

Why Jesus Died

reviewed by [Beverly R. Gaventa](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

In Review



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Gerard S. Sloyan
Augsburg Fortress

However one assesses Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, the film has drawn attention to the death of Jesus in a way that preachers and teachers, who annually labor to place Good Friday before their people, can only envy. One could scarcely

have imagined that the crucifixion would become a topic for movie reviewers and talk show hosts.

Gerard Sloyan's book comes as a welcome resource for reflecting on some of the difficult questions surrounding the Gibson film. This slim volume excerpts three chapters from Sloyan's *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (1995); the first addresses historical questions about the crucifixion, the second the interpretation of Jesus' death as redemptive and the third the lodging of blame for Jesus' death on the Jews.

Sloyan briefly introduces the Roman use of crucifixion for the worst criminals and for those perceived to be a political threat, and then reviews the evidence in the Gospels regarding Jesus' death. Although conceding that some Jewish religious leaders may have wanted to silence Jesus, Sloyan insists that Roman power crucified Jesus. Even while agreeing with Sloyan on this point, I must note that the evidence is far less clear than he indicates. (And it is simply unimaginable that the list of works recommended for further reading does not include Raymond Brown's magisterial *The Death of the Messiah*.) When Sloyan concludes his book with the assertion that Jews as a people "would have repudiated to a person the small number of Jews in power who had had a part in the [crucifixion]," his rhetoric—however admirable—has outstripped the sources.

The second chapter undertakes to explain why the earliest interpreters of Jesus came to view his death as redemptive. Given that the question takes Sloyan behind the sources available to us, it is understandable that this is the least clear section of the book. What he does make clear is that Paul, the earliest commentator on Jesus' death whose comments are available to us, interprets that death as God's loving and redemptive action on behalf of human beings, rather than as an evil thing done by bad people.

The significant point here, and one that might have been made more sharply, is that Paul displays virtually no interest in identifying human villains behind the death of Jesus. Gradually, however, blame for that death was placed on Jews, and not only the Jews in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion but all Jews at all times. Sloyan's final chapter briefly draws attention to the trajectory of interpretation—beginning with the early apologist Justin and extending through Pope Gregory the Great—according to which Jews were stigmatized as the killers of Christ.

Making a discussion of these difficult issues available in an accessible format is highly desirable, particularly in the present season. Sloyan's volume does just that, though pastors will find that his historical reconstruction offers no substitute for the continual instruction and proclamation of the theology of the cross.