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## Bloody Message

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# A Bloody Message



By Leendert van Beek

## Introduction

It is easy today to divide people into those who have seen the film *The Passion of Christ* and those who haven't.<sup>1</sup> In Diane Sawyer's February 16, 2004, ABC interview with Mel Gibson a few days before the film premiered in the United States, one exchange in particular brought me to the edge of my seat. At a certain point Gibson mentioned that he deliberately deleted an English subtitle from the film

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after having received some criticism about it during the preview sessions. The actors still say the line in Aramaic, but there is no English. He is referring to this passage from Matthew 27:25: "Let his blood be on us and on our children."<sup>2</sup>

As an answer to the question of why the Jews have led such a wandering existence through the centuries and have been persecuted brutally, people, including Christians, sometimes quite "naturally" mention this phrase from Matthew 27. The Jews have invoked the curse upon themselves, haven't they?

Having thought about this text quite a bit since I saw the film, I can't figure out why believing Christians have used a Bible verse to hurt other people. I would have thought that Bible verses would be used, in the first place, to comfort people, not to persecute them. I've done some research on this text, and I would like to explain a specific reading of this notorious verse. Rather than presenting a God full of revenge, waiting for the moment in which He could realize what the Jews supposedly asked for, I would argue that this verse can and should be read as a phrase showing us a God full of compassion, though I do not presume to have the final interpretation.

## A Misused Bible Verse

The misuse of Matthew 27:25 has a long history.<sup>3</sup> That history goes back to the fourth century, the century in which Christianity turned from a persecuted religion to a state religion. Although in the preceding centuries, there had been signs of anti-Semitism, for example in pamphlets, it is striking that Matthew 27:25 had never been used against the Jews in Christian writings and had never been seen as a self-damnation on the part of the Jews. The answer to the

question “How can it be that people in the fourth century all of a sudden started referring to this text, giving it its anti-Semitic explanation?” is not easy to find, and church historians are not all in agreement either.<sup>4</sup> It is a fact, though, that after the Council of Nicea in 325, Emperor Constantine wrote a letter to all his bishops informing them about certain decisions reached at Nicea, such as the time set for the celebration of Easter. And in that same letter he also referred to the Jews, saying that “they had spoiled their hands with a wicked crime and were therefore rightly considered to be a people on whom blood-guilt rests.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Church father Hieronymus, who died in 420, wrote, “Their curse: ‘His blood be on us and on our children’ has been answered with eternal damnation.”<sup>6</sup>

Also, the Middle Ages were a dark period in Jewish history, especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the times of the Crusades. A contemporary Jewish chronicler wrote, “The crusaders were passing through cities with a Jewish population and said to one another, ‘We are on our way to take revenge on the Muslims, but here already we meet the Jews, whose ancestors crucified our Savior. Let us take revenge on them first! May the name of Israel be destroyed if they do not want to become like us and recognize Jesus as Messiah!’”<sup>7</sup>

In those days we also find the first malicious stories about Jews taking part in ritual murders and poisoning water wells. As a result of these tales, the Jews were forced to live in separate districts, and in the fifteenth century these ghettos were commonplace. In 1240 the first public burning of Jewish books took place in France.

A so-called explanation for the fact that the Jews were often described as wandering on earth, the wandering Jew, was that people liked to compare them to Cain, who after the murder of his brother Abel (seen as an Old Testament type of Christ) had been made a wandering fugitive by God. In the same way, the Jews had to live in the Diaspora without a fatherland. The Jews were a wandering and brand-marked people because they carried the burden of self-damnation, of a blood curse, with them all through the centuries.

In the times of the Reformation, we see similar views, even with Reformers like Luther and Calvin. Luther wrote in a sermon on Matthew 27:25, “The Jews are still burdened with the blood of Christ, and

that will eventually push them down into hell.”<sup>8</sup> And Calvin wrote on the same passage, “Their unconsidered zeal drove them to the point that they plot an inexpiable crime and with a solemn oath cut themselves off from any hope of pardon.”<sup>9</sup>

Needless to say, this kind of thinking also found its way into the minds of Nazi sympathizers in the twentieth century. The minutes of one of the *SS Einsatzkommando* trials in Ulm, Germany, in 1958, speak volumes: “When the protestant army chaplain was asked by the judges why he had been looking on tacitly at the repeated atrocities afflicted upon the Jews, he answered that in his opinion these acts

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should be seen as the fulfillment of the self-damnation the Jews in front of Pilate’s court had called upon themselves.”<sup>10</sup> The holocaust could easily be explained with the help of Matthew 27:25.

Even today, there are still people who hold this view. It is a well-known fact that in Europe when the so-called passion plays were performed, these were often times of increased Jewish persecution. In addition, Hitler was strengthened in his desire to wipe out the Jewish race after having seen a passion play at Oberammergau in 1934. And as we have seen from that fragment of the interview with Mel Gibson, the same thought is apparently persistent in this country too.

### **The Connotations of Blood**

Before I go into Matthew 27:25, we need to know first of all what connotations the word *blood* had for the people of Israel. In the Bible, blood has a symbolic significance. Blood is life, life itself. To shed blood, therefore, means to pour out life, to kill. And that refers to shedding blood not only of humans but also of animals. Life, even animal life, is a sacred gift. Humans cannot just kill animals as if animals

live inferior creatures that had no right to live. Certain Native American tribes had the practice of even asking forgiveness from the animals, praying to them, before they would kill them. They realized how sacred life is. I'm afraid we have lost, to a certain extent, that respect for animal life. What do we here in North America think when the hunting season begins? Do we realize what we are doing when we take the sacred life of an animal? In the Old Testament temple, the priests realized how valuable and sacred the life of the animal was that was to be sacrificed. They knew how costly its life was. That realization makes the more sense if we realize that the life of an animal was taken because of our sins, that its innocent blood was shed because of us.

This matter gets more serious when the life of a human is taken, when human blood is shed, the blood of a man who had been created in the image of God. Who dares to take that life?

In Israel, there was a full awareness that *blood has a voice*. That idea may be strange to us, but blood that has been shed on the earth, life that has been taken, keeps on speaking to God. It has a voice. And that voice is heard by God, the Creator of all. When somebody fell under the hands of murderers, that deed would ask for God's wrath against the life of the person who had committed the crime, the more so if it was innocent blood that was shed. Israel knew that blood has a voice that can *never* be stopped. The murderer would be ruined by the voice of *that* blood:

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone

kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over."

Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. (Genesis 4:8-15)

Notice that when Cain had killed Abel, God spoke to him: "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." And as soon as Cain realized that it was the blood of his innocent brother that was crying out to God, he said, "My punishment is more than I can bear." He believed that he would be ruined by the voice of this blood.

From this example, we learn that there was a real fear among the people of Israel when innocent blood had been shed. In addition, when a murder had been committed that remained unsolved, there was great fear in that town because of God's reaction to this crime:

If a man is found slain, lying in a field in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess, and it is not known who killed him, your elders and judges shall go out and measure the distance from the body to the neighboring towns. Then the elders of the town nearest the body shall take a heifer that has never been worked and has never worn a yoke and lead her down to a valley that has not been plowed or planted and where there is a flowing stream. There in the valley they are to break the heifer's neck.

The priests, the sons of Levi, shall step forward, for the LORD your God has chosen them to minister and to pronounce blessings in the name of the LORD and to decide all cases of dispute and assault.

Then all the elders of the town nearest the body shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley, and they shall declare: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Accept this atonement for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, O LORD, and do not hold your people guilty of the blood of an innocent man." And the bloodshed will be atoned for. So you will purge from yourselves the guilt of shedding innocent blood, since you have done what is right in the eyes of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 21: 1-9)

The life of an animal was taken; an animal was sacrificed to atone for the sin committed. And the elders washed their hands in the presence of the people and in the presence of God, declaring that they were innocent of this blood. The fear of God's revenge was great.

## The Context of Matthew 27

In that light we turn to Matthew 27, where we first read about Judas' remorse:

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. (Matthew 27: 1-5)

Judas at this point realized that he had betrayed *innocent* blood and that because of his betrayal, an innocent life would be taken. He was terrified. As a Jew, he knew what he could expect. Perhaps he thought of Cain's words. The *voice* of Jesus' *blood*, Judas realized, would never be silenced. It would cry to God with a voice stronger than the blood of Abel. The chief priests also knew this, well versed as they were in the Scriptures. But they did not help Judas here. The only thing they said was, "What is that to us? That's your responsibility." Knowing that the voice of innocent blood can never be stopped, they left Judas to himself. And he saw only one way out. In fact, this is the first murder the chief priests and the elders of the people committed that day.

Somewhat further down in the same chapter, we read the following:

"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. (Matthew 27:22-26)

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, but at the same time he realized that things had gotten out of

hand. He had to turn Jesus over now in order to prevent an uproar in the crowd. He also knew that he would be guilty of Jesus' blood. Yet, he wanted to hand Jesus over but not take responsibility for it. His action was hypocritical, but in the presence of the people he *washed his hands*—that gesture so familiar to the Jews—just as the elders did in Deuteronomy because of an *unsolved murder*. He testified his innocence in this manner. He did not want the curse over his life, the curse that might rest upon the shedding of this *innocent blood*. And then we hear the same words as in the beginning of Matthew 27, where the chief priest replied to Judas,

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*In their eyes, Jesus was guilty, and they dared to be responsible for what they said. They were so convinced of his guilt that they said, "His blood on us and on our children."*

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"That's your responsibility." Here Pilate used a similar phrase: "It's your responsibility." As hypocritical as the chief priests were earlier on, Pilate here claimed that he was not guilty of Jesus' blood.

### **What Does this Phrase Mean?**

What happened then? We begin to understand how great Israel's fear of the shedding of innocent blood was—where the chief priests laid the responsibility with Judas, where Judas saw no other way but to take his own life, where Pilate laid the responsibility with the people. We now see a crowd that said, "O, that's no problem. We take that responsibility upon us. Lay the responsibility with us for this shedding of innocent blood." No, no Jew would ever have done that. The fear of God's likely revenge upon them would have been too great. And when they still said, "His blood on us and on our children" (that is all the Greek text says; there is no verb), they meant that they did not consider Him to be innocent at all. On the contrary, they thought he was guilty—Jesus' blood was not innocent blood: He made himself Son of God; that's blasphemy. In their eyes, Jesus was guilty, and they dared to be responsible for what they said. They were so

two generations. Why, then, did the Christian Church turn that statement into a pronouncement that would apply to generation after generation? Even in God's commandments, we read that He punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the *third* and *fourth* generation. And that's about it. We—it's a collective guilt—have turned that two generations into tens of generations, up to the Holocaust in the twentieth century. One must then wonder what the voice of *that* blood does—the voice of the innocent blood of Etty Hillesum, Dave Minco, Anne Frank that is crying out from the ground in Europe. Will that voice ever be silenced?

They *answered* this to Pilate. They didn't yell; they didn't shout, even though some older Bible translations make suggestions in that direction. No, they answered Pilate. They considered Jesus guilty.

The phrase itself, "His blood on us and on our children," goes back to an Old Testament formula, with which one accepted responsibility for a particular event. In Joshua 2, after Rahab had let the spies down by a rope through the window, they told her that when the Israelites entered Jericho, she should take her whole family inside the house: "If anyone goes outside your house into the street, his blood will be on his own head: we will not be responsible. As for anyone who is in the house with you, his blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on him" (Joshua 2:19).

We can also consult Leviticus 20, which is a chapter full of sexual taboos. Most of the verses end with a similar phrase: "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood is on their own heads" (Leviticus 20:13). Another verse says, "They will be held responsible." Without a doubt, the expression means something like this: whoever commits a sin is to be held responsible. The crowd in Matthew 27 wanted to make known that they were prepared to accept responsibility. Pilate, as it were, handed the responsibility over to them. Looking at the event from a Jewish background, one sees that this was not self-damnation or a blood curse that they called upon themselves at all.

They believed that they were doing the right thing. Realizing this, we remember Paul's words to the Corinthians:

We speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Corinthians 2:7-8)

Paul says that they all did not understand what they were doing. They were blinded, both Israel and the Gentiles in the person of Pilate. And in their blindness they said something they would not have said otherwise. His blood was their responsibility and that of their children. We can also think of Jesus' own words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Moreover, "on us and on our children" refers to

two generations. Why, then, did the Christian Church turn that statement into a pronouncement that would apply to generation after generation? Even in God's commandments, we read that He punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the *third* and *fourth* generation. And that's about it. We—it's a collective guilt—have turned that two generations into tens of generations, up to the Holocaust in the twentieth century. One must then wonder what the voice of *that* blood does—the voice of the innocent blood of Etty Hillesum, Dave Minco, Anne Frank that is crying out from the ground in Europe. Will that voice ever be silenced?

### A New Light on the Phrase

Looking back at verse 25, we must ask what has really been said. Though the people may have been blinded and even though they found him guilty, they made this statement nonetheless. Jesus' blood was innocent, and if this blood speaks, there is no one who can stop it. He *was* crucified; therefore, His shed blood *comes* upon the Jewish multitude and their children. How should we interpret these words then?

The Christian Church speaks every day about the blood of Jesus Christ. And that Christian Church knows what the blood of Christ signifies. This blood of Jesus cries out to God, certainly, but what does it cry?

In the previous chapter, Matthew writes about Jesus having Holy Supper with His disciples, and there we read, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). His blood was to be shed for atonement. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, and, in the first place, he was reconciling his people Israel. That reconciliation of his people is also the first thing we learn from Matthew 1: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (vs. 21). He is the Lamb that will be slaughtered for the sins of his people. That salvation is what Jesus' blood accomplishes.

That reconciliation, therefore, is the context in which Matthew 27:25 is placed. The meaning is as simple as that, but it is confusing at the same time. What happens there, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the murder of the Innocent One, becomes the greatest act of salvation from God's part. And it is not only the Jews who crucify him. With the Church of all ages, we believe that we ourselves also took part in that act. We are as guilty as the crowd in those days.

Many artists have made that claim clear in their works. Take, for instance, this painting by the Dutch painter **Rembrandt**. If you look carefully, you will see that the painter himself (right in the center) is one of the people who nail Jesus to the cross.



I claimed that the crowd was blinded when they said, "His blood on us and on our children." They were blinded, indeed, because who

could have guessed that they said they wanted his atoning blood on them and their children? Still, this is what they said. They asked for the blood of the Innocent One on themselves and their children.

That is the message, therefore, that should be proclaimed all over the world. This blood of the New Covenant does not ask for revenge; rather, it is the blood of forgiveness. Jesus' blood speaks, as Paul writes in his epistle to the Hebrews:

You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

This sprinkled blood of Jesus, Paul says, speaks, but it doesn't ask for revenge; it asks for God's *compassion*. It invokes God's mercy over the world. It is the blood that purifies and saves. It is the blood of our salvation. And even today, God listens to the voice of the blood of the Lamb, to everyone who calls this blood upon himself or herself. It is high time we read Matthew 27:25 in this light. So, please read along with me, and think about this redeeming interpretation of the phrase: And all God's people said, "His blood on us and on our children!"

## ENDNOTES

1. This article is a revised version of my chapel message, delivered at Dorcht College on April 1, 2004, as part of the Thursday theme chapels of the Spring 2004 semester, focusing on "Compassion."
2. All Bible verses quoted in this article are from the New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.
3. Of particular help concerning the historical development of the use of this verse has been a two-part article by Dr. H.C. van der Meulen, "Zijn bloed op on en onze kinderen," *Hervormd Weekblad*, 29 January 1995, 4, and *Hervormd Weekblad*, 2 February 1995, 4.
4. Simon Schoon, "Zijn bloed over ons en over onze kinderen." *Een tekst en zijn uitwerking*. Kampen: Kok, 1983, 6.
5. Both this quotation and the next one are from Schoon, p. 7. Since both quotations were originally in Dutch, for this article I provided an English translation of my own. This applies to all quotations from Dutch sources.
6. See note 5.
7. Hans Jansen, *Christelijke theologie na Auschwitz*. Theologische en kerkelijke wortels van het antisemitisme Vol 1 ('s-Gravenhage 1981), 95.
8. Martin Stöhr, "Luther und die Juden." *Evangelische Theologie* 20 (1960): 157-182. For a summary in English of Luther's views on the Jews, see, for example, the section titled "Luther and the Jews" in Dr. James MacKinnon, *Vindication of the Movement* (1530-46), Luther and the Reformation Vol. 4 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 192-204.
9. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke*. In Calvin's Commentaries Vol. 3., translated by A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 188.
10. Quoted in Jansen, p. 59.

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