human "Messiah," the charge of "deicide" would be added to supposed crimes of "the Jews." Passion plays not unlike the recreation of the crucifixion in "The Passion of Christ," would further drive home to the Christian masses the culpability of "the Jews." The Jews at this point could not help but see Jesus as a Jew who had somehow lost his way and renounced the practices of his people. After all, the Christianity they saw around them looked very different from the Judaism from which it had been born.

The tendency to regard the defining moment in Jewish-Christian relations as the rejection by the "Jews" (as if the original followers of Jesus weren't Jews!) of Jesus at Golgotha rather than the rejection by Christians, subsequent to the crucifixion, of the *halakhah*, only serves to further deflect attention from Christianity's roots in Judaism. All the attention given to *answering* the question, "Who killed Jesus?" further misleads the adherents of both Christianity and Judaism from the truth. Christians continue to skirt the implications of their Jewish heritage for their faith and their relationship with the Jews. Jews, by responding defensively, only legitimize the falsifying of history that has allowed Christians for so long to regard them as the "Other."

Much more is at stake than the ramifications of Mel Gibson's insensitivity towards the Jews. The Second Vatican Council may have absolved the Jews of today of responsibility for the death of Jesus, but it left open the question of the complicity of first century Jews. Still, whether the high priest, or some other Jews played any important role in the events leading to the crucifixion in the end misses the point. So do partisan debates about who truly understands the Gospels and how best to understand the contradictions in the depiction of the final hours of Jesus. Whether or not Jewish legal procedure, Temple rituals, Roman jurisprudence, or even the personality of Jesus are accurately depicted in the Gospels will no doubt continue to be debated, but they too do not get to the heart of the issue.

New Passion plays, such as Mel Gibson's movie, only further mask the historical truth and do nothing positive for relations between Christians and Jews. The Church and Christian leaders need to set their own history and relationship with the Jews straight, not by readdressing, or compelling Jews to readdress, "Who killed Jesus?" but by finally teaching their adherents the undeniable truth about Christian origins. Empathy for the suffering of Jesus *the Jew* might then be transformed into a truly meaningful lesson.

Stuart S. Miller

Associate Professor of Hebrew, History, and Judaic Studies
University of Connecticut at Storrs