

# Jesus Wasn't Killed by the Jews

*Reflections for Christians in Lent*

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## INTRODUCTION

# *We Need This Book*

JON M. SWEENEY

As Rabbi Skorka writes in his foreword, this book was conceived in the weeks after the shooting at a synagogue in Poway, California, about twenty miles north of San Diego. That tragedy (April 27, 2019) was the latest in a series of attacks on Jewish people, carried out by people calling themselves Christians, who seem to believe they are acting on behalf of their faith, in support of the cause of Christ.

In Poway, a young man with a semiautomatic rifle entered a Chabad congregation on the last day of Passover, and began firing where approximately one hundred people were attending services. The shooter was only nineteen years old. He knew none of the people he was trying to kill—except that they were likely Jewish. Two people died and several were injured; many more would have died if the teenager’s gun hadn’t jammed and he hadn’t fled the scene. This all took place six months to the day of an even worse synagogue shooting inspired by antisemitism at the Tree of Life synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You can look these things up, if you don’t remember them. There will be others.

It is easy to dismissively say that the perpetrators of such crimes are insane. *They are obviously out of their minds*, we say. If they didn’t often defend themselves specifically as Christians, that would be an easy explanation for their behavior. It is becoming clearer, sadly, with each new tragedy, that these

madmen have often reasoned their way to their murderous behavior. There is, in fact, a long tradition within Christianity to do so.

As for expressing their Christian faith in the killing of Jews, the perpetrators obviously couldn't be more wrong, when considering the central tenets of our faith. But then this book wouldn't be necessary if the "obviously" in that sentence was accurate. It isn't.

Many Christians have been taught antipathy toward Jewish people as a kind of faithfulness to the Christian gospel. For example, the shooter in Poway was a member of a local Presbyterian church. He'd posted a "manifesto" in explanation of what he was about to do hours before entering the synagogue; it was posted on a social media website, and its language was a blend of Bible quotations and white nationalist rhetoric. In the days following the attack and the suspect's arrest, thousands of Christians were involved in discussions on social media about Christianity's role in these abhorrent views. One prominent pastor in the Presbyterian church remarked that the shooter's writing presented "a frighteningly clear articulation of Christian theology" and warned: "There's a deep and ugly history of anti-Semitism that's crept into the Christian church, that needs to be continuously addressed, condemned and corrected."<sup>1</sup>

There are many, many other historical examples of similar actions and viewpoints. Some of these are offered in the essays to come; so I won't repeat them all here. You will hear of great historical figures, theologians and teachers of the faith, who included in their teaching and preaching the denigration of Jewish people, even characterizations of Jews as evil or less than human, as if Christian tradition rests on such ideas. And then there are passages from our Scriptures that are, at least, troubling, such as John 8:42-44: "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you

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1. Reverend Duke Kwon, quoted in Julie Zauzmer, "The alleged synagogue shooter was a churchgoer who talked Christian theology, raising tough questions for evangelical pastors," *Washington Post*, May 1, 2019.

not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil'” (NRSV). So why are we surprised that a young man of college age, who was reared in the church, would shoot at Jews in a synagogue?

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Christians have been taught our faith as over and above and against other faiths, especially Judaism, for centuries. We have imbibed the story of the Gospel too often as a version of, *We grasped what they failed to grasp*. We are taught that *we* are those who joined the faith that *they* rejected. But to do this—to see it in these oversimplified terms—is to misunderstand the Jewish context of Jesus’s life, what Judaism is, when what we know as Judaism today really started, and how and when the early church was born and formed.

Jesus was Jewish, plain and simple. He wasn’t just sort of Jewish, or temporarily Jewish. Jesus was born a Jew, and died a Jew. And every Christian who proclaims that Jesus was not just a figure in history, but was raised from the dead and lives today, needs also to realize that Jesus never once stepped foot in a church. Jesus was not even walking around Israel/Palestine when the word “Christian” was first used in the New Testament book of Acts nearly a generation after the death of St. Paul in Rome. (And Paul’s death was about thirty years after Jesus’s death and resurrection.) These are not the views of a conservative or a liberal; these are the facts as agreed upon by all Bible scholars.

In the book of Acts, we read about the early disciples of Jesus debating what it means to be Jewish and a follower of Jesus at the same time. This is because all the first followers of Jesus were Jewish, and after Jesus was gone from their midst they had to figure out what it meant to be a disciple of the rabbi. They were confused, and rightly so.

The most prominent of those early disciples, in terms of missionary activity, was St. Paul. About one-third of the New Testament was written by Paul. He was Jewish, we learn from his

writings (see Philippians 3:5), and then he became a follower of Christ. He took his faith in Christ to the Gentiles—to non-Jews. He had to figure out how to make the religious transition himself, and how to teach it to others. For example, did a follower of Jesus not born Jewish have to become Jewish first, before becoming Christian? Paul said no. There are many statements about this in his letters in the New Testament—for example, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law” (Galatians 5:18 NRSV). The other early disciples seem to have agreed with him over time. But this was all new.

Any Christian quoting that verse of St. Paul, from Galatians chapter 5, should do it carefully. It shouldn't be used ever as a proof text (an isolated passage used to try and prove a proposition) for the irrelevance of Judaism, which did not exactly exist when Paul said/wrote this. What we know today as Judaism originated at about the same time as Christianity. What the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) describes is ancient Israelite religion involving priests, animal sacrifice, and a central Temple in Jerusalem. This changed rapidly at about the same time the first followers of Jesus began calling themselves “Christians.” The century of Jesus is the century of the birth of both Christianity and what we know today as Judaism (what Jews and Judaism call “Rabbinic Judaism”). And Judaism today bears almost no resemblance to the faith and practices of the ancient Israelites. (For more on this, see chapter 1, “You Can't Understand Judaism Simply Reading the Old Testament.”)

A verse such as that one in Galatians 5 also should never be said or quoted as if it is an end to a discussion or an argument in apologetics of “our” faith vs. “their” faith. There is no evidence that Paul saw himself as ceasing to be Jewish. There was no radical separation of two “faiths”—even the term “faith” is of more recent origin (see Richard C. Lux's article, “Supersessionism/Replacement Theology,” chapter 5). Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah were part of a first-century Judaism under Roman rule that was diverse and fluid. At that time, all Jews were equally persecuted minorities in ancient Rome, whether they were Jews following what was being born as early

Judaism or whether they were Jews who were now starting to call themselves Christians.

All people of good will in the Roman Empire lamented the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE in Jerusalem, including Jews and Christians. This happened just a few years after St. Paul and St. Peter were martyred in Rome, and just after the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written down. Anyone not worshipping the Roman gods was subject to persecution, including those who were beginning to center their faith on the life, ministry, and resurrected life of Jesus Christ. It was only after the destruction of the Temple in 70 that both the early Christian church and Rabbinic Judaism really began to take shape (see chapter 3 by Mary Boys). The last of the writings in the New Testament, for instance, can be reliably dated to around 100 CE, at least a generation after the deaths of St. Peter and St. Paul and the destruction of the Temple.

It was then only after Emperor Constantine made Christianity the safe and preferred religion of the empire, in 312 CE, that Judaism remained the religious tradition to be persecuted. Christians, then, many of them, took a “victory lap.” What they should have done, then and since, is remember what it is like to suffer for their faith, rather than cause the suffering of others less fortunate.

So to start, we need to stop blaming, and hating, and killing our religious siblings. The Jewish people are our “elder siblings,” as Pope John Paul II once said. This is historically and religiously true. Then, we need to go beyond not hating and not hurting and begin to see all the ways that we misuse and misappropriate Jewish texts, ritual, teachings, and tradition. For example, a Christian poet perhaps doesn’t realize how inappropriate it is for her to write with Christian confidence, yet in the guise of a Hebrew psalmist or Hebrew prophet. She writes lines such as these, reflecting on Psalm 74 and its “O God, why hast thou cast us off forever?”

Come, Lord, O come with speed!  
This sacrilegious seed

Root quickly out, and headlong cast;  
All that thy holy place  
Did late adorn and grace,  
Their hateful hands have quite defaced.

Poet Mary Herbert, 1561–1621

Prophets of the Hebrew Bible—*Jewish* prophets—may talk this way, about themselves and their people, to call all back to faithfulness. So the prophet Amos can channel God, saying: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). But a Christian does not get to talk this way about those same people, who are—at least in this important regard—not her own. As Christians, we should clean up our own house, first; that work should keep us busy for a lifetime and more. And here we come full circle with a reminder of why we need this book.

That God-wrestling psalmist’s question is not answered simply and only by the coming of Christ. There is another covenant—the first and older one—which is unbroken and unashamed. Jewish leaders like St. Paul were upset that their coreligionists (other Jews) did not see Christ in glory, but they also didn’t think that everyone who was a Jew was destined to, or necessarily needed to, become a Jesus-follower. It has taken most of the rest of us two thousand years to learn this lesson. And we still need to learn it.