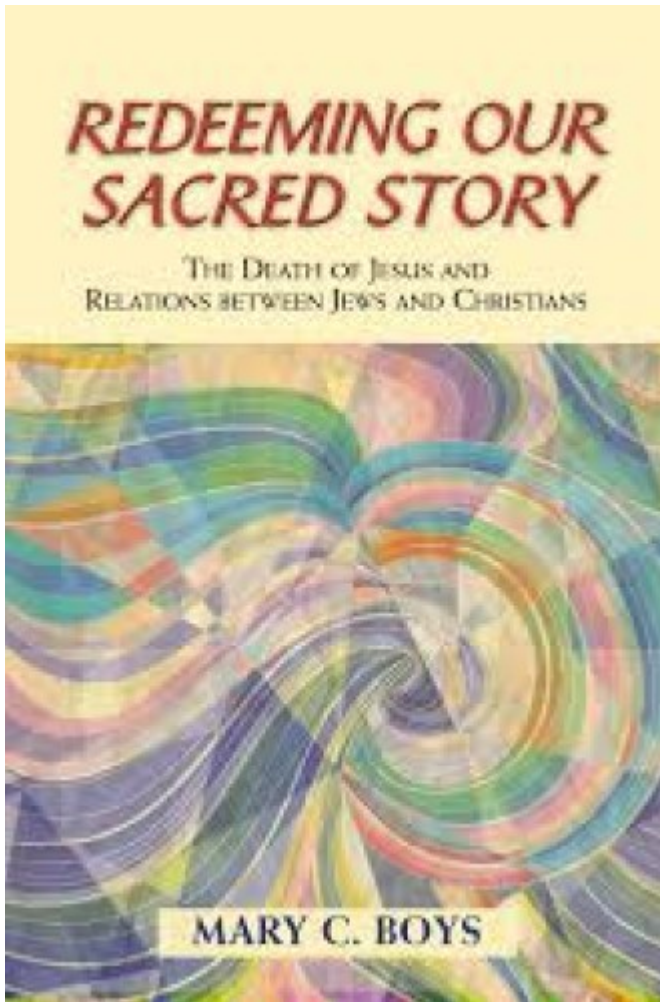


*Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, by Mary C. Boys

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

## In Review



## Redeeming Our Sacred Story

By Mary C. Boys

Paulist

Mary Boys of Union Seminary in New York, a longtime participant and advocate in Jewish-Christian dialogue, has made a singular and significant contribution to that vexed, urgent conversation. The our in her title concerns the Christian narrative

about the crucifixion of Jesus. The book addresses how that story can be told faithfully in the presence of Jewish conversation partners. The key term in Boys's urging is *redeeming*.

Her book is divided into two parts: first, about why the story needs to be redeemed, and second, offering specific, concrete steps that can be taken to redeem it.

This symmetrical presentation is introduced by an extended discussion titled "A Trembling Telling" wherein Boys considers "wrong tellings" that have distorted this narrative and others in pernicious ways. She summons readers to move from a "troubled telling" to a "transformed telling" that no longer positions Jews as the villains in the crucifixion narrative.

In her articulation of the dominant troubled telling of the story, Boys reviews the familiar elements of the gospel narrative that treats Jews in a stereotypical way as the villains who are responsible for Jesus' death. It is important and breathtaking to recognize how powerful and central that rhetoric is to the gospel story. The texts themselves make it convenient to conclude that "the Jews" were "Christ killers."

Given that testimony, Boys reflects on the ways in which subsequent church interpretation of the text has solidified and accented the verdict of "Christ killers." She cites John Chrysostom as among the foremost champions of such a negative stereotype in the early church. And while Augustine dealt with the matter in a much more complex way, he continued the primary verdict of his predecessor interpreters. With a serious and specific dip into the Middle Ages, Boys shows how the "Christ killer" accusation became an unquestioned, widely shared view.

Moving to our own time, Boys reflects on the impact and nefarious influence of the passion play at Oberammergau in Germany, the silence of the Barmen Declaration on the topic, and the capacity of the Vatican, as late as 1928, to sort out "unacceptable" and "acceptable" forms of anti-Semitism. She judges, moreover, that even the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate*, on "Non-Christian Religions," did not escape grudging ambiguity in what was a much-disputed decision. This careful reportage makes painful reading, but it is essential reading as Boys's book moves toward an effort at redeeming the crucifixion narrative. As a prelude to such a transformed telling, she reports that the managers of the Oberammergau script have been seriously engaged in reconsideration and modification of the script to both acknowledge the problem and attempt to rectify the troubled reading in that

long-running drama.

Important as this review and analysis are, the crucial and energizing part of the book is the second part, about the transformed telling. For this rereading and retelling, Boys identifies two crucial emergents in interpretive practice. The first of these is the recent recognition of the pervasive, brutalizing reality of the Roman Empire, which was “a pyramid in which wealthy elites, perhaps two to three percent of the population supported by a retainer class of bureaucrats of about five percent, ruled over vast lands and peoples.” The military force of Rome had the capacity and will “to deter rebellion by terror.” One tactic for such deterrence was crucifixion, a state exhibition that was “a spectacle for the edification of those watching” and that terrorized the population into submission. Boys likens crucifixion to the show killings conducted by Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, in which executed bodies were left on exhibit for all to see. Boys concludes:

We lack sufficient evidence to know for certain why the New Testament writers assign blame to Jews. What we do know is that we have compelling warrants for situating those texts in a wider horizon and for rethinking their theological meaning.

The second basis for rethinking the accusation against the Jews is to take seriously the recent scholarship on Pauline theology that breaks with the old assumption that Paul was busy attacking “Jewish law.” Readers will do well to follow Boys’s bibliographic guidance to the older work of E. P. Sanders and the more recent offers of Mark Nanos, Krister Stendahl, and especially Neil Elliott and Brigitte Kahl, who show that Paul’s gospel is “in contrast to the imperial theology in which Caesar is worshiped as god.” Thus “the law” that Paul critiques is not Jewish law but Roman law; and the critique expresses concern for those who “stepped outside of conformity with the law and religion of the Roman city and the Roman Empire.”

This contrast to Rome (and not to Judaism) permits Boys to observe that the boundary between Jews and Christians, both of whom were coerced by Roman law, is fluid and that the supposed “partings of the ways” between Jews and Christians are at best ambiguous and do not permit reductionistic labels or contrasts.

As her book closes, Boys moves to a series of concrete proposals about how to work at the redemption of the narrative. The accent is on ways in which the texts exhibit a probing openness that does not admit of one-dimensional interpretation. Attention

must be paid to the complexity of the early centuries, with an awareness that the larger gospel claims are not compromised if we reject the texts that are oppressive.

The book finishes with two surprising and helpful expositions. First, drawing on her own life as a member of a Catholic religious order, Boys ponders how the spiritual exercises of Ignatius may be useful in new probes and discernments. Such a way with the text refuses any simplistic cognitive approach and invites instead engagement of all the senses, so we might experience the sights and sounds and smells of the crucifixion scene in all of its palpable insistence. When we do that, we might not so readily focus on blame rather than on the raw power of an empire that could inflict such top-down brutality.

Second, Boys offers an exposition of the “seven last words from the cross” with particular attention to the petition, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This riff on forgiveness is powerful guidance for a fresh reading of the entire drama. (However, this exposition is not quite complete, for the discussion shortchanges some of the seven words.)

This volume presents us with two subtexts. One is about the deep need for rethinking and reimagining what can be said about the “saving significance” of the cross. We are at square one concerning the salvific efficacy of the cross because old formulations are clearly not adequate. The other is about the fact that we live in a time when anti-Semitism is a ready charge against any critique of the contemporary state of Israel. On both counts, this book is an opening for rethinking.

The church, in its various manifestations, has so much for which to answer and so much for which to repent. Boys shows how these tasks can be undertaken concretely in ways of generosity and graciousness that are at the heart of the story.