

Barabbas or Jesus? The Jewish-Roman War and the War in Iraq

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As we American Christians hear the stories of the suffering and death of Jesus during the 2007 Lenten season against the background of the fourth anniversary of the war in Iraq, there is an eerie echo of the stories of the people's choice to release Barabbas and to crucify Jesus. Christians of various stripes have been the decisive factor in the 2004 reelection of George W. Bush and the continuing war in Iraq. This paradoxical position of American Christians—advocacy for policies of war in Iraq by believers in a non-violent Messiah—has a significant analogy to the original audiences of the Gospels who heard the stories of Jesus in the decades from AD 70-100 against the background of the Jewish-Roman war in AD 66-70. Listening to the Gospel stories in their original context reveals that the stories required their listeners to reflect on the choice of the way of Barabbas over against the way of Jesus in the wake of the Jewish-Roman war. Listening to the stories now requires American Christians to reflect on their continuation of that ancient/modern choice.

The Gospels are remarkably consistent in their portrayal of Jesus as a non-violent Messiah. All of Jesus' actions—his healings, exorcisms, interventions with nature, feedings—are non-violent. As Messiah, he stands in radical contrast to the earlier messiahs (anointed ones) in Israel's history, most notably Saul and David, all of whom were warriors. The only story of Jesus that could be considered violent is the cleansing of the Temple. John reports that he used a whip of cords (John 2.15) and all four stories

agree that he drove out those who were selling animals and birds. Matthew, Mark and John report that he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove out those who were buying as well as selling. But there are no implications in the stories that anyone was hurt nor that Jesus was arrested for a violent act. Everyone, including the chief priests, are presented as understanding his action to be a prophetic protest and many of the people celebrated it. In the four Gospels, Jesus' action is presented as an act of non-violent resistance to the policies of the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, Jesus taught his disciples and followers to be non-violent. This too stands in contrast to the earlier messiahs of Israel who led their followers into battle. In the sermon on the mount in Matthew and on the plain in Luke, Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute (Matthew 5.44) or abuse (Luke 6.27-28) them. The only recorded act of violence by Jesus' disciples was the cutting off of the ear of a slave of the high priest at Jesus' arrest (Matt. 26.51; Mk. 14.47; Lk. 22.50; Jn 18.10). In all of the stories, Jesus stopped the violence, and in Luke he healed the slave's ear (Lk. 22.51). Thus, Jesus' followers are consistently portrayed as being non-violent.

There are only two Jesus sayings that can be construed as advocacy of violence. The first occurs in Luke just prior to the arrest episode. Jesus' final words at their last supper together are as follows:

“But now, the one who has a purse must take it and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.” They said, “Lord, look, here are two swords.” He replied, “It is enough.” (Lk 22.36-38)

Jesus' advocacy of each buying a sword is at most an endorsement of a measure of self-defense against outlaws and bandits. But the identification of two swords as enough is hardly an equipping of the twelve disciples for battle. And Jesus stops the actual use of the swords during the arrest.

The other saying occurs in Matthew in Jesus' speech to his disciples: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matt. 10.34) Taken out of context, this seems to be a statement of his mission as bringing war rather than peace. But in the context of what immediately follows, it is clearly a recognition of the divisions in families that he and his teachings will bring:

For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. (Matt.10.35-36)

Luke understands the saying in this way and uses "division" (diamerismon) rather than "sword" (maxairon), perhaps in order to eliminate this potential ambiguity:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Lk. 13.51-53)

There is nothing in these sayings that can be construed in context as advocacy of violence.

The Gospels all speak with a common voice in relation to the issue of violence and warfare. Jesus and his followers are consistently presented as non-violent in a Greco-Roman world that celebrated heroism in war as the supreme virtue.

Furthermore, until Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire in AD 312, there are no recorded acts of violence by Christians in the history of the Church throughout the period (AD 33-312). That is, those who joined the movement for nearly three hundred years understood that being a Christian meant being non-violent. This was a new policy among the religions of the Roman Empire, many of whom celebrated warfare. The Christian insistence on worshipping the one God and refusing to worship the Emperor were protests against Roman oppression and violence. In part for these reasons, Trajan made it illegal to be a Christian (AD 100), Septimius Severus forbid conversion to the Christian religion (AD 202), Decius required everyone to sacrifice to the Roman gods (AD 250), and Diocletian made the possession of Christian books a capital crime (AD 300). The various governments of the Roman Empire throughout this period killed thousands of Christians, but apparently without retaliation or violent resistance. When seen against the background of the oppressive policies of the Roman empire, the entire Gospel tradition was a story of non-violent action in advocacy of the Kingdom of God and God's anointed one, Jesus Christ.

The Gospel tradition was developed during a time of war and its tragic aftermath. Virtually all New Testament scholars agree that the four canonical Gospels were written in the period from AD 66-100. Mark was the earliest. Most Markan scholars place its composition in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish-Roman War (AD 71 or 72) because of the implicit notice of the destruction of the Temple in Mark 13.2: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." But even those who would date it earlier place the Gospel's composition in the

immediate context of the war (AD 66 or 67). Matthew was written sometime in the early to mid'80's, Luke perhaps as late as the early 90's, and John sometime in the '90's. Thus, all of the Gospels were written within thirty years of the Jewish-Roman War, the greatest catastrophe in the history of Israel. Its tragedy was rivaled only by Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile some six hundred years earlier in Israel's history (587-586 BC).

The statistics were horrendous. While the historical precision of Josephus' estimates is questionable, he states that 1,100,000 people were killed during the siege, virtually all of whom were Jewish. He reports that 97,000 Jews were captured and enslaved, many of whom were under the age of seventeen. (*Wars of the Jews* VI.9.3) He also tells of attacks on Jews in the cities of the Roman empire in the aftermath of the war. Josephus reports that on one occasion, Titus condemned 2,500 Jews to fight with wild beasts or with one another in the amphitheatre of Caesarea in celebration of his brother Domitian's birthday. (*Wars of the Jews* VII.2.1) The Temple was burned and most of the city was destroyed. (*Wars of the Jews* VI.8-9; VII.1.1)

Since the war loomed as such a tragedy in the immediate past, it was the experiential background for the hearing of the Gospels. For psychological comparison, the Vietnam war, a mini-war by comparison, had approximately 60,000 American military casualties, no destruction in the U.S. itself, and no civilian deaths. The Vietnam war ended in 1975, 32 years ago, and is still a very present factor in American politics. When seen against this background, all of the Gospels were anti-war stories that told the

story of the heroism of Jesus as a non-violent alternative to the celebration of war in ancient culture.

The story of the Pilate trial is particularly significant in this post-70 context. In all four stories, Pilate gives the people the choice between Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas is described in the Synoptic gospel accounts as one who had participated in a murderous insurrection in the city. John specifically calls him a *lastes* (*Jn. 18.40*). This word is usually translated as “bandit,” “robber” or “brigand.” But as N.T. Wright has noted in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (420), Josephus, who like the evangelists wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Jewish-Roman war, regularly uses this word as a description of the Zealots. For the audiences of the Gospels in the post-war context, this characterization of Barabbas was connected with the revolutionaries who had advocated and carried out the war against Rome. Those who instigated the war believed that, if they were courageous enough to start the war and to fight with zeal, God would vindicate and reward them with victory. For those who told and heard this story, the choice of Barabbas resonated with the choice of the people for war and violent resistance against Rome. The rejection of Jesus was likewise connected with the rejection of Jesus’ way of non-violence and love of the enemy.

The rhetoric of all the Gospels is structured to lead the audiences, both Jews and Gentiles, to identify with the people who chose Barabbas and called for Jesus’ crucifixion. Variouslly called “the crowd” (*oxlos* in Mark and Matthew), “the people” (*laos* in Luke), and “the Jews” (*Ioudaioi* in John), these terms have all been used earlier

in their respective stories to describe characters with whom the audience is invited to identify strongly.

As a result of this sympathetic relationship earlier in the Gospel narratives, the audience is identified with the people who reject Jesus at the trial. The effect of the story is to implicate the listeners in this decision. The liturgical reading of the passion narrative on Good Friday in Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches continues this rhetoric of implication by having the congregation speak the words of the people: “Crucify him!” In the first century, the implication was present for all those, both Jews and gentiles, who were tempted to advocate violence against the Roman empire. This included the majority of people in the Empire, fifty per cent of whom were slaves. Virtually everyone could understand the choice of violence rather than non-violence, of Barabbas rather than Jesus. The experience of hearing the story was that “we” were involved in the choice of Barabbas and the rejection of Jesus.

Because of the connection of this choice with the Jewish-Roman war, hearing the story of the Pilate trial was connected with the choice of war rather than aggressive love and non-violent resistance. In the Gospel stories, what caused Jesus’ death was not our individual sins, as it is frequently interpreted now. Jesus’ death was caused by our ancient/modern choice of violence and war as the way of our salvation.

The culmination of the stories of Jesus in the four canonical gospels is the resurrection stories. These stories were experienced by first century audiences as the vindication and victory of Jesus’ way of non-violent confrontation with the powers of evil. The martyr stories of Israel, particularly the stories of the Maccabean martyrs,

Eleazar and the family of seven boys and their mother (II Macc. 6-7), identified the hope of the resurrection of their bodies as the hope for the vindication of themselves and all those who died as righteous Jews at the hands of their gentile oppressors. But, as N.T. Wright has shown in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, no one in the world of Jesus' day expected the resurrection of the body of a particular historical person. In this way, Jesus' resurrection was unexpected good news, providing hope for all those who faced the possibility of martyrdom. And it was that hope that sustained the Christians throughout the centuries of non-violent resistance to Roman oppression that followed the Jewish-Roman war. Easter was the celebration of God's vindication of Jesus' way of non-violence.

How then are we to account for the centuries of Christian violence and warfare since the 4th century? It is easy to understand why people have been afraid to affirm and practice non-violence in a violent world. Who wants to be a martyr and to contemplate the potential mass slaughter of innocent women, children, as well as men? A major source of Christian participation in war was Augustine's theory of "just war." One can appreciate Augustine's impulse to develop the doctrine of "just war" as he and the Roman world faced invasion and slaughter by the barbarian Vandals. Augustine died on August 28, 430 as the Vandals were at the walls of the city of Hippo and shortly thereafter they conquered the city and it became the capital of the Vandal kingdom of north Africa (AD 431-39). But one must also recognize the discontinuity between Augustine's theory and the faith of Jesus and the early church. In light of the havoc that has been wrought through the centuries by the enthusiastic participation of Christians in

warfare, one might wish that Augustine had maintained more continuity with the traditions of the New Testament.

This is the dilemma for American Christians on Easter, 2007. We have launched an unjust war against the people of Iraq in which over 500,000 Iraqi citizens and more than 50,000 children have died, many in the civil war that has ensued since the American conquest, but many at the hands of American and coalition forces. The moral basis for this war of self-defense against potential nuclear weapons and Al Qaeda were manipulated and significantly fabricated by the Bush administration, as the latest controversy over the “outing” of Valerie Plame has made clear once again. The blood of hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Iraq is on our hands. There is no ethical justification for these deaths and the destruction of the entire infrastructure of the country of Iraq. Our leaders’ confidence in a “clean” war was utterly naïve. It is probable that the administration and the Congress, like the leaders of the Zealots in AD 66, truly believed that, if they had the faith and courage to launch the war, God would vindicate them and give them victory. However, the cycle of violence once started is much more difficult to stop than we as a nation imagined.

Whether or not there is justification for this particular war, the broader question is whether there is Christian justification for any war. There is no basis in the Gospels for Christian faith in violence and war as a means of human redemption. The stories of the Pilate trial in particular and the Gospels as a whole connect the choice of Barabbas with the choice of violence and war. It was this choice that caused Jesus’ death. Easter is more specific than the often vague celebration of Jesus’ victory over the power of death as it is

proclaimed by much of Christian preaching. The stories of the resurrection were told as celebrations of the vindication of Jesus as the non-violent Messiah who gave his life to save the world from violence and war.

The message of the Gospels is that God sent Jesus to save us from the expectation that violence and war is the way in which human beings will be delivered from the powers of evil. Our tenacious faith as Americans in the myth of redemptive violence—manifested in our films, television, computer games, and guns—is shown by the Gospels to be a lie that was developed in the service of some god other than the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The early 21st century is a time to listen to the stories of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection anew against the background of the ancient Jewish-Roman war and the current war in Iraq. Christians will undoubtedly make a range of decisions in regard to this issue. But Pilate's question will continue to resonate through time: "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?" (Matt. 27.17) Which way do we choose?