

MYTH #3: JEWS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATH OF JESUS

Where does it come from?

The belief that the Jews killed Jesus grew out of interpretations of the trial and crucifixion portions of the New Testament. The Gospels describe Jewish religious leaders delivering Jesus to Roman authorities with the request that they execute him for blasphemy and public menace. In the Gospel of Matthew (27:25), it is written that Jews cried out, “His blood be on us and our children,” as they demanded his crucifixion. As a result, Christians have historically held Jews collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

What are the facts?

Crucifixion, the particular method used to execute Jesus, is forbidden by Jewish law. Moreover, Jesus did not commit any crime that is punishable by death according to Jewish law. It is widely agreed upon by current scholars that Jesus was executed by the Roman rulers of Israel, the same Romans who also executed tens of thousands of other Jews by crucifixion, including two others on the day Jesus was executed.

The myth of Jewish responsibility for Jesus’ death is embedded in 2,000 years worth of Christian teaching and Western culture, starting with the gospels’ attempt to define who the true Jews were. While most people respect the rights of others to adhere to the tenets of their religion, there has been a historic resentment against Jews by many Christians who cannot understand why Jesus has been so stubbornly rejected. Beginning in the Middle Ages, Christians believed that Jews desecrated communion wafers and killed Christian children to use their blood for matzah (the famous “blood libel”). Today, these issues come up in all sorts of ways, from history classes where the Crusades are taught as heroic times (thousands of Jews were slaughtered during this period) to literature and media that refer to Jewish responsibility for Jesus’ death. The most recent widespread example is Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. In Mr. Gibson’s film, there is absolutely no ambiguity as to who is responsible for the death of Jesus — it is the Jews.

According to Christian theologian Carl Evans, “From the New Testament times to the present, it is difficult to find a single period when the Church has not acted shamefully toward the

Jews. I'm convinced that anti-Semitism has been such a powerful and persistent nemesis largely because of the Church's false witness against the Jews." To this day, some Christian children are still being taught that "Jews are Christ-killers" and "Jews drink the blood of Christians."

However persistent these myths may be, the Catholic Church has recently made significant steps to correct them. In 1965, the Vatican Council issued *Nostra Aetate*, which stated that Jesus' death "cannot be charged against all Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today." In 1992, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (a teaching guide) noted that no one is certain of what happened 2,000 years ago and that Jews as a collective group should not be considered responsible for the crucifixion.

How can we respond?

When someone labels you with something as loaded as "Christ Killer," it is easy to react emotionally. It is best in such a situation to avoid taking the comment to heart and to respond with objectivity. While reason will not work with everyone, it may be useful to point out that placing responsibility on a modern-day person for something that happened 2,000 years ago is absurd. Pointing out the Catholic Church's stance on the issue today may also get the person to stop and think. Keep in mind that comments like this often stem from ignorance, and do not necessarily reflect anti-Semitic attitudes. If you share facts rather than condemn people for such statements, they may be more willing to listen and learn.

You might point out, as an example, the irony of the blood libel, since Jewish dietary laws strictly prohibit consuming any type of blood.

Many choose to respond to this allegation by personalizing their response, "Are you blaming me for the death of Jesus? How can you hold me responsible for something that happened 2,000 year ago? I wasn't there, were you there?" While this type of response doesn't provide factual information, it does push people to reflect on what they are saying.