Crucified. The Christian Invention of the Jewish Executioners of Jesus

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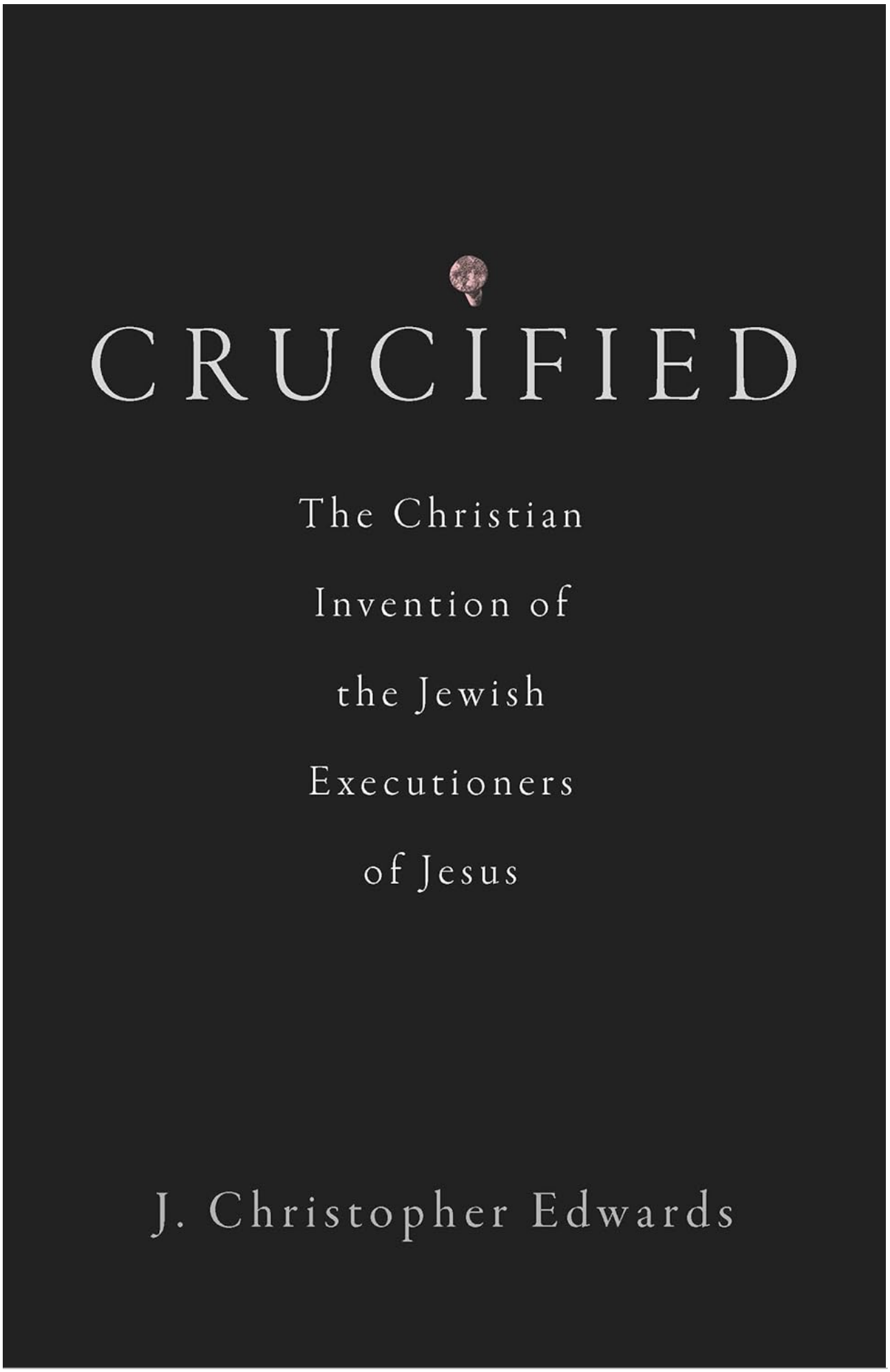
J. Christopher Edwards:Crucified. The Christian Invention of the Jewish Executioners of Jesus.Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2023255 Pages; $28.00



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As J. Christopher Edwards notes in *Crucified: The Christian Invention of the Jewish Executioners of Jesus*, everyone who has seen a “Jesus movie” knows that Jesus was crucified by the Romans. And yet, for 2,000 years, his death has been blamed collectively on “the Jews.” Edwards explores the earliest evidence for this charge, beginning with the gospels and ending with later Christian texts up to the 5th century. His purpose is to help modern Christians become aware of the sources used to blame the Jews for Jesus’ crucifixion.

In chapter 1, “Romans Killed Jesus: The Christian Suppression of an Uncomfortable Fact,” Crucifixion was the Roman punishment for treason. The historical context for Mark’s gospel was the Jewish Revolt against Rome (66-73). Mark had to distinguish his Jews from those involved in the Revolt. He did this through the creation of “conflict dialogues” between the Pharisees and Sadducees and Jesus from the very beginning of the ministry. Mark argued that Jesus’ death was the result of religious differences with the Jewish leadership and not the politics of the Empire. Thus, Mark’s claim of the “false trials” before the Sanhedrin. Beginning with Mark, each gospel exonerated Pontus Pilate who declared Jesus “innocent” (of rebellion).

Chapter 2, “Shifting Blame,” from Rome to the Jews, was articulated through the parables, established in Mark 12, “The parable of the tenants.” The owner of a vineyard sent a servant to collect the harvest, but the servant was beaten. He sent more with the same result. He finally sent his son, “whom he loved, but the tenants killed him . . . What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” “Giving the vineyard to others” was a rationalization for the fact that there were more Gentiles (ex-pagans) in the movement than Jews in the 1st century.

What is absent in Edwards’ study of the gospels is a detailed discussion or analysis of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The gospel writers portrayed Jesus as opposing these groups of Jews through the strict rules of Leviticus and the Law of Moses. It was this opposition to Jewish traditions and practice that motivated the Jews to convince Pilate that Jesus should die. Laws are not strict in and of themselves; strictness relates to enforcement. But we have no contemporary evidence for how the dictates of Scripture were literally enforced in the 1st century. Written texts alone cannot confirm conformity or historicity.

A more detailed understanding of how these groups functioned is important because the modern concept of Pharisees remains biased from the gospel polemic. In Merriam-Wester’s dictionary, Pharisee is defined as “a member of a Jewish sect of the intertestamental period noted for strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and for insistence on the validity of their own oral traditions concerning the law; a pharisaical person; marked by hypocritical censorious self-righteousness.”

Edwards’ analysis could have been enhanced with a discussion of Mark’s “passion narrative,” which contains several anomalies. Mark claimed that Jesus challenged the business of the sacrifices at the Temple by disrupting the animal-sellers and the money-changers. (In relation to “Jesus movies,” this is always a premiere event). But then Jesus came back to the Temple for three days and continued his teaching. Why would the priests let him back in? In relation to the Jewish trial of Jesus Would the entire Sanhedrin, including the high-priest leave their families on the first night of Passover to try a Galilean peasant? The Sanhedrin was not permitted to meet at night or during the holiday festivals.

Edwards includes four Excurses that detail manuscript evidence. “Editing the Accusation into Paul,” argues that the persecution by the Jews against Jesus was “read back” to explain why Paul was persecuted. However, Edwards did not point out that Paul never described any trials by the Jews, and surprisingly, never mentioned Pilate. Edwards could have bolstered his argument for “invention,” by noting that prior to Mark, there was no claim that the Jews killed Jesus.

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Chapter 3, “Killing Jesus as Murdering God,” analyzes the writings of the collective group known as the Church Fathers in their *Adversos* literature (the Jews as adversaries). With the deification of Jesus as the divine son of God, the parable of the tenants remained essential to the claim that when they “killed the son,” they also “killed” (rejected) God, the crime of deicide. When Rome destroyed the Temple in the Revolt, this was God’s punishment of the Jews for their rejection of Jesus as the messiah.

The Church Fathers heightened the polemic against Jews with their claim that the Jews continued to persecute Christians. He correctly points out that the charge cannot be verified by historical evidence. He also includes a section on the later Rabbinic polemic against Christians. But beyond criticism, Jews had no authority to punish anyone beyond the synagogue.

In chapter 4, “Retribution Against the Jews for Killing Jesus” Edwards surveys the later Christians legends in apocryphal “Acts of the Apostles,” and the “Acts of Pilate.” Beginning with Pilate, these were stories of the miraculous Christian conversions of Roman magistrates and kings in the East.

Chapter 5, “Why Agency Matters: The Execution of Jesus and Anti-Judaism,” describes Constantine I’s anti-Jewish legislation. This was the beginning of diminishing Jewish social and economic life that was ultimately codified in the Theodosian and Justinian legislation of Christian law-codes. Such codes were the basis of discrimination against Jews throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.

The book has 70 pages of detailed footnotes which can serve as scholarly resources on the topic and research of early Christianity. This is particularly relevant to the many extra canonical texts of later centuries.

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