

THE CROSS CONDEMNS US AND SAVES US

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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A friend has drawn my attention to an article in a Sydney newspaper, last week, written by a Judge of the Israeli High Court. The Judge aims to prove that the Jews did not crucify Jesus. It was the Romans who were the villains of the piece. The Jews, the Judge said, 'cherished Jesus and wished Him no harm. In solemn truth', the Judge goes on the Jews 'did all they possibly and humanly could to save Jesus (whom they dearly loved and cherished as one of their own) from his tragic end at the hands of the Roman oppressor.'

We can understand the motivation of the Israeli Judge, in wishing to vindicate his nation with which he identifies, even after so long a time. However, to arrive at his conclusions the Judge has to fly in the face of all the evidence which makes it quite clear that the initiative for the arrest of Jesus and the driving force which carried it through to His condemnation and crucifixion came from the Jewish leaders. Early in Jesus' ministry these men were offended and disturbed by his teaching which cut through the legalism with which they had surrounded the Old Testament. The Judge ignores the evidence for this antagonism early in the ministry of Jesus and has, in addition, to deny outright the story of Judas' betrayal of his master, though it is clearly testified to in all the records. In Judas' treachery, two evil aspects of human nature meet; on the one hand, greed for money found in the heart of Judas, and on the other, jealousy of Jesus and his influence found in the hearts of the Jewish leaders. Greed and jealousy brought about the treachery of Jesus' betrayal; it was concocted entirely within the Jewish circles. This is so fatal a blow to the Judge's argument that he can do nothing else but offer a flat denial. 'The whole tale of Judas' treachery is so unlikely, so incongruous, regardless of who his fellow conspirators might have been, that it merits no credence.' The exact opposite is true. The story of Judas is entirely realistic and rings only too true to human circumstances. It is fully substantiated in the records.

Thirdly, the Judge has to deny the evidence with regard to the composition of the posse which arrested Jesus. All four Gospels say that it was composed of police under the control of the Jewish leaders. St. John's Gospel says that there were also present Roman soldiers. The presence of these soldiers was entirely probable, since the Romans were the occupying power and would naturally keep an eye on what the local police were doing. The Judge, however, seizes this mention by St. John of the Roman soldiers and maintains that the detachment that arrested Jesus was composed primarily of Roman Soldiers, in spite of the fact that the evidence is quite to the contrary. Then fourthly, on His arrest, Jesus was taken direct to the High Priest's Palace. This again is a vital flaw in the Judge's argument that the Romans alone had

anything to do with Jesus' arrest while the Chief Priests and the Jewish nation loved and protected Jesus. All the evidence of the Gospels is consistently contrary to the Judge's verdict. Take a fifth point, the evidence is that Jesus was sent by the Jewish leaders to Pilate, the Roman Governor, in order to be executed because the local leaders did not have the supreme power of capital punishment but were only able to punish in a lesser way. But since they were anxious that Jesus should be killed they sent Him to Pilate and used all their persuasive arguments to get Pilate to act on their behalf. The evidence of the Gospels is consistent and coherent; it holds together, and unfolds a very natural course of events, in which leaders of the Jewish nation, frightened lest the new teacher should undermine their position both with the people and with the Roman Government, arranged for His arrest and death in what may be called a judicial murder.

If we go to evidence outside the Gospels we will find that their description and interpretation of events is supported by further testimony; for example, St. Paul writing years later to the Thessalonians, commenting on the disasters overtaking the Jewish nation, said it was retribution for having persecuted and executed the Lord Jesus Christ (I Thes. 2:14-15). This shows that his view was that the Jewish leaders were primarily responsible for Christ's death. Outside the pages of the New Testament, there is the evidence of Josephus, the Jewish historian, who lived through these events. In his book "Antiquity of the Jews" Book 18, Chapter 3, he wrote: "Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, condemned Jesus to the Cross."

If one chooses to set aside the evidence, any man of ingenuity can make a convincing case in any way he likes. But the Bible is not a nose of wax to be pulled this way or that. It is a book written by honest men careful to put down the facts as they really were and this is why the Bible, over the centuries, has always been vindicated against its critics. It is, in fact, a trustworthy and reliable book written by honest men who were in a position to know the facts and who were careful to write accurately. Thus, St. Luke tells us at the beginning of his Gospel that he had taken some care to ascertain the facts from eye-witnesses and to write them accurately, so that his readers might have a sure body of truth in the vital matters on which he wrote.

The judge has to brush aside the Bible's statements in order to make out his case, so it is important to vindicate the Bible as a reliable book. But a more interesting question

to investigate is why should an Israeli Judge act in a way so strange for a Judge, by ignoring all the evidence. The answer is that being an Israeli he identifies with the Jews even those of 2,000 years ago, rather than with the Romans. So he blackens the Romans, or as we would say the Italians, in order to white-wash the Jews. There is a very interesting lesson here for all of us. We are very reluctant to admit our own guilt, or to admit the guilt of the group with which we identify. After all, in the matter under discussion it is not very important, after all these years which group took the initiative in crucifying Christ, though it is important to vindicate the reliability of the record on which our faith depends. But whether those who initiated Christ's death two thousand years ago were Italians or Palestinians is not of great importance. Yet if you identify with one or the other it becomes important, because we feel so reluctant to admit our own guilt. I came across an excellent illustration of this reluctance to admit our own guilt only two days ago. A clergyman friend of mine wrote that a man he was interviewing admitted to 83 convictions in the courts, yet he added it was not really his fault in any one of them - it was always somebody else's fault. How out of touch with reality can we get! Yet to acknowledge our own guilt is the beginning for forgiveness for it is the beginning of reality, and there is no hope of relationship with God till we reach that point. Repentance means to change your mind about yourself; to acknowledge your wrong attitudes and actions. So as we reflect on the crucifixion of Christ we ought not to identify either with one group or the other so as to vindicate ourselves, rather we should identify with humanity as a whole in this matter; for the wickedness which brought Jesus to His death is common to human nature which we share equally with everyone else so that Christ's death, whoever brought it about, condemns us, not because we happen to be Romans or happen to be Palestinians but because we are men and women sharing the same nature as those who persecuted Christ. A nature shot through with selfishness, greed, jealousy, fear and wrong-doing. Christ's death condemns mankind and we should see our own natures reflected there. Let us identify with whoever it was who crucified Christ rather than try to excuse ourselves. Do not whitewash yourselves either with regard to your responsibility for the sort of things which brought Christ to His death or with the sort of things which you do in a wrong way towards others, today.

Our Lord Jesus was the perfect man who was guilty of no wrong-doing, and yet was condemned by men - Jews and Romans each shared in the crime. As we look on Christ on the Cross we should see ourselves as related through our common nature to those who brought Him to death, and we should repent for our thoughts, our jealousies, our actions which are wrong and unjust just as theirs

were. Repentance is the beginning. Repentance is the first essential. If we go on saying we are not guilty, there is no hope for us. Unless we take that attitude of recognising ourselves for what we are there is no hope of a relationship with God who is truth. But then as we see Christ on the Cross we see not only ourselves as His unjust executioners, we also see the character of God who identified with us when Jesus became man for our sakes; and died our death on the Cross. The death we deserved, he died for us. He lived His perfect life in the midst of wrong and sin and accepted the consequences in order that through His death we might be restored to fellowship with God through forgiveness. No wonder Jesus has been crowned as Lord of all, for He alone is victor over sinful nature and through His victory we may be forgiven, we may share His crown and by the Holy Spirit's presence grow into His character. Through Jesus is the only way back to God. We must identify, not only with those who crucified Him, and acknowledge the guilt of our nature, but we must also identify with Jesus, recognising that he died on Calvary for us, and accept Him as our Lord and Saviour.

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