

Matthew 27

Introduction

In this module, we explore a story from the New Testament that Christians have sometimes viewed as justifying violence against Jews in their own day.

Orientation to the Text

The New Testament book of Matthew is a story about the life of Jesus. Near the end of the story, Jesus is in Jerusalem. At the time, Jerusalem and the surrounding area were part of the Roman Empire, and there were Roman soldiers and officials stationed there. There was also a local authority structure, including “chief priests” and “elders,” which predated the Roman occupation. In Matthew’s story, some prominent figures in the local community become upset with Jesus and have him arrested. Then they hand Jesus over to the Roman governor Pilate for execution. Just before the passage printed below, Pilate tells a crowd of people that he will free one of two prisoners currently held in his custody – either Jesus or a man named Barabbas – in honor of the Passover festival, which was being celebrated in Jerusalem at the time. Some of the local leaders push to have Barabbas released and Jesus killed. After the passage below, Jesus is crucified by Roman soldiers.

The book of Matthew was written in the first century CE, in Greek.

Getting Familiar with the Text

Read the short excerpt from Matthew printed on the next page. As you read, answer the following questions, which are designed to help you get familiar with the contents of the text.

1. What do the Roman governor Pilate and the soldiers do and say in the passage?
2. What do the chief priests and elders do and say?
3. What do the crowds do and say?

Matthew 27:20-31 (translation: New Revised Standard Version)

²⁰ The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.

²¹ The governor [Pilate] again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?”

And they said, “Barabbas.”

²² Pilate said to them, “Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?”

All of them said, “Let him be crucified!”^a

²³ Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?”

But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”

²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.”

²⁵ Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!”

²⁶ So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort^b around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ³⁰ They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹ After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Digging Deeper

After thinking about questions 1-3 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

4. When an act of violence takes place, there are often many different factors and circumstances that contribute to it, involving a range of people. How does the passage from Matthew about the execution of Jesus illustrate this phenomenon?
5. Does the passage from Matthew encourage its audience – the people for whom the story was written in the first century CE – to act violently against anyone? (Note: The intended audience probably consisted of members of Jesus-following communities, at least some of whom considered themselves Jewish.)

^a Crucifixion was a standard Roman method of execution.

^b A cohort was a unit of Roman soldiers.

6. Some Christians over the centuries have used Jesus' death to justify violent actions against Jews in their own day, saying, "The Jews killed Jesus," or calling Jewish people "Christ-killers."
 - a. After studying the passage from Matthew, how would you respond to someone who said, "The Jews killed Jesus and should be punished for it"?
 - b. Does it surprise you that Christians have sometimes invoked the story of Jesus' death to justify action against Jews? Why or why not?

(Note: The book of Matthew seems to have been written by someone who was Jewish himself, as well as being a member of a Jesus-following community. In the story, Jesus and his first followers are also Jewish, and remain Jewish throughout the story. Some other characters in the story object to Jesus' teaching and actions, but this is not depicted as a broader conflict between "the Jews and Jesus" or between "Jesus and Judaism." Rather, it is depicted as a conflict *among* Jews.)

Further Reading and Watching

- You may enjoy reading the rest of the book of Matthew, which is freely available on the internet.
- On the history of anti-Jewish attitudes among Christians:
 - o Jeremy Cohen (2007). *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 - o Henry Abramson (2014). "Medieval Antisemitism" [video]. Available at: <https://youtu.be/H-yEMdrOASo> (accessed 24 September 2020).
 - o Chapter 2 of Michael Rydelnik, *They Called Me Christ Killer*. Available at: <https://discoveryseries.org/courses/they-called-me-christ-killer/lessons/the-historical-perspective> (accessed 24 September 2020).

Summary of Key Takeaways from this Module

- In the book of Matthew, a variety of different people and groups are involved in the process that leads up to Jesus' death.
- Some Christians over the centuries have carried out violence against Jews.
- Some Christians have referred to Jesus' death as justification for actions against Jews, even though New Testament texts do not give any such instructions.