Transformations in Telling the Passion Story

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Or: "His blood be on us and on our children"

by Lloyd Gaston

For centuries, even in times of relative peace, Jews knew not to show themselves on a Christian street during Holy Week if they valued their lives. For centuries, Christians during Holy Week heard the story told which lay at the very centre of their faith and became better Christians for it. The Passion Narratives have had then both bad and good consequences. How were they transformed to yield also the first, and how can they be transformed back to yield only the second? But first we must try to reconstruct the historical circumstances of Jesus" death as accurately as possible.

I

To state first what we know most certainly: Jesus died by crucifixion. This is attested by the earliest Christian sources (Paul) and by the earliest non-Christian sources (Tacitus). According to the latter, it occurred while Pontius Pilatus was procurator in Judaea. between the years 26 and 36 therefore. Since crucifixion was a Roman and not a Jewish practice, those who carried out the execution were certainly Roman soldiers. The historicity of the *titulus* on the cross, the charge against the accused, is virtually certain: The King of the Jews. Jesus" crime was seen then to be political. This is confirmed by Paul, who only once speaks of those responsible for the crucifixion and calls them "the rulers of this age" (1 Cor 2:8; 1 Thes 2:15 is not by Paul). Jesus died as part of a group: two others crucified with him are called guerrilla fighters ("robbers") and one who may have been (Barabbas) is described as "a rebel who had committed murder in the insurrection" (Mk 15:7). Jesus was arrested, probably by Roman soldiers (Jn 18:12) as a robber, i.e. a Zealot (Mk 14:48). Although Jesus certainly did not have a trial before Pilate, he may have had a brief hearing. In any case it is quite certain that Pilate passed sentence and ordered the execution. Finally, and this is very important, it is very certain that none of Jesus" followers were arrested and executed with him.

These are the surest things we know about Jesus" death, and they all fit very well into what we know otherwise about occupied Judaea in the first century. If we only had the passion narratives, it is quite clear that we would understand Jesus to have been a Zealot, an armed insurrectionist against Rome, and indeed some (Eisler, Brandon) have forcefully made such a case. The only

thing which stands against it is the troubling fact that Jesus" followers were not included. On the other hand, if we had only the sayings of Jesus, all the parables and prophetic sayings and the like, removed from their context in the gospels, it would never occur to anyone knowing early Judaism to predict that the one who said them would die on a cross. One recent writer (Harvey) has put the dilemma this way: "On the one hand, the events and legal procedures leading up to Jesus" death can be established with reasonable certainty as implications of the bare statement that he was crucified.... On the other hand, it seems incredible that the person condemned on this charge was Jesus of Nazareth."

We move now to aspects of the passion narratives which are highly improbable, not to say incredible.

1. Jesus "was one of the rare Jews of his day who believed in love, mercy, grace repentance, and the forgiveness of sin," while on the other hand, "Jews in general, and Pharisees in particular, would kill people who believed in such things" (Sanders, Jesus, 326f). Not only is it difficult if not impossible to find anything in the teaching of Jesus which would be offensive to Pharisees, but there are no Pharisees at all in the passion narratives (Jn l8:3 and Mt 27:62 are the exceptions). Actually, there is one Pharisee not recognized by the evangelists, "Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Bet Din who was also himself looking for the Kingdom of God" (Mk 15:43). But the relationship between Jesus and Pharisees needs to be discussed more fully in another context.
2. The Jewish people as a whole, in the form of the crowd, turned against Jesus, and all cried for his crucifixion. On the contrary, the gospels emphasize the necessity of arresting Jesus secretly and at night "lest there be a tumult of the people" (Mk 14:2). While we cannot with confidence assert that Jesus was known to and popular with many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the opposite position has no historical basis at all and we must look for a purely theological explanation.
3. Pilate was personally convinced of Jesus" innocence but was weak and cowardly and vacillating and yielded to the pressure of the crowd. The only description we have of him by a contemporary calls him "a man of inflexible, stubborn, and cruel disposition,... a spiteful and angry person" and speaks of "his venality, his violence, his thefts, his assaults, his abusive behaviour, his frequent executions of untried prisoners, and his endless savage ferocity" (Philo, Legatio, 301f).
4. There was a Roman custom of releasing one condemned prisoner, whatever the crime, whomever a subject people wanted, whenever they had a festival (Mk l5 6), or alternatively, that the Jews had the custom of asking (Jn 18:39) and Pilate was eager to remind them of it so he could release someone. The entire scene before Pilate has an air of great unreality.
5. Jesus was arrested and executed, and Simon of Cyrene was coming in from the fields (Mk l5:2l), all on the l5 of Nisan, the first day of Passover. In all probability, John is right in dating Jesus" death before the Passover, on 14 Nisan, and the Last Supper was not a Passover meal.

   Jesus was convicted of blasphemy before an official Jewish religious body presided over by the High Priest called the Sanhedrin. Part of the problem is terminological.

   1. There was a Pharisaic institution called the Bet Din (*boulé* in Greek) which debated and decided on religious law, more of a senate than a court, which after 70 C.E. had an official standing in the eyes of the Romans. It had 71 members, all Pharisees of course, and we know the names of its president (Nasi) and vice-president (Ab Bet Din) since its inception in 147 B.C.E. As part of a lay movement, it of course included no priests at all, to say nothing of the High Priest. It met in the Hall of Hewn Stone, never in a private house. Provisions concerning capital cases stated in the Mishnah include the following: they may not be tried at night, on a Sabbath or holy day or on the day before such; a verdict may not be pronounced on

the first day of the trial; voting begins with the youngest member, the president voting last; conviction requires the independent testimony of two witnesses, whose testimony must agree in all respects; testimony against oneself (confession) is not admissible; blasphemy is strictly defined as speaking aloud the Divine Name. Jesus clearly did not appear before this body.

2. The Greek word (*sunedrion*) should be translated "council" or in modern language an "ad hoc committee" and not as if it were a technical designation "Sanhedrin." We hear in Josephus and the New Testament of their being convened by kings, procurators, or High Priests. See e.g. Festus in Acts 25:12 or the High Priest at the death of James in the account cited below. Jesus might have been examined by a body of advisors to the High Priest Caiaphas or his father-in-law Annas or both.
3. The whole trial scene in the gospels has about it an air of unreality. There is nothing blasphemous or even offensive about claiming to be Messiah or Son of God. There is nothing in the public teaching of Jesus earlier in the gospels to prepare for the High Priest"s question, "Are you the Messiah?" and in any case Jesus is strangely hesitant about saying Yes ("You have said so"). The charge of speaking against the temple, which may actually have been the real offense, is dropped, because the false witnesses, whose testimony had been suborned, still could not agree. Finally, the "Sanhedrin trial" is not referred to at all in what follows; it leads nowhere in the plot of the story. It simply did not take place as described. We have looked at some almost certain facts and seen in the gospels some very incredible explanations of them. There was a high degree of certainty in both cases, positively and negatively. If we go on to state what we think really happened, it will be with a much less degree of probability. We shall look for analogous cases in occupied Judea of this period.

II

We will first hear what Josephus has to say about Theudas (cf. Acts 5:36) and the Egyptian (cf. Acts 21:38) and some unnamed prophets and magicians.

During the period when Fadus was procurator of Judea, a certain magician named Theudas persuaded the majority of the masses to take up their possessions and to follow him to the Jordan River. He stated that he was a prophet and that at his command the river would be parted and would provide them an easy passage. With this talk he deceived many. Fadus, however, did not permit them to reap the fruit of their folly, but sent against them a squadron of cavalry. These fell upon them unexpectedly, slew many of them and took many prisoners. Theudas himself was captured, whereupon they cut off his head and brought it to Jerusalem. (Ant XX, 97-98)

Magicians and deceivers called upon the mob to follow them into the desert. For they said that they would show them unmistakable marvels and signs that would be wrought in harmony with God"s design. Many were, in fact, persuaded and paid the penalty of their folly; for they were brought before Felix and he punished them. At this time there came to Jerusalem from Egypt a man who declared that he was a prophet and advised the masses of the common people to go out with him to the mountain called the Mount of Olives, which lies opposite the city at a distance of five furlongs. For he asserted that he wished to demonstrate from there that at his command Jerusalem"s walls would fall down, through which he promised to provide them an entrance into the city. When Felix heard of this he ordered his soldiers to take up their arms. Setting out from Jerusalem with a large force of cavalry and infantry, he fell upon the Egyptian and his followers, slaying four hundred of them and taking two hundred prisoners. The Egyptian himself escaped from the battle and disappeared. (Ant. XX. 167-172)

There is more resemblance to Jesus than is evident at first glance. It is probable that Jesus

thought of himself as a prophet or at least was thought to be so by others. It is highly probable that Jesus preached the near coming of the Kingdom of God as the eschatological restoration of Israel. It is highly probable that Jesus performed miracles and was therefore accused of being a magician (Greek *goés*). To be sure, Jesus" miracles were not great national ones, recalling Israel in the desert and the crossing of the Jordan and the collapse of Jericho"s walls, but he clearly hoped God would establish his end-time Kingdom in an analogous way. The main difference between Jesus and these signs-prophets: he was not seen to be as great a threat as Theudas or the Egyptian and his followers were not attacked.

But to some of the Jews the destruction of Herod"s army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and so doing to join in baptism.... When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake. Though John, because of Herod"s suspicions, was brought in chains to Machaerus, the stronghold that we have previously mentioned, and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod"s army was a vindication of John, since God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod. (Ant XVIII, 116-119)

Here a single individual is put to death, as was the case with Jesus. Popularity alone can be dangerous. With respect to motive, John 11:48 may not be far off the mark: "If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." Jesus was probably allied with and shared the same preaching as John the Baptist. In addition, much of his popularity stemmed from his fame as a miracle worker. Note how he was said to have been taunted on the cross as a miracle worker: "save yourself and come down from the cross.... He saved others; he cannot save himself" (Mk 15:30f). Indeed, it would be no great exaggeration to say that Jesus died because of his miracles.

The younger Ananus, who, as we have said, had been appointed to the high priesthood, was rash in his temper and unusually daring. He followed the school of the Sadducees, who are indeed more heartless than any of the other Jews, as I have already explained, when they sit in judgment. Possessed of such a character, Ananus thought that he had a favourable opportunity because Festus was dead and Albinus was still on the way. And so he convened a committee of judges and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned. Those of the inhabitants of the city who were considered the most fair-minded and who were strict in observance of the law were offended at this. They therefore secretly sent to King Agrippa urging him, for this was not the first time that Ananus had acted unjustly, to order him to desist from any further such actions. Certain of them even went to meet Albinus, who was on his way from Alexandria, and informed him that Ananus had no authority to convene a committee without his consent. Convinced by these words, Albinus angrily wrote to Ananus threatening to take vengeance upon him. King Agrippa, because of Ananus" action, deposed him from the high priesthood which he had held for three months and replaced him with Jesus the son of Damnaeus. (Ant XX, l99-203)

This is a very interesting parallel. James had an informal meeting before advisors of the High Priest and was summarily executed. The Pharisees (those "who were strict in observance of the law", were so shocked by such behaviour that they managed to get Ananus deposed. So much for the Pharisees as those who put Jesus to death! We do not learn the specific charge against James, but perhaps we can learn something from the accounts of persecution in Acts. In every

case, the persecutors are the high priests, and often it is the Pharisees who defend the early church. Insofar as they were persecuted at all (cf. Acts 8:1), it was not for repeating the teaching of Jesus and it was not for their belief in Jesus as Messiah or the like, but it was for speaking against the temple and the law. Stephen was accused of "speaking against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:13f). Paul was accused of "teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs" (Acts 21:21) and of "teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place; moreover he also brought Greeks into the temple and he has defiled this holy place" (Acts 21:28). To judge from Romans, Paul was not guilty of the charge, but to judge from Acts 7 Stephen was. Also Jesus was said to have predicted or even threatened the destruction of the temple (Mk 13:2; Jn 2:19), and although such a saying seems to go nowhere in his "trial" (Mk 14:58), it is a taunt to Jesus on the cross (Mk 15:29). Was it for this saying that Jesus died? We will look at one more parallel case, dealing with another Jesus.

Four years before the war, when the city was enjoying profound peace and prosperity, there came to the feast at which it is the custom of all Jews to erect tabernacles to God, one Jesus, son of Ananias, a rude peasant, who, standing in the temple, suddenly began to cry out, "A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, a voice against all the people." Day and night he went about all the alleys with this cry on his lips. Some of the leading citizens, incensed at these ill-omened words, arrested the fellow and severely chastised him. But he, without a word on his own behalf or for the private ear of those who smote him, only continued his cries as before. Thereupon, the magistrates, supposing, as was indeed the case, that the man was under some supernatural impulse, brought him before the Roman governor; there, although flayed to the bone with scourges, he neither sued for mercy nor shed a tear, but, merely introducing the most mournful of variations into his ejaculation, responded to each stroke with "Woe to Jerusalem!" When Albinus, the governor, asked him who and whence he was and why he uttered these cries, he answered him never a word, but unceasingly reiterated his dirge over the city, until Albinus pronounced him a maniac and let him go. During the whole period up to the outbreak of war he neither approached nor was seen talking to any of the citizens, but daily, like a prayer that he had conned, repeated his lament, "Woe to Jerusalem!" He neither cursed any of those who beat him from day to day, nor blessed those who offered him food: to all men that melancholy presage was his one reply. His cries were loudest at the festivals. So for seven years and five months he continued his wail, his voice never flagging nor his strength exhausted, until in the siege, having seen his presage verified, he found his rest. For, while going his round and shouting in piercing tones from the wall, "Woe once more to the city and to the people and to the temple," as he added a last word, "and woe to me also," a stone hurled from the ballista struck and killed him on the spot. So with those ominous words still upon his lips he passed away. (B.J. VI, 300-309)

Speaking against the temple could get a person into trouble, especially in Jerusalem. And yet this Jesus, brought by the temple authorities before the Roman governor, was beaten but not executed. Why? Surely because he had no followers and was not even a potential threat. Jesus of Nazareth did have followers, but evidently not as many as Theudas, for they were not seen to be a real threat and were not molested. We need to look for an additional factor beyond the saying against the temple. We find it in the so-called "cleansing" of the temple. Here was a concrete action, probably intended as a prophetic sign, which was understood as a direct attack on the temple and sacrifices. This was very likely the immediate cause of Jesus arrest and execution.

III

If the historical event was something like we have suggested, then how did transformation occur in telling the story? Even more important, why did the transformation occur? The historical event was

interpreted, but what was the nature of the interpretation?

The "how" question can be answered briefly: it was by addition. Many scholars have been confident of their ability to recover from the text an earlier passion narrative, a "source" if you will. In Mark such a source may be found in 14:1-2, 10-11, 17-21, 26-27, 29-31, 43-46, 48-50, 53a; 15:1, 3-5, 15a, c, 21-24a, 26-30, 34-35, 36b-37, 39. Others have reconstructed an earlier passion source in Luke and in John. Of course such a source already contains much interpretation, but the point is that anything added to it is pure interpretation, having no correspondence to the historical events. The same thing is true of changes and additions Matthew has made to the Markan text. It is then possible to see tendencies; e.g. how the anti-Judaism develops from none in the Markan source to Mark to Matthew to the Gospel of Peter.

We can also consider general developments in the church during the period when the story was being transformed.

1. At first everything centred on the resurrection as eschatological event. Jesus had preached the Kingdom of God, saying that God would soon intervene decisively in history and establish his Kingdom, including the general resurrection of the dead; the early church saw in Easter an eschatological act of God in which one person was raised, thus confirming all the eschatological hopes. Jesus" death was not significant in itself but only the necessary prerequisite for his resurrection, and it was therefore also interpreted eschatologically.
2. As such, it was in accordance with the purposes of God revealed in Scripture, which could be used to interpret its significance.
3. At a somewhat later stage the death was interpreted in the light of the Pharisaic concept of the atoning value of the death of martyrs (seen most clearly in 4 Maccabees): it was "for our sins."
4. Then came the call of Paul and the beginning of the Gentile mission,
5. with its own special Christology.
6. The end of the generation which saw this Gentile success also witnessed the almost complete failure of the church"s preaching to Jews. These two factors made it necessary for the Gentile church to define itself in relationship to Israel and to establish their own legitimacy not only before the public but in their own minds, the election of the church as the people of God and the rejection of the Jews as those cut off from that people (cf. the position attacked in Rom 9-11). Finally,
7. the persecution of the church under Nero and
8. the disastrous defeat of Judea by the Romans left major impressions. All of these developments are reflected in the passion narratives.

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1. The eschatological interpretation of the passion can be seen most clearly in the relationship between the eschatological discourse, Mark 13, and the passion narratives, Mk 14-15. The coming destruction of the temple (and thus the end of the world) is connected with Jesus" death in Mk 15:28 and 38, and it is probable that Mk 16:7-8 look forward to "the consummation of the age" (Mt 24:3) in the very near future. The "darkness at noon" (Mk 15:33) and the earthquake are eschatological portents, and Mt 27:52-53 even has a kind of general resurrection. The story is not told from the perspecexeg of what an observer on the scene would have seen but is filtered through the lens of the resurrection.
2. The use of Scripture to interpret events can perhaps best be seen in the double offering of drink. A narcotic dissolved in wine (Mk 15:22) is one of the facts, but vinegar (15:36) is part of the interpretation using Ps 69:22. Psalms of the suffering righteous one, especially Psalm 22, have had extensive influence on the telling of the story. We can also note the recurring "that the Scriptures might be fulfilled" (Mk 14:21, 27, 49; Mt 26:54, 27:9; Lk 22:22, 37).
3. That Jesus" death was "for our sins" is seen most clearly in the account of the last supper,

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but it is also present in the Barabbas episode. Barabbas was guilty of the crime with which Jesus was falsely charged, and in the most personal sense Jesus died "in his place." We can note that at least in the early stages of development, Jesus" death as a suffering righteous one makes atonement for all Israel, and not just the church. We can also note that contrary to later Christian piety neither in the passion nor anywhere else in the NT is Jesus said to have died "because of our sins" (in the sense that our sins or the sins of someone else killed him) but it is always "for our sins" (in the sense of liberating us from them). Also, one very important aspect of the Gethsemane episode is to allow Jesus to go voluntarily to his death.

4. The Gentile mission can be seen in the Roman centurion"s confession, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mk 15:39) and in the prediction of "the gospel being preached in the whole world" (Mk 14:9).
5. Christological affirmations of the early church are seen most clearly in the hearing before the High Priest. Jesus is the Son of God, the Lord of Psalm 110 and the Son of Man of Daniel 7. Note how in spite of the actual events this affirmation also denies that Jesus should be understood as Messiah. The major function of the whole scene is to have Jesus die for the truth of the Christology of the later church.
6. We now come to the most problematic transformation. It was not the so-called delay of the parousia which occasioned the greatest crisis for the early Christian movement, but it was the complete failure of the Jewish mission. This is true even if there existed a small Jewish-Christian sect in Jerusalem, for the teaching of Jesus, continued by his Jewish followers, was addressed to the whole of Israel and was not sectarian in nature. Mark"s way of dealing with the terrible failure is through his "Messianic secret" motif. If that mission failed it was because it was divinely willed: God must have hardened Israel"s heart. "To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside (the Jews) everything is in riddles, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; *lest* they should turn againnote be forgiven" (Mk 4:11-12).
   At the same time, the new Gentile churches were very unsure of their own legitimacy. Partly they tried to appropriate for themselves things belonging to Israel (the unhistorical "preparation for the Passover," Mk 14:12-16, is an example). But mostly, for reasons that are complex, they thought that they could affirm that God had chosen the Gentiles only by saying that first he had rejected the Jews. This is seen, most forcefully in the scene before Pilate. There is a trial here, but it is a trial before the Jewish people as a whole, who are Jesus" accusers, and Pilate functions as Jesus" defense attorney. It was necessary for the Jews, all Israel, to reject Jesus, so that God could reject the Jews, and he had to reject the Jews so he could elect the Gentiles. We note also how the original mocking of the soldiers (Mk 15:16-20) has been shifted to the Jews (Mk 14:65; Lk 22:63-65; 23:11). (No more can be said here, but I have written about Matthew in "The Messiah of Israel as Teacher of the Gentiles," Int 29 (1975) 24-40; and about Luke in "Anti-Judaism and the Passion Narratives in Luke and Acts," *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, Vol. 1, *Paul and the Gospels* (eds. P. Richardson and D. Granskou; Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1985).
7. I believe that what was just said is more important than the idea of a Roman apologetic motif. Christians did not want to appear to be politically subversive (cf. Acts 17:6-7), and so as a kind of political opportunism they whitewashed the character of Pilate, thereby inadvertently blackening the Jews. But in any case, the influence of the Neronian persecution in the injunction to the disciples to watch in Gethsemane and in the warning example of Peter"s denial of Jesus. (Or this may have more to do with Mark"s more general "theology of the disciples.")
8. At least part of the motivation for Matthew"s "His blood be on us and on our children" may have been a reflection of the tremendous amount of Jewish blood spilled in the catastrophes of C.E. 66-73, in an attempt to give a theological explanation for an event which had already happened.
9. One final observation can serve as a transition. The evangelists really wanted to put the two halves of their story, Jesus in Galilee and Jesus in Jerusalem, together. As Bultmann

put it, "What is certain is merely that he (Jesus) was crucified by the Romans, and thus suffered the death of a political criminal. The death can scarcely be understood as an inherent and necessary consequence of his activity; rather it took place because his activity was misconstrued as a political activity. In that case it would have been historically speaking - a , meaningless fate." It was natural that already the evangelists wanted to avoid such a conclusion, and so we hear of Jewish plots to kill Jesus earlier in the story: after the healing of a withered hand on the Sabbath (Mk 3:6), or after the allegory of the wicked tenants (Mk 12:12), or after the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11:45-53). (On the other hand, to put the plot after the temple event (Mk 11:18) may well come close to the truth, even if Mark may not have known it.) We can also list the strange double accusation of blasphemy in Mk 2:7 and 14:64. But this desire to connect Jesus" death with his life is even stronger in subsequent interpretation.

IV

The telling of the passion story has had bad effects in the past, physically for Jews and theologically for many Christians. What transformations can we make on the story today to improve the situation? In the first place, it should be clear by now that I want to remove all anti-Judaism not only from traditional interpretation but also from the text itself. The first task then is to look seriously at the texts from this perspective and clearly to identify the objectionable aspects. But what justification could we possibly adduce for tampering with the sacred text? Here is where the importance of our earlier canonical discussion comes to the fore. Anything in the Apostolic Writings which is not a legitimate midrash on but basically contradicts Holy Scripture is for that reason to be rejected.

In the second place, we need to think further about the last point raised in our discussion of the evangelists, the need to connect Jesus" death with his life, which is even stronger with us. We all find the death of Archbishop Romero somehow satisfying, because it was the direct result of his life"s work. On the other hand, we think Laurence of Arabia should have died on the back of a camel and not in a senseless motorcycle accident. We have a very strong desire to have Jesus die for the truth of the gospel, however we define it. 1) Jesus died for proclaiming that God is gracious to repentant sinners. 2) Or, Jesus died because he taught in parables. 3) Or, Jesus died for blasphemously usurping God"s place in forgiving sins. 4) Or, Jesus died because of table-fellowship with sinners. 5) Or, Jesus died for the Christological titles of the early church. 6) Or, and this is the most prevalent, Jesus died because he attacked the Torah God gave to Israel. I think such assertions are patently absurd, although they are still being made by otherwise reputable theologians. The problem is that if Jesus died for the truth, there must have been Jews who were violently opposed to that truth, but of this we can find no evidence. At least such assertions pretend to make historical statements, but there are further ramifications. We tend to assume that what Jesus taught was religiously true, and we sometimes define religiously true by our own concerns. Thus some feminists have thought that Jesus must have been a feminist too, and that therefore the Jews were all misogynists. Or, some pietists have thought that Jesus must have been interested in spirituality, and that therefore the Jews must have been interested in external obedience only. Or, some social activists have thought that Jesus wanted to lead a social revolution, and that the Jews must have supported multinational corporations. All of this stems from the well-meaning attempt to connect Jesus" death with his life, but I think we have to come to terms with the fact that no such connection may be possible.

There are other examples of how in our desire to interpret the passion narrative in terms of our own religiosity we go beyond the texts themselves. This could be seen in any attempt to use the story to evoke in people emotions of hatred or pity or guilt. ("Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended?... who is it denied thee, I crucified thee" is bad theology and is not in the text.) Why not use some of the other theological motifs we identified above? Why not speak of the death of Jesus

as making atonement for all Israel? Why not describe his death as identifying with the national hopes of Israel, or more generally as being in solidarity with all victims of all repressive regimes everywhere? Why not proclaim that God can turn even meaningless deaths into something positive?

One last practical matter. The effect of hearing the entire passion narrative read aloud is so powerful as to counter all transformations. If your church tradition requires that it be done, why not use one of the earlier sources or even a reconstruction such as John Townsend"s *A Liturgical Interpretation of our Lord"s Passion in Narrative Form*?

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