

THE JEWS, THE CHURCH AND THE PASSION OF CHRIST

by ÅKE SKOOG

There seem to be some words that are like an atom which suddenly lets loose all its bound energy and creates an enormous explosion. In a Christian forum one such word is very often the word "Jew", especially if it is mentioned in combination with the crucifixion of Jesus.

For some years, I have been lecturing to different groups, mainly Swedish, on the development of Jewish-Christian relations following the Second World War. What I tell them is listened to with a certain sympathy and understanding, but I nearly always meet strong, and sometimes rather aggressive resistance, when I deal with the so-called Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. This resistance has a double character.

My arguments for "Jewish innocence" are flatly rejected, either because they seem to contradict the New Testament witness, where the Jews are seen to play such an important role, or for the reason that my listeners feel that I am accusing them of anti-Jewish attitudes. And so they say, "Never did we make a point of making the Jews guilty, you are trying to force already open doors. Our preaching is: man killed Jesus, not the Jews."

You can understand that it is with some fear that I raise this reflection here. But I feel that it should be done, because this still seems to be an issue in which nerves are laid bare, on both the Christian and on the Jewish side, and where reactions are very strong. I would like to know why. To quote a well-known Swedish author, Lars Gyllensten:

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Immorality, looseness, fluidity, wavering, the vague and the shapeless – all this remains the pre-requisite condition for all productivity.<sup>1</sup>

I can only hope that my reflections, vague and loose as they be, can become a fertile soil for future theological discussion.

## I

Those who feel that one cannot exonerate the Jewish people from all guilt in the killing of Christ, are of course, true to a very long and insistent Christian tradition, nor do I think that these people can be shrugged off as fundamentalists or conservatives: they really are reading the Passion-story as it has been read in the Church throughout the centuries. What they do not realise, however, is that this insistence on Jewish guilt created, from the Passion of Christ, the passion-story of the Jewish people. It was in Holy week that the pogroms broke out. That was the chosen period to attack the Jews, the “Christ-killers,” the “deicide people” – concepts rooted in the Church’s earliest preachings.

Actually, it was the preachings of Lent and Passion-tide which created the image of the evil, demoniac Jew in the Christian conscience. The Jew became the unconscious symbol for anything bad and God-less, one who easily could be accused of anything.

At the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, this history was acknowledged by a simple – and truthful – statement:

The Churches in the past have helped to foster an image of the Jews as the sole enemies of Christ, which has contributed to anti-semitism in the secular world...<sup>2</sup>

If this declaration is accepted, it becomes evident that we must be very careful in our presentation of the Jews and the passion of Christ. Still, in the world-wide Church, the only Jews many Christians ever meet are the Jews in the Gospel of St. John and in the pastors’ preaching. Will the preachings in Holy Week make it possible for coming Christian generations to have respect, love and admiration for Jews and Judaism?

In our enlightened time, it seems as though many Christians still cannot accept the previously cited declaration from Amsterdam, which states a possible relation

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1. *Tankar i moerkret* (Vintergatan, 1961).

2. See H. Croner, *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations* (London – New York, 1977), p. 70.

between Christian teaching and anti-semitism. This lack of acceptance, I am very sorry to say, is even present among such outstanding church leaders as Cardinal Bea. On November 19, 1963, during the elaboration of the Church's declaration on the Jews, he declared as "something which is in no way true" that anti-semitism draws inspiration from Christian doctrine. He blames any traces of anti-semitism in the Church on the Nazis:

We do not mean to state or hint that Anti-Semitism usually or principally arises from a religious source, namely, from what the Gospels recount concerning the Passion and Death of the Lord...<sup>3</sup>

On the whole, Cardinal Bea was never able to acknowledge any Christian guilt for the long Jewish history of suffering.

There are many others, scholars and theologians, who seem to be able to erase the nearly two-thousand year old interpretation of the Passion-story as if this teaching never existed in the Church. I find this to be an irresponsible attitude. It is our duty at least to know our own history, even if it is one from which we would like to be dissociated! We must ask ourselves whether such a consistent tradition can really be wiped out during some decades, without effort, without debate.

The truth is that the consistent church teaching was always that there is a causal relationship between the suffering and death of Christ, and the suffering and dispersion of the Jewish people. Sometimes this was said with contempt and hatred, sometimes with compassion and awe, but, fundamentally, in all times the Jews were marked with the sign of Cain.

This powerful image of the fratricide and his punishment entered early into the Church's teaching. Listen to Prudentius, in his *Apotheosis*:

From place to place the homeless Jew wanders in evershifting exile, since the time when he was torn from the abode of his fathers and has been suffering the penalty for murder and having stained his hands with the blood of Christ, whom he denied, paying the price of sin...<sup>4</sup>

Why the Jews suffer was no secret for John Chrysostom:

It is because you killed Christ. It is because you stretched your hand against the Lord. It is because you shed the precious blood, that there is now no restoration, no mercy anymore and no defence... you have eclipsed everything in the past and through your madness against Christ, you have committed the ultimate transgression. This is why you are being punished worse now than in the past...<sup>5</sup>

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3. A. Gilbert, *The Vatican Council and the Jews* (Cleveland, 1968), p. 97.
  4. Prud. Apo., 541-50, cited in Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York, 1974), p. 134.
  5. J. Chrys., "Eight Orations against the Jews," cited in Ruether, op cit., p. 146.

This constant idea of the negative witness of the Jews was skillfully developed by Augustin, and became standard in Christian teaching right up until our day. Bernard of Clairvaux stated in his letter to the English people:

The Jews are for us the living words of Scripture, for they remind us always of what the Lord suffered. They are dispersed all over the world so that by expiating their crime they may be everywhere the living witness of our redemption...<sup>6</sup>

Quotations from the writings of two of the greatest Protestant theologians in our own century will suffice to show that this tradition was never broken. On April 1, 1933, the day of the nazi-boycott of all Jewish shops in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared that Hitler could not be faulted from the perspective of religious faith:

The Church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the "chosen people" who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering...<sup>7</sup>

In 1947, just two years after the war, another eminent Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, wrote:

Israel confirms its whole previous history in the Crucifixion. It confirms it by rejecting Him, not accidentally, but as blasphemers of God and by banishing him the heathen, and handing him over to Pilate to be killed and hanged on the gallows. Such is Israel, this elect nation, which so deals with its own mission and election and pronounces its own condemnation. The whole of anti-semitism comes too late. The verdict has been pronounced long ago and beside this verdict all other verdicts are puerile...<sup>8</sup>

Later, Barth continues the "witness-tradition":

... Alongside the Church there is still a Synagogue existing upon the denial of Jesus Christ (Sic!) and on a powerless continuation of Israelite history, which entered upon fullness long ago... we can only see the Synagogue as the shadow-picture of the Church, which accompanies it through the centuries, and whether the Jews are aware of it or not actually and really participate in the witness of God's revelation in the world...<sup>9</sup>

This suffering, shadow-figure is also very much present in a strange declaration by the Reichbruderrat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, made April 8, 1948:

1. Since the Son of God was born a Jew the election and the calling of Israel has found its fulfillment.
2. Since Israel crucified the Messiah, it has rejected its election and calling.
3. The election of Israel, since Christ and through Christ, has been transferred to the Church of all people, the Church of Jews and Gentiles...

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6. *Letters of St. Bernard*, ed. Bruno Scott James (Chicago, 1953), p. 463 cited in E. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York, 1965), p. 93.

7. D. Bonhoeffer, "Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage," *Kirchenkampf und Finkenwalde* [Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. II. (München, 1959)] , p. 59.

8. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York, 1947), p. 79.

9. Barth, op cit., p. 81

4. God's faithfulness does not forsake Israel even in its rejection. That the judgement of God follows Israel in its rejection until this day is a sign of God's long-suffering.

5. Israel under the judgement is the constant confirmation of the truth, of the reality of the divine word, and a continual warning to his congregation. The Jewish destiny is a silent sermon that God is not mocked, and it is an appeal to the Jews that they should be converted to the one who is the only one in whom they also will find salvation...<sup>10</sup>

To cite Prof. Rolf Rendtorff: "was it this silent sermon of the Jews that made Christians so silent during the Nazi-period?"<sup>11</sup>

I do not honestly believe that this long and consistent interpretation of history simply evaporated during the last few years as if it never was. Nevertheless, many Christians would say "this is not my tradition", and rightly so. In the history of the Church there is a parallel tradition, expressed in a beautiful form in the declaration of the Council of Trent in the 16th century:

It was the peculiar privilege of Christ the Lord to have died when He Himself decreed to die, and to have died not so much by external violence as by internal assent...

and, concerning the responsibility and guilt:

... In this guilt are involved all those who fall frequently into sin, for, as our sins consigned Christ the Lord to the death of the cross, most certainly those who wallow in sin and iniquity crucify to themselves again the Son of God, as far as in them lies and mockery of him. This guilt seems more enormous in us than in the Jews, since according to the testimony of the same apostle: "If they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory; while we, on the contrary, professing to know him yet denying him by our actions, seem in some sort to lay violent hands on him." (Heb. 6:6; 1 Cor 2:8)

We hear an echo of the same tradition in the declaration of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961:

The historic events which led to the Crucifixion should not be so presented as to impose upon the Jewish people of today responsibilities which must fall on all humanity, not on one race or community. Jews were the first to accept Jesus and Jews are not the only ones who do not yet recognize Him.<sup>12</sup>

Or, as it is expressed in *Nostra Aetate*, as alluded to in the "Notes":

Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, that Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation... What happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today...<sup>13</sup>

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10. "A Word on the Jewish Question," cited in *Auschwitz* (Heidelberg, 1980), p. 241.

11. From a lecture at "Ein Schwerpunkt-Tagung des Landessynode der Evangelische Landeskirche in Baden," 1980.

12. Croner, op cit., p. 72.

13. Croner, op cit., p. 2.

We also find a number of beautiful hymns in the Protestant world expressing this sentiment of our personal guilt for the Crucifixion. Listen to the Hymn of Johann Heermann (16th-17th century):

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.  
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee,  
I crucified thee.

But I still ask myself: are we saying with this any more than “We are as bad as the Jews!” Such an attitude does not remove the responsibility of the Jews in any way. The classical expression of this ambiguity is the use of the *Improperia* or the *Reproaches* for the services of Good Friday. These are utilised in many churches, and always with the same motivation: “We do not speak about the Jewish people or about Israel, we talk about ourselves and our own sins.” Still, these *Reproaches* bluntly put in the mouth of Jesus a reproach of deicide against Israel! Israel has repaid all the blessings bestowed upon it during the Exodus by crucifying its Saviour. Not even the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* seems to be able to go beyond the original intention to put the blame on the Jews:

The set of reproaches addressed by the Crucified Saviour to his ungrateful people... which set in parallel the divine compassion for Israel and the outrages afflicted on Christ in his passion...<sup>14</sup>

It might be that pastors and theologians are more sophisticated – for non-theologians these reproaches clearly speak of the Jewish people and Jewish history:

O my people, what have I done unto thee, or wherein have I wearied thee?  
Testify against me.  
I opened the sea before thee, and thou has opened my side with a spear.  
I went before thee in a pillar of cloud  
And thou has led me to the judgement hall of Pilate.  
I fed thee with manna in the desert,  
Yet thou hast beaten me with blows and scourges.  
I gave thee to drink the water of salvation from the rock  
But thou hast given me vinegar and gall to drink.

O my people, what have I done unto thee...

I struck down the kings of Canaan for thy sake,  
But thou hast struck my head with a reed.  
I gave thee a royal scepter,  
And thou hast given my head a crown of thorns.  
I raised thee on high with great power,  
And thou hast hanged me on the gibbet of the cross.  
O my people, what have I done unto thee,  
Or wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me.

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14. H.T. Townsend, “The Reproaches in Christian Liturgy,” *Face to Face* (Summer 1976).

Is it really credible that non-sophisticated Christians are able to join in this prayer without a conscious or unconscious feeling of: "I am as bad as they were." (The irony in all this is that the crimes of which the generation of the Exodus is accused are in fact those committed by the Roman soldiers, according to the Passion narratives!)

Truly, the Church of Christ has identified with these words, looking upon itself as the people of God, the New Israel, and so could honestly say: "we are in reality talking about ourselves, comparing our own infidelity with the ancient people of God." This is, as a matter of fact, the center of the confusion: that so many Christians still believe that on Good Friday Jesus was rejected by his people, by the chosen people of God. Until today, many Christians are not able to state as simply as the U.S. National Conference of Catholic bishops in 1975: "The truth is that... the Jewish people never were, nor are they now, guilty of the death of Christ."<sup>15</sup>

For many Christians, the trial of Jesus is first of all a confrontation between the chosen people of Israel and its Messiah. Secondly, the trial of Jesus is predominantly religious and a process of rejection on the part of Israel. Consciously or unconsciously, these Christians accept that at the moment of the crucifixion the specific role of Israel came to an end, as Martin Noth expressed it so clearly in his writings. The guilt of the Jewish people is a necessary cornerstone in building the substitution-theology of the "New Israel". For this reason, the role of the Romans is treated as insignificant (whoever has heard about the Romans or the Italians as being called "deicide" people or "Christkillers"? Still our confession of faith states that He "suffered under Pontius Pilate," not under the Jews!); it must be "the Israel of God" who stumbled.

## II

We are able to break with this tradition, without being unfaithful to the Gospel, on condition that we make a credible historical analysis of what happened in Jerusalem during the last week in the life of Jesus. If we get our history right, our theology might also become sound; and vice versa: if our Passion story does not fit historically, it will probably not fit theologically either.

The Gospel story cannot be seen as an accurate historic description of what happened in Jerusalem. We would rather call it "Passion-kerygma", the Good News to the Christian congregation for their instruction and consolation that "Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3); that he "humbled himself and in obedience accepted even death, death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). "Was the Messiah not bound to suffer this before entering his glory?" asks St. Luke 24:26. "God designated him to be the means of expiating sin by his sacrificial death, effective through faith" (Romans 3:25).

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15. Croner, op cit., p. 32.

This is the kerygma: that Christ died for all mankind, especially for me, and because of my sins. But this is not the immediate story in the gospels; the gospels tell a story, and the kerygma is the interpretation of that story (I would be very unhappy if the passion story were kerygma disguised as a story, and not the other way round!). A careful reading of that story would give us a truer picture of the drama: the man from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, comes to Jerusalem for Passover. This feast draws crowds of people, and the central message of the feast – Liberation and Redemption – makes it one of those feasts the Romans dislike. They are massively present. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, his popularity, his actions and clearly messianic preaching alarms them, as it alarms the chief-priests and the other authorities appointed by the Romans, whose role is to maintain the difficult balance between occupation and independence. They look upon themselves as responsible political leaders of the nation. Their situation is not an easy one and, like all collaborators, they are detested. Their reasoning is well described in John 11:48-49:

“What action are we taking?” they said. “This man is performing many signs. If we leave him alone like this, the whole populace will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and sweep away our temple (our ‘place’) and our nation.”

But one of them, Caiphas, who was High Priest that year, said: “You know nothing whatever, you do not use your judgment; it is more to your interest that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should be destroyed.”

After that they entered into collaboration with the Roman power to get him out of the way.

The role of the Jewish people in this drama is different. They were the ones who accompanied Jesus with enthusiasm when he entered Jerusalem, they were the ones who stood around him as a protective wall day after day when he was preaching in the temple. It is precisely of them that one of the chief-priests said: “we are afraid of this people”; *they* are the real problem for the priests. Listen to Mt. 26:3-5:

Then the chief-priests and the elders of the nation met in the palace of the High Priest, Caiphas; and there they conferred together on a scheme to have Jesus arrested by some trick and put to death. “It must not be during the festival,” they said, “or there may be rioting among the people.”

This is the same “people” who, according to St. Luke “mourned and lamented over him” on his *via dolorosa* and went home, after his death, “beating their breasts” in sorrow.

A careful reading of the Gospel of St. John confirms this picture. Indeed, St. John tells us much about the role of “the Jews,” but by this term, used in the Passion-narratives, he always refers to the leaders, rulers (St. Luke, as the other evangelists) or “the chief-priests and their henchmen,” to cite John 19:6. These are the Jews who proclaimed: “We have no king but Caesar.” They are “the Jews” feared by Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38) and by the disciples behind locked doors (John 20:19). It is a moral obligation to impose such a careful reading of St. John in all our churches.



In any event, these are the men who find it necessary to get rid of him. They represent established power, not the people, nor the religion of Israel. It is significant that religious leaders, such as the Pharisees, are absent from the Passion-narratives, at least according to the synoptic Gospels (many scholars likewise express their doubts about the role of the Pharisees in St. John). The reason for this judgment is Jesus' messianic claims, according to Mk. 46:61, by which he is threatening their own power and the peace of the land and what there is left of national independence.

Could such an un-theological reading of the gospel lay the ground for theology? I think so. The story is not the story of Israel rejecting its Saviour; no, it is the story of how the powerless servant of the Lord is crushed by power. In the crucifixion we do not see the Jews rejecting their Messiah, we see the world rejecting the vulnerable witness of the suffering servant of the Lord – i.e., the world is rejecting Israel, incarnate in the Royal Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. "Jesus dies," says Paul van Buren, "because the world refuses to come to terms with God's purpose in calling Israel – except on its own violent, self-centered terms".<sup>16</sup>

The deeper theological meaning is not how Israel rejects his Messiah, but that in him the world rejects Israel, and that he is suffering as Israel. The witness of Israel, symbolised by the Royal Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. In an interesting article in *Exodus und Kreuz*, Bertold Klappert has spoken about the "losing and regaining of the Israelite outline to the passion-story".<sup>17</sup> He emphasizes that the suffering of Christ is a suffering with Israel, as Israel, for Israel – and not anything that puts Christ in conflict with Israel. He has shown how the anguished cry of Jesus: "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" is not only an example of the pious man dying with a word of God on his lips, neither is it an example of a man crying out in desperation, but is the classical Jewish prayer of the righteous man who suffers unjustly. But Psalm 22 is not only the lament of the individual, it speaks about the suffering of the whole people of God, of Israel's suffering. The cry of Jesus is a cry for all the poor, for all the unjustly treated, for all the crucifixions. He shares his people's suffering under the occupation, and he is crucified between two zealots.

But his cry is also the cry of one suffering under judgment. The darkness of judgement is over the whole earth: between the sixth and the ninth hour, the judgment over Israel and over the peoples is concentrated in the crucified. He represents Israel and the people. It is in this context that the sayings of the Son of Man become so significant. The Son of Man and (according to Daniel) the ruler of the world is said to participate in the suffering of Israel, to become the one crucified for Israel. He becomes *the* servant, the representative. "You are my servant, Israel, through whom I shall win glory". But (Is. 49:6): "Is it too slight a

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16. Paul van Buren, *A Christian Theology of the People of Israel* (New York, 1983), p. 260.

17. In Henrix-Stöhr, *Exodus und Kreuz im ökumenischen Dialog zwischen Juden und Christen* (Aachen, 1978), pp. 107-153.

task for you, as my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the descendants of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, to be my salvation to the earth's farthest bounds."

Thus does Christ fulfil his vocation of being Israel. In him, in the suffering servant, mankind has seen the light. Through the Royal Jew, mankind has been redeemed. "Christ brought us freedom from the curse of the law by becoming, for our sakes, a cursed thing, the Scripture says: 'A curse is on everyone who is hanged on a gibbet.'" (Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23) And the purpose of it all was that "the blessing of Abraham should, in Jesus Christ, be extended to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:14).

Thus, the first one to declare him the Son of God was a Gentile officer, at the foot of the cross. The Son of Man, as Israel, is called the Son of God. The Son of Man thus entered the history of Israel, shared its suffering, became in full what Israel always was, the servant, suffering representative for the many. And in that moment the Gentiles are drawn into the destiny of the blessing, promise and hope of Israel.

In Jesus Christ, we find the confirmation of Israel's calling, not the fulfilment in the sense of him being the end of Israel's calling. For us Christians, his resurrection is the confirmation that the hope of Israel is justified, that the judgment has been pronounced, and that the blessings to all nations, promised to Abraham, has now been bestowed upon mankind through his descendant, the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. As Paul van Buren has forcefully shown, in both *Discerning the Way* and in *A Christian Theology of the People of Israel*, the calling of Israel was and has always been for all others. Abraham had been called for the sake of the world. Now, in Jesus, this calling of Israel had been put into effect for all the Gentiles. He is God's way for the Gentiles to come before him in praise and thanksgiving, and to join Israel in its mission – God's mission – for the redemption of creation.

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