

Who Killed Jesus?

Dub McClish

Introduction

For whatever reasons or motivations, numerous attempts have been made over the years to convince the public mind that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea (rather than Jewish leaders) was the prime mover in Jesus' crucifixion. One of these prominent attempts was that of President Jimmy Carter who, in 1977, absolved the Jews of blame. Complicit with Mr. Carter, the late George W. Cornell (d. 1994), long-time Associated Press religion writer, wrote an article praising Carter's proclamation under the headline, "Carter Helps Bury 'Knotted Myth' that the Jews executed Jesus." Cornell's article appeared in the May 21, 1977, edition of the Fort Worth, Texas, Star-Telegram, a major daily paper in the area where I lived at the time.

I responded to the Cornell article by addressing the editor of the "Opinions Page" on which said article appeared, requesting that my response to the Carter claim and the Cornell article that endorsed it be printed by the Star-Telegram. I regret that I failed to file a copy of Cornell's piece for reproduction at this point. However, I believe my correspondence with the editor and my response reveals the essential contentions of both Carter and Cornell. I introduced my response in the following letter (on a church letterhead) to the editor of the "Opinion Page," on which Cornell's article appeared.

Church of Christ
Box 396 — U.S.377 South
Granbury, Texas 76048
Dub McClish, Preacher
May 25, 1977

Editor, Opinions Page
Fort Worth Star Telegram
Fort Worth, TX 76101

Re: "Carter helps bury 'knotted myth' that the Jews executed Jesus," article by George W. Cornell, AP Religion Writer, Star-Telegram edition of May 21, 1977, page 5B

Dear Sir:

I'm enclosing an article in the form of an "open letter" to Mr. George W. Cornell. The open letter will also be sent to President Carter and Mr. Cornell since it is

principally a response to statements made by Mr. Carter and applauded by Mr. Cornell in the aforementioned article. A severe distortion of historical truth was made both by Mr. Carter and Mr. Cornell and, in my opinion, it deserves public correction based upon historical evidence. Therefore, I am very hopeful that you may find room on your "Opinions Page" soon for the publication of this material. If you cannot find room for it or do not feel that it is appropriate for the "Opinions Page," please consider placing it in your Saturday religion section. I sincerely believe that, in all fairness, this material deserves an equal hearing with the material Mr. Cornell published.

Cordially yours,

Dub McClish

An Open Letter

May 24, 1977

Mr. George W. Cornell,
AP Religion Writer
c/o Ft. Worth Star-Telegram
Ft. Worth, TX 76101

Re: News story, "Carter helps bury 'knotted myth' that the Jews executed Jesus."

Dear Mr. Cornell:

I am amazed at President Carter's lack of acquaintance with the historical record in the New Testament of the events and persons precipitant to the crucifixion of Jesus, as indicated in the story cited above. I am equally amazed that a journalist of your experience and repute would speak with such harshness and candor about matters that you have obviously not researched personally. Seldom does so brief an article contain so many gross inaccuracies as does yours.

A fair appraisal of the evidence will show any fair-minded individual that, while the sentence of death was indeed given to Jesus by the Roman governor of Judea, Pilate, and carried out by Roman soldiers, it was a **concession** to the **Jewish** rulers' thirst for Jesus' blood and threat of tumult if he didn't concede. Moreover, it will be seen that it was a **reluctant** concession on Pilate's part. You speak of blaming the Jews for Jesus' death in some tough words: "the malignant, old distortion ... abetted by reckless preaching, medieval forgeries, etc." However, the evidence will show that those who try to absolve the Jews of plotting and perpetrating Jesus' death are simply trying to rewrite history, for whatever reasons. It will be seen who is guilty of "malignant distortions" and "reckless preaching."

Those who wish to absolve the Jews of any blame in this awfullest travesty of justice have erected a "straw man." The assumption seems to be that if one accepts the fact of Jewish implication in Jesus' death in the first century, he automatically spreads the guilt to all Jews of every age. Not so. Consider another case: Some of the Germans were guilty of terrible crimes against humanity, including the Jews, in the World War II era. To recognize this historical fact does not mean that all Germans since then are thereby guilty of those inhumanities. The fact is that it would be as foolish to absolve Germans of blame in the World War II atrocities as to deny the Jewish precipitation of the death of Jesus. They are both matters of historical record. It does not make one "anti-German" to believe the sordid record of Germany in World War II. Neither does it make one anti-Semitic to believe the sordid record of the Jewish rulers in plotting, demanding, and obtaining the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It surely makes one "anti-history" to deny it, however.

It is amazing that in listing the "human instruments of Jesus' crucifixion," Mr. Carter utterly ignored the constant references in Scripture to the scribes, chief priests, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees, the Jewish council, and "rulers of the Jews" (all referring to various Jewish elements) as the prime movers in that spectacle. While it is true that the high priest, Caiaphas, was a Roman appointee, he was still a Roman-hating Jew. However, before Jesus was even brought to Caiaphas, He was first brought to Annas, who had earlier been deposed as high priest by Tiberius. Though officially deposed, Annas was still venerated by the Jews as high priest (John 18:19-24). He certainly was no Roman puppet. This Jewish leader eagerly began the interrogation of Jesus that would lead to His death sentence. So many fabrications, misconceptions, and distortions appear in Mr. Carter's comments and in your applauding article that space forbids a detailed reply to all of them. Since apparently neither you nor Mr. Carter have seriously studied the evidence, I will cite some pieces of it for your consideration:

Long Standing Jewish Hatred and Plotting

Hatred among the **Jewish** leaders toward Jesus began early in His ministry and steadily increased with the passing of time. Leaders in His hometown synagogue (Nazareth) sought to destroy Him because of His teaching (Luke 4:28-30). After being humiliated by Jesus' answers to their questions, the Pharisees (a **Jewish** sect) discussed how they might destroy Him (Mat. 12:14). While Jesus worked in Galilee, scribes and Pharisees came all the way from Jerusalem to try to publicly discredit Him (15:1-2). Jesus plainly told His disciples that He would suffer many things of the elders, chief priests, and scribes who would condemn Him to death and kill Him **by delivering Him to the Gentiles** for crucifixion (16:21; 20:18-19). The chief priests and Pharisees, not the Romans, sought to arrest Him after one stinging rebuke, but fearing the multitude, waited till a more convenient time (21:45-46).

It was **Jewish** leaders who first arrested Jesus, tried Him (if you can call their proceedings "trials"), condemned Him to death, and then delivered Him to the Roman authorities for execution of their (**the Jews'**) sentence. The **Jewish** chief priests and elders gathered with Caiaphas to plot the details of Jesus' death (Mat. 26:2-5). Judas went to the **Jews** rather than to the Romans to bargain for the betrayal money, showing that it was a known fact that the **Jewish** rulers were bent on Jesus' destruction (vv. 14-16). It was the **Jewish** rulers and their officers who arrested Jesus in Gethsemane after Judas' betrayal kiss (vv. 47-50).

The Six "Trials" of Jesus

The first three stages of Jesus' trials were all at the hands of His fellow-countrymen. **First**, He was brought before Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, as earlier noted, who was still recognized by the Jews at the time of this trial as high priest (John 18:12-13, 19-24). **Second**, Jesus was taken to Caiaphas, the Roman-appointed Jewish high priest, by whom (along with certain scribes and elders) He was interrogated through the night. It was determined at this illegal "hearing" that Jesus was "worthy of death," and Caiaphas allowed the crowd (composed of **Jews**) to physically abuse Jesus (Mat. 26:57-68). **Third**, the **Jewish** Sanhedrin passed a formal death sentence against Him after consultation at daybreak (27:1; Mark 15:1; Luke 22:66-71).

The second three-stage phase of Jesus' trials were in Roman courts. It will be clearly seen that the Roman involvement in Jesus' trials was at the insistence of the **Jewish** authorities: **First**, the Sanhedrin took Jesus before Pontius Pilate, for the specific purpose of obtaining permission to kill Him (John 18:31). (The Jews could prosecute and punish only for lesser crimes than those requiring capital punishment. Annas had been deposed by Tiberius in A.D. 14 for ordering the death of a personal enemy **without Roman approval**. This fact implies that, had it been in their power, the Jews would have executed Jesus themselves immediately, **without Roman involvement**.) At this first hearing before Pilate, he found Jesus innocent of the **Jews'** charges (Luke 23:4). **Second**, Pilate, hearing that Jesus was from Galilee, and knowing that Herod, the Roman vassal "king" of Galilee, was in the city, sent Jesus to him for disposition. After a lengthy, pointless interrogation, and vehement accusations against Jesus by the **Jews**, Herod's soldiers mocked Him (23:6-12). Herod could find no fault in Jesus (v. 15) and sent Him back to Pilate.

Third, Pilate, after further examination, told the chief priests and rulers of the people **three times** that he found **no fault** in the man and **desired to release Him** (Luke 23:13-16, 20, 22). Each time Pilate spoke of releasing Jesus, the bloodthirsty **Jewish** leaders cried for His crucifixion (vv. 18, 21, 23). He reluctantly acquiesced to their demand in order to forestall a riot, for which he would be answerable to Rome (Mat. 27:23-24). **The Jews then cried, "His blood be on us and on**

our children," willingly owning their guilt (v. 25). It is undeniable that Pilate, a Gentile, played a part in Jesus' death and thereby certainly shares in the guilt, but equally undeniable is the fact that it was a **Jewish** plot from the beginning that sought the death of Jesus and involved the Roman authorities in it. Jesus recognized this and said as much to Pilate (John 19:11).

The apostles, themselves Jews, knew that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. To the throngs of Jews from "every nation under heaven" gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 2:5), the apostles charged, "Ye by the hand of lawless men did crucify and slay" Jesus (vv.22-23, 36). (Note the recognition by the apostles that the **Jews used** the Romans to kill Jesus!) The **Jews**, not the Romans, sought, to destroy the apostles of Jesus, just as they had destroyed Him (or so they thought), because they stood for the same things He stood for (Acts 4:1-3; 5:17, 26, 33, 40). Peter reminded the Sanhedrin they had crucified Jesus (4:10). Soon after the crucifixion and resurrection, Jewish leaders denied blame for His death in the first century, just as some would do today (Acts 5:28), forgetting their earlier rash acceptance of blood-guiltiness for themselves and their children before Pilate's court (Mat. 27:25). Stephen paid the ultimate price for correctly accusing the Jews of betraying and murdering Jesus (Acts 7:52).

In the face of this avalanche of historical evidence, from contemporary, unimpeachable, inspired witnesses to these events, it is absolutely incredible to read your conclusions that Jesus' death was a Gentile plot from beginning to end. That the Jews killed Christ is not a "harshly knotted, old Christian twist," as you alleged. **Exactly** contrary to your statement, as the evidence above conclusively shows "by the Biblical record, they plainly **did**." It was undoubtedly a tactful political move for the President to make, to try to absolve the Jews of all blame for Jesus' death, however, he did history and the truth a severe injustice. I recommend that Mr. Carter, reportedly a Sunday School teacher, read his Bible more carefully before pontificating upon so serious a theme. I should also think that you would serve both your profession and your readers much better if you would study the facts personally, rather than relying upon such obviously unauthoritative, biased sources.

To believe historical truth says nothing of one's love or hatred for anyone, only for the truth. One is not an anti-Semite or Jew-hater simply because he believes some historical facts about the Jews that are uncomplimentary. I earnestly suggest that you restudy this subject, Mr. Cornell, and then set the record straight in a future article.

Sincerely yours,

Dub McClish

P.O. Box 396

Granbury, TX 76048

cc: President Jimmy Carter

Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*

Mr. Jimmy Cox, *Star-Telegram* Editor, Responded with The Following Letter

May 30, 1977

Dear Mr. McClish:

The "Voices of the People" column (letters to the editor) is provided for reader response to items published in the *Star-Telegram*. As it stands, your response to the George Cornell article exceeds the 250-word limit for letters by a considerable margin, and I do not feel I should try to edit it to length.

If you will summarize your statement to 250 words, or something within reasonable range of that limit, we will be glad to publish it as a letter. It should be addressed to "the editor" for that purpose, however, since we also have a policy of not publishing "open letters," or letters addressed to others.

Sincerely,

s/Jimmy Cox

I Answered Mr. Cox With the Following Summation of My Original Letter

June 3, 1977

The Editor

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

400 W. Seventh St.

Fort Worth, TX 76102

Dear Sir:

My letter is in response to the article in your May 21 edition by George Cornell, titled, "Carter Helps Bury 'Knotted Myth' that the Jews executed Jesus." The article makes the crucifixion of Jesus a Roman plot in toto. It labels the historical fact that the Jews were the primary perpetrators of this tragedy as "the malignant, old distortion...abetted by reckless preaching, medieval forgeries, etc." Cornell quotes President Carter's listing of the "human instruments of Jesus' crucifixion" as only Gentiles, utterly ignoring (or could he be that ignorant?) constant Scripture references to the scribes, chief priests, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees, Sanhedrin council, and rulers of the Jews, as the prime movers in that unholy spectacle.

History shows that very early in Jesus' ministry, Jewish leaders began plotting His death (Mat. 12:14; Luke 4:28-30;). Jesus predicted that the elders, chief priests, and scribes would condemn him and kill him by delivering him to the Gentiles for crucifixion (Mat. 16:21; 20:18-19). Judas went to the Jewish rulers, rather than to the

Romans to bargain for the betrayal money (26:14-16). Jesus was arrested, tried, and condemned to death by the Jews (vv. 17-68; 27:1; John 18:12-13, 19-24).

The Jews took Jesus to Pilate, to obtain permission to crucify Him (John 18:31). Jesus blamed the Jews (John 19:11), and the Jews willingly accepted the blood-guilt on themselves and their children (Mat. 27:25). Pilate desired to release Jesus, but the Jews, threatening to riot, demanded his crucifixion, and Pilate reluctantly conceded (Luke 23:13-23).

To believe historical truth says nothing of one's love or hatred for anyone, only for the truth. One is not anti-Semitic simply because he believes some historical facts about the Jews that are uncomplimentary. In the face of the historical evidence, it is incredible to see such egregious blunders made by men who are supposed to be so knowledgeable.

Cordially yours,
s/Dub McClish