A Holy Week Reader

Featuring Excerpts from *Did God Kill Jesus?*

By Tony Jones

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March 29 - Palm Sunday

An Unexpected Messiah

The Greek word for passion, *pascho* (“to have an experience,” or, when used negatively, “to suffer”) is used several times in the Gospels and Acts to refer to Jesus’ final days, and it is similarly found in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) in passages that have traditionally been interpreted to predict Jesus’ arrest, torture, and execution. (It should be noted that the contemporaries of Jesus, including his disciples, did not seem to have been expecting an executed Messiah, so these interpretations of Hebrew prophecy by Paul and the Gospel writers were all done in hindsight.) From that word, Christians have used the term *passion* to indicate the period in Jesus’ life from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem—celebrated annually on Palm Sunday—up to his crucifixion.

In spite of the Gospel writers’ different emphases, which we’ll look at on Wednesday, the four Gospels are largely in agreement on the outline of the passion. On Sunday, Jesus came into Jerusalem to great acclaim. Jews at the time expected a Messiah, just as many do today. And they expected certain things of that Messiah: he would be a great military
or political leader, or both; he would unite the people; he would reclaim King David’s throne in the Temple; and he would expel the Roman oppressors. Based on the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, it seems that a collection of his followers and that city’s residents thought that Jesus might be just the Messiah they’d been hoping for. With shouts of “Hosanna!” and coats and palm branches laid at his feet, Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem as a prophet, and possibly as a liberator.

But as the week wore on, it became increasingly clear that, if Jesus was a Messiah, he wasn’t the kind of Messiah that they’d been hoping for. Early in the week, Jesus threw a fit in the Temple, castigating the money changers and animal peddlers therein. He ate meals with his followers, and at one of those meals a woman anointed his feet with oil over the disciples’ objections, a clear precursor to death. He continued to preach and heal. All the while, the Gospel writers tell us, the religious leaders in Jerusalem were plotting to silence the wild-eyed Nazarene preacher.

What started as what many viewed as the triumphant entry of a nation’s hero was well on its way to becoming a troubling and bloody execution.

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March 30 – Monday of Holy Week

What It All Means

I teach a class at a local state university called, “Introduction to the New Testament,” so I’m always looking for discussion material on who was Jesus, really, and how much we can confidently say about him. Recently, two examples—plucked right from Jesus’ interactions with the temple money-changers during Holy Week—fell right into my lap.

The first was a 60 Minutes interview with a right-wing TV personality. He’d just written a book about the death of Jesus, and he was doing the talk-show circuit, selling his book. He professed to 60 Minutes that he’d written a book free of any religion or doctrine—“It’s a history book,” he claimed. Then he got to the crux of his argument, the thesis, he said, of his book: Jesus was killed by the Jewish and Roman authorities because he interrupted the flow of taxes from the “folks” to the elites. Jesus was a small-government revolutionary, shown most clearly when he stormed the Temple and overthrew the table of the moneychangers and those selling animals for sacrifice.

As I was sitting in the living room, watching this interview, my spouse, Courtney, started chuckling. “What?” I asked. “Well, I was just reading about that same episode.”
Courtney was sitting across the room, studying for her yoga teacher certification. She proceeded to read to me from one of her assigned books, *World Peace Diet: Eating for Spiritual Health and Social Harmony*, in which the author claims that Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple was “an act of animal liberation,” and that, “it was for this flagrantly revolutionary act that Jesus had to be crucified by the herding culture’s power elite.”

These two takes, of course, demonstrate the complexity one encounters when trying to understand Jesus—perhaps especially in trying to understand his actions in the last week of his life. Here, like in so many other places, we’ve got two authors, both saying that Jesus’ actions in the Temple got him killed. One claims it’s because Jesus was a small government, anti-tax protestor. The other says it’s because Jesus was an anti-herding animal liberationist.

I showed the *60 Minutes* interview to the class, and I read them the relevant paragraphs from *World Peace Diet*. We all had a laugh. Then I read them the passage about the cleansing of the Temple from the Gospel of Matthew. It’s two verses long:

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the Temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a den of robbers.’

Nothing about taxes, and nothing about a vegan diet.

As we see, different readers are able to come to entirely different conclusions based on the reading of the same passage or passages. And it’s no wonder why we struggle to
arrive at a uniform interpretation of the events of Holy Week or even a uniform interpretation of what the cross meant to humankind. After all, the Bible is rife with language about both God’s love and God’s wrath. The Bible talks of sacrifice, for example, and of the penalties for sin. Proponents of one version will tell you that their position has more Bible verses in their favor, while another camp will tell you that they have better verses. Quantity versus quality. And on and on it goes.

The authors of the New Testament say many things on the topic of Jesus’ death. They are not of one voice on the matter; they are polyphonic. Thus, we have to weigh the biblical evidence about each story, from Holy Week or beyond, and run it through the gauntlet of our reason. This is particularly important, perhaps, when trying to decipher the meaning of the troubling events to come—as God seemingly signs off on his son’s violent death.

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Some Thoughts About Why Fig Trees Die

Tuesday of Holy Week of course brings us to the well-known passage in which Jesus curses a fig tree and it dies. While we might attempt to look for some special significance to this story being placed in the last week of Jesus’ life, it is perhaps better understood in context of Jesus’ entire earthly ministry.

Jesus’ miracles, such as the withering of the fig tree, can be understood in a similar way. Contrary to popular belief, they were not carnival acts meant to wow the crowds and convince everyone of his divinity—if that were the case, the miracles failed miserably, since none of Jesus’ followers seemed to consider him a divine being until after his resurrection. Instead, the miracles showed in action what Jesus was teaching in his sermons and parables. With the nature miracles—calming a storm, walking on water, killing a fig tree, feeding large crowds—Jesus is showing God’s power over nature.

And with the even-more-important people miracles—healing lepers, paralytics, blind men, and a bleeding woman; exorcizing demons; raising the dead—Jesus is reaching out to people who had been literally and figuratively cast out of God’s kingdom, and he’s bringing them back into God’s kingdom. In fact, he is saying that bringing in the poor
and cast out is a characteristic of the new kingdom that God is inaugurating.

Remember: Cleanliness really was next to godliness in first century Judaism. Religious life centered on the Temple in Jerusalem—Yahweh himself was believed to be especially present there. But only “whole” persons were allowed to enter the Temple courts to experience Yahweh. People who were in any way “unclean” were prohibited from Temple worship—this included anyone who was physically infirm—the blind, the lame, the leprous, women who were menstruating, persons with mental illness and/or demons, and anyone who’d touched a dead body but not yet gone through a ritual bath. When Jesus healed these people, he was effectively ushering them back into the center of life with God and bypassing all the rules that had been set up to keep them out.

So when Jesus defended his disciples for picking grain on the sabbath, he was essentially telling his interrogators that they had misunderstood God’s relationship with human beings. He was saying, in effect, “yes, there are rules, but don’t let the rules get in the way of loving God and others.” And when Jesus healed a leper, he was giving an object lesson in the same: by the power of God’s spirit, the people who have been excluded are now included.

Be it apocalyptic preaching or nature miracles or cryptic parables or miraculous healings, the entirety of Jesus’ ministry—his three years on the road and even this infamous fig tree story—were about telling and showing what the kingdom of God is really like. He was, in speech and action—indeed, in his very being—inaugurating something new, a new configuration of the relationship between God and humans. And so, the question for Holy Week becomes, how does God allowing his son’s violent death
fit into the new relationship Jesus is inaugurating?

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The Difference in the Gospels

The Gospel writers, like us, had to wrestle with the meaning of the events of Holy Week, including, of course, the violent nature of Jesus’ coming death. It may not surprise us then that in each of the four Gospels, Jesus’ passion is the longest and most detailed sequence recounted in Jesus’ life. The Gospel writers spend more ink on those six days than on anything else in Jesus’ 33 years of life.

Despite their intense focus on the events of this week, however, each of them approached the search for meaning differently. And since the Bible doesn’t hint at what happened on Wednesday, we’ll spend this time doing a quick review of how these Gospel writers captured the events of Holy Week.

In John, Jesus’ passion is presented very much as a drama, leading to the common practice since the Middle Ages of “Passion Plays.” While each of the Gospel writers presents the passion as such, John described scene settings that sound almost directorial. It is clearly a dramatic narrative they’re presenting—maybe even a narrative drama.

As they recount the last week of Jesus’ life, however, the Gospel writers have different
emphases in their narratives. Mark and Matthew share a perspective, and they probably shared source material as well. In their telling, Jesus is abandoned by his followers, left to die agonizingly alone. Framed by two prayers—in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays in Aramaic and Greek that his suffering might be avoided, and on the cross he prays in Aramaic, asking why God has abandoned him—the passion in Mark and Matthew seems to indicate the absence of God, but then God arrives just at the moment of Jesus’ death.

In both Gospels, the Temple curtain is torn in two, and in Matthew, there is an earthquake and dead bodies rise from graves. A strong theme leading up to the passion in both Gospels is that Jesus’ followers themselves will have to follow his path, carry their own crosses, and endure suffering in his name, so it is significant both that the passion is excruciating in these Gospels, and that God, albeit hidden, is not entirely absent.

In contrast, Luke’s Gospel depicts God and Jesus in a less tortured relationship. When Jesus prays in the Garden, angels answer him back. And on the cross, Jesus offers entrance to paradise to a fellow victim and breathes his last after praying, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Throughout Luke’s Gospel, the focus is on healing, on Jesus’ ministry to women, and on forgiveness, and these themes continue through the passion and crucifixion. In Luke, the Passion and crucifixion of Jesus are more salutary than in Matthew and Mark.

In John, the passion of Jesus is not so much tragic as it is triumphant. Written decades later than the other Gospels, the Fourth Gospel is both more theologically sophisticated and more hopeful than the Synoptics. In John’s telling, Jesus’ passion is leading him to-
ward his ultimate destination: eternal glory at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is portrayed as a king, though a hidden one, throughout the passion of the Fourth Gospel, even concluding with a somewhat regal entombment, as opposed to the hasty burial of the first three Gospels. The Johannine passion can best be summarized by a passage from another New Testament book, 1 John: “For whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.”

Each writer includes some air of mysterious struggle as Jesus prepares for a violent death, in which God will not intervene to save him. Whether the authors of the Gospels infer God’s absence, Jesus’ surrender of his spirit, or Jesus’ hidden kingship, this was clearly a weighty, veiled topic for them, let alone us.

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April 2 – Maundy Thursday

The Search to Blame

Ultimately, of course, the religious leaders convinced one of Jesus’ compatriots, Judas, to betray him on or around the Passover celebration. Jesus celebrated one last dinner with his followers, from which Judas excused himself to complete his transaction as betrayer. While we have a lot of detail about this dinner, the nature of Jesus’ comments are something of a conundrum. Paul, who was not present at the dinner, wrote to the Christians in Corinth that Jesus connected that dinner—and every subsequent commemoration of that dinner—to his own death, indeed, to the tearing of his flesh and spilling of his blood. Three of the four Gospels also record Jesus’ words, each with slight variations. The connection of the last supper to the blood sacrifice of Pesach is clear.

Following dinner, Jesus and his disciples retreated to a grove of olive trees, where Jesus prayed and the disciples slept. The Gospel writers give us some of Jesus’ most poignant words in this scene. He is deeply distressed. He prays that God will take away the cup of suffering that he is about to experience, and he chides his disciples for not staying awake during his hour of need. Judas arrives in the grove with a coterie of soldiers, indicating to them which Galilean was the marked man by kissing Jesus. From there,
Jesus is taken, jailed, beaten, mocked, and bandied back and forth between Jewish and Roman officials. Everyone wants him silenced, but no one, it seems, wants to be responsible for his fate.

The Gospels tell us that the Jesus was tried before a Sanhedrin court, and that he also stood before Herod, the Jewish governor, and Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect. Through it all, Jesus is portrayed as carrying himself stoically, answering his inquisitors rarely and briefly, and even invoking a slap across the face from a soldier and the high priest who demanded, “Have you no answer?”

In the end, Pilate assents to the demands of the crowd—a crowd that has turned on Jesus in less than a week—and, though he washes his hands and attempts to deny responsibility, Pilate sentences Jesus to be executed, by crucifixion.

And so, with this telling, begins the age-long search for who is to blame for Jesus’ coming violent death. Is it the imperialistic government? The over zealous religious leaders? The angry mob? Or could it even be God himself?

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The Violent Death

Crucifixion was a common form of execution for over a millennium, from at least the sixth century BCE until the emperor Constantine banned it in 337 CE out of respect for Jesus. After one battle, Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) crucified 2,000 defeated Tyrian soldiers. Three centuries later, the Roman Empire embraced crucifixion; it was considered a particularly humiliating way to die, and thus used for slaves, pirates, and insurrectionists. Roman citizens were exempt from the ignominy of crucifixion.

Unlike a firing squad or lethal injection or the gallows, crucifixion does not kill in an instant. Instead, it’s a long, torturous death. But the ancient church didn’t appear to be too concerned with exactly how Jesus died; it wasn’t until 1805 that there was any published account hypothesizing about the cause of death. In 1847, for example, J.C. Stroud, M.D., proposed that Jesus died from a violent rupture of the heart; this theory long held sway, making for many imaginative sermons. But as cardiac medicine advanced, doctors discovered that heart valves rupture due to disease, not mental anguish.

In 1950, a French surgeon suggested that victims of crucifixion actually die from
asphyxia. Pulling up on the spikes through the arms, and pushing on the spike through the legs, the victim can take in breath. But as exhaustion sets in, the victim cannot rise enough to breathe; the muscles that facilitate inhalation and exhalation similarly become exhausted; ultimately, exhalation of carbon dioxide from the lung becomes impossible, suffocating the victim.

There are other, equally horrible aspects of crucifixion that, while they may not have killed Jesus, surely accelerated his death. For one, he likely lost a great deal of blood from the scourging he suffered at the hands of Roman guards and the crown of thorns they pressed into his scalp, since cuts to the head cause significant blood loss.

Since then, some recent studies have cast doubt on the asphyxiation thesis, positing the cause of death as shock and dehydration. Indeed, a crucifixion would likely send anyone into shock. Popular depictions most often show Jesus with a spike through each hand, and one through his stacked feet. But, in fact, it’s most likely that the spikes went through his wrists or forearms, between the radius and ulna bones, and that each of his heels was nailed to the side of the upright beam of the cross.

Whatever the medical cause of death, crucifixion was just as the Romans intended: long, agonizing, humiliating (the victims were often naked), and excruciating (a word that is derived from crucifixion).

The Gospels differ somewhat on the details of Jesus’ crucifixion—in Mark and Matthew, he is abandoned; in John, his mother and others keep vigil as he dies. In Mark and Matthew, a fellow Jew mockingly offers Jesus some vinegary wine on a sponge; in Luke, Roman soldiers offer the wine; in John, an unspecified “they” offer it.
But in each, Jesus dies. Unequivocally. Even the apocryphal gospels, written in the second and third centuries agree on this:

Jesus died. He died on a cross. He died at the hands of the Roman Empire. He died at the provocation of his coreligionists. And in his death, the disciples’ hopes for a military-general-messiah were dashed. On Good Friday, all they’ve got is a dead messiah. In fact, they likely thought that they had a dead pretender-to-the-throne.

Why God would allow this has become one of the greatest mysteries of history.

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April 4 – Holy Saturday

Back to Blaming

In a strictly historical sense, Jesus was killed by Jewish and Roman leaders working in collusion with one another. But in the early church, the blame was poured mainly on the Jews; and in the subsequent centuries, blame has been placed exclusively on the Jews. Matthew, breaking with Mark and Luke, takes up the issue of responsibility for Jesus’ death, and he lays it at the feet of the Jewish leaders. Matthew co-opts passages from the Hebrew Bible about the innocent blood being on the hands of the executioners. And in a scene unique to Matthew, Judas repents of his betrayal, saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” When he tries to give back the money he was paid for turning on Jesus, he is rebuffed, and he hangs himself.

The more troubling quote comes later in the chapter. Pilate, upset that the crowd was threatening to riot if he didn’t execute this innocent man, symbolically washes his hands—a Jewish custom—and declares, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” Matthew writes, “Then the people as a whole declared, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’” No longer is it just the Jewish leaders who want Jesus dead. Now it seems to be all Jews.
No verse has a more terrible legacy in all the Bible than this one. And the Gospel of John has reinforced this as well, since that Gospel is far less precise about who plotted Jesus’ death, preferring the phrase “the Jews” to any talk about chief priests, scribes, and presbyters.

But the accusations against the Jews in the Gospels of Matthew and John must be understood in their historical context. First, those were brutal times. Religious and political violence was terribly common, and proto-Judaism itself was not exempt. In the two centuries leading up to Jesus’ birth, various factions of Jews had fought for control of the religion, razed each others’ temples, and assassinated rival priests. In the Judean Civil War in the first century BCE over 50,000 Jews were killed. When it ended, the victorious King Alexander Jannaeus crucified 800 Pharisee men, slaughtering their wives and children before their eyes as they hung on crosses. As I said, it was a brutal time, and religious violence was well-known outside and inside Judaism.

More to the point, Jesus was a religious revolutionary. Even scholars who reject his divinity, his miracles, and his resurrection concede that Jesus’ preaching was a radical departure from the dominant religio-political parties in first century Jerusalem. So out-of-step with traditional interpretations of the law was Jesus that he was opposed by the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the scribes, the presbyters, and the chief priests. In other words, he was opposed by everyone in power. Even when they agreed on nothing else, they agreed that Jesus should be silenced.
With Jesus’ enemies in agreement about his execution, perhaps the biggest question that remains is whether God, for some mysterious reason, willingly allowed their unified efforts to result in the crucifixion of his son.

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April 5 – Easter

God’s Total Solidarity with Us

Across the globe every Easter, churches perform their most dramatic liturgy. Ministers and priests don their most colorful vestments, black draping is stripped from altars and pulpits and replaced with linens of brightest white, and trumpets blare as choirs sing, “Hallelujah!” It’s a stark contrast from the dark and somber liturgies of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. It turns out the story of Jesus makes for good theater.

The resurrection of Jesus is the capstone of the drama that is his life and passion. It’s the proof of God’s power and, as Paul says, a down payment on the resurrection that each one of us is promised. Without the resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth would have been just another religious martyr. His would have been an inspirational death, but it would have had no cosmic import.

Some today—even Christian theologians—find the resurrection passé. God doesn’t break the laws of physics, they say, and God doesn’t bring people back from the dead.
Not even himself. Even if the disciples did encounter Jesus after his death, what they saw was a spirit, an apparition. His body stayed in the donated tomb, they say, and believers changed the story to make it more dramatic.

But in Jesus we’ve found that God is extraordinarily interested in what it means to be human. And nothing is more constitutive of our humanness than our bodies. Remember those in the early church who thought that the divinity of Jesus got vacuumed out of him just before he died? They were condemned because that radical bifurcation between the body and spirit of Jesus has long been rejected by the church. It’s the same on his resurrection day—we should reject any notion that attempts to divorce Jesus’ spirit from his body. Jesus was resurrected in toto, body and spirit, humanity and divinity.

God’s commitment to our humanity is complete. It didn’t end at the tomb. The true solidarity that united us with God because of Jesus’ death becomes glorious and everlasting in his new life on Easter morning. And Jesus’ death—all the theories about it, all the questions and debates—only has meaning because of his resurrection.

**Conclusion**

Even in this hope, of course, there is much more conflict left to explore. After all, Jesus’ death was rooted in the sort of religious conflict that, to some extent, continues to this day. During his three years of itinerant ministry, Jesus preached a particular perspective on the future of Judaism and the nature of God. But his view was at odds with other religious and political groups of the day: the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the leaders in the Jerusalem temple. The Roman authorities got caught in between these rivals. The
temple leaders had more power than Jesus and his band of Galileans, and the Romans sided with the powerful and sent Jesus to the cross. We tend to look at a crucifix and think of Jesus as a willing victim who died for our sins, but to the eyewitnesses—both Jew and Gentile—it surely must have been seen as an internecine religious disagreement. And in the years since, even more religious violence has been perpetrated as a result of that crucifixion, in the name of the crucifixion, most notably the extraordinarily heinous history of Christian anti-Semitism. The crucifixion, an event that we claim brings peace between God and humans, has also been used to justify pogroms and holocausts.

While we could look at a lot of aspects of Christianity to help us solve the problem of violence that besets our religion, the obvious place to start is with that bloody execution. What we do with that violence will help us figure out what to do with all of the subsequent violence in Christianity and in the world. And what we finally decide about God will have massive implications for these questions, because if God is wrath, then violence is inevitable.

While it’s impossible to address all these issues in a Holy Week devotional, I’ve penned a more lengthy exploration about God’s role in the crucifixion in my new book, Did God Kill Jesus: Searching For Love in History’s Most Famous Execution. This book travels through pre-history and history, Old and New Testament, and 2,000 years in the life of the church to look at some of the faith’s most troubling questions. I hope you’ll join me in asking if God is love, if the violence then must be surmountable. And the crucifixion of Jesus, while violent, must be the key to ending violence.
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