



CRUCIFIED

The Christian
Invention of
the Jewish
Executioners
of Jesus

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Cover image: Rusty nail from different perspectives on a white background

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In memory of
Fr. Benjamin Ferguson
(1982–2022)

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TABLE OF EXCURSES

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2. A Pagan Prophetess Predicts Jewish Violence against Jesus
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PREFACE

Maybe because I was raised in the evangelical environment of northeast Tennessee, where a lived Judaism is not noticeable and dispensational schemes encourage a degree of Judeophilia, or because I saw a few Jesus movies with Roman soldiers hammering the nails, I did not grow up encountering the accusation of Jews as Christ killers. This ignorance endured through the early years of my academic career, when my teaching and research was largely confined to the New Testament, where the accusation is certainly present, but not necessarily apparent to an unaware reader. It was not until I began teaching a course on the extra-canonical gospels that I first observed how explicit and standard the accusation becomes after the first century.

As part of my most recent book project on the Epistle of Barnabas, I researched a particular and important manifestation of the accusation. Following the book's publication, I was asked to give a talk to my colleagues among the faculty and administration at St. Francis College, Brooklyn. Because I hoped it would attract non-specialists, I focused my discussion on Barnabas's accusation that Jews carried out the crucifixion of Jesus. Following the talk, several Jewish colleagues shared with me their personal experiences with the accusation, even in supposedly more progressive circles.

Both my academic work and my experiences with Jewish colleagues alerted me to the need for a more extensive examination of the specific claim that Jews killed Jesus. Due to the limits of my training, this examination is confined to the period from the New Testament through the first half of the fourth century CE, during which time the accusation is born and matures. I have worked with a sense of obligation to explain to my Jewish friends the origins and development of

the accusation, and to expose my Christian friends to how early and widespread the accusation is among our ancient co-religionists.

Of course, there have been other works to examine the accusation within early Christianity. There are myriad studies of the passion narrative, and each of these must engage, however indirectly, the question of Jewish involvement in Jesus's demise. Perhaps the most well-known among such studies are R. E. Brown's seminal commentary *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, and J. D. Crossan's dissenting volume *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*. These two projects represent the yin and the yang of historical perspectives on the passion, with Brown seeing Jewish involvement in Jesus's death as having some historical basis, and Crossan seeing the same involvement as almost entirely Christian propaganda—a view freshly propounded in German scholarship by W. Stegemann's essay, "Gab es eine jüdische Beteiligung an der Kreuzigung Jesu?" (Was There a Jewish Involvement in the Crucifixion of Jesus?). The studies of both Brown and Crossan, like so many other analyses of the passion narrative, are limited to the very earliest Christian texts.

Painting with a much broader historical brush is J. Cohen's *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen*. Through literature and art, Cohen tracks the image of Jews as deicides within a variety of sources across two millennia, from the gospels, to Melito of Sardis, to the crusaders, to Martin Luther, to the Oberammergau Passion Play. M. C. Boys' volume, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians*, traces the accusation within a similarly expansive time frame.

My own volume aims to combine some of the virtues of these previous works, such as the exegetical precision and scholarly depth of Brown, the historical skepticism of Crossan, and the breadth of Cohen and Boys. My purpose is to provide a detailed historical and exegetical examination of textual receptions of the accusation that Jews killed Jesus from the New Testament to the establishment of the Christian empire. This is not a general history of early Christian anti-Judaism—a

topic that has been treated many times over. Neither is it a history of the accusation that Jews were simply involved in the events that led to Jesus's arrest and subsequent execution. Rather, it is a history of the specific accusation that Jewish actors crucified Jesus. The time frame is the first three-and-a-half centuries CE. Certainly, some Christians in this period continued to blame Jesus's execution on Pilate and his soldiers. After all, that is the message of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, and it is the testimony of the great church historian, Eusebius (cf. the *Testimonium Flavianum*; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.4). However, my purpose is to trace the alternative version of Jewish executioners, which is first received in the New Testament, spreads and develops during the second and third centuries, and continues in the fourth century as a basis for the persecution of Jews in the newly established Christian empire. While this alternative version of the passion is not original, it becomes the dominant narrative within 100–150 years of Jesus's death.

When I began this project, I thought it possible that I would find claims about the Jewish executioners of Jesus spread throughout the various types of Christianity known to exist in the early centuries CE. However, in the course of my research it became apparent that such claims are largely, though not completely, sequestered to texts that modern scholars have typically labeled as proto-orthodox, that is, Christian texts that are continuous with what becomes the dominant and orthodox form of Christianity from the fourth century onward. In hindsight, this is not particularly surprising given that so much of our extant literature is proto-orthodox, and the so-called Gnostic writings generally do not emphasize Jesus's bodily suffering. While there is a small paragraph devoted to heterodox texts in the introduction to chapter three, this volume necessarily focuses on proto-orthodox literature.

In order to separate the material into manageable sections, I initially set out to divide the chapters roughly by century. This plan worked for chapters two and three, which cover the New Testament and the second century. However, the fourth chapter spills over into

the first half of the fourth century. I should also note that there are a number of texts whose dates are so uncertain that their placement in any one of the chapters will raise eyebrows for someone (for example, Sibylline Oracles; Six Books Dormition Apocryphon).

Concerning the content of each chapter, I attempt to be thorough without being completely comprehensive. In other words, I have tried to include representative sections of major church fathers and relevant narrative literature, but it is not my purpose to provide detailed discussion of every single passing reference to Jews as executioners of Jesus in the first three-and-a-half centuries; such documentation would transform the project into a giant catalog. Instead, I have selected texts according to one of three criteria: they are especially early; they add an important nuance to the development of the accusation; or they are widely received in later centuries. Having said this, in the introductions to chapters three and four, I do list a handful of important writings that make only passing mention of the accusation. However, even with these listings, it is possible that some knowledgeable readers will believe that I have either overlooked or underemphasized what they consider to be an important reception of the accusation. I can only say that if I am ever fortunate enough to produce a second edition, I will be eager to buttress or expand the trajectories I have drawn.

Finally, throughout the study, I translate the Greek term *Ioudaioi* as “Jews,” rather than “Judeans.” While I am aware that this translation risks the charge of anachronism, I am content to follow the logic of A. Reinhartz, who argues that “the term ‘Jews’ could not in the past, and still cannot in the present, be limited to its religious sense, and that its connotations in English include a complex mix of practices, affiliations, identifications, and beliefs for which we find evidence in the ancient sources” (*Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*, xv).

All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV. Any changes to this translation are my own.

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J. Christopher Edwards
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