

Arthur J. Dewey

How the Death of Jesus Was Remembered

INVENTING THE PASSION

Study Guide

For groups or individuals



Introduction

How does the historical-critical reading of the death of Jesus differ from the traditional or ahistorical reading of the death of Jesus?

What does this book propose to do in reading the traditions of the death of Jesus?

Chapter 1

“How Little There Is”

Visit the website for the project Without Sanctuary (<https://withoutsanctuary.org/>) that Art mentions in the Coda section of the chapter (pg 15). What do you think of his conclusion that these photos are the “best introduction to the death traditions about Jesus?”

Stories of crucifixion are hard to find from the ancient world because the act was a total deprivation of personhood and was infrequently memorialized. Yet, over the course of the writing of the Gospels, this story becomes central. Why was this viewed as important for the early Christ communities?

Are there any non-Christian witnesses to the death of Jesus?

Chapter 2

“Facing Death: Did the Historical Jesus Anticipate His Fate?”

This chapter argues that Jesus’ death may have caught everyone — including Jesus! — off-guard. What do you make of this interpretation? Do you think it matters whether or not Jesus knew or suspected he would be put to death?

Do the sayings of the historical Jesus ever speak of a martyr’s death?

Art argues that the story of Jesus’ predicting his own demise was written more as a cypher of the community’s own fate, decades later, than to provide documentary evidence. Why might telling the story this way have been helpful? How / Is it helpful for us today?

Chapter 3

“Evidence from the Sayings Gospels”

The “Sayings Gospel” (Q) — from which the other gospels are thought to have been written — reveals that the death of Jesus is not the focal point in the story (pg 33). Rather, the community focused on Jesus’ words and teachings. In this chapter, Art wonders if this is perhaps a more faithful reading of the historical Jesus. How would a focus on story, rather than death, influence or change your understanding of Jesus today?

The Gospel of Thomas is also a sayings gospel; it does not have any birth or death narrative, childhood stories, or details of biography. What might it mean, then, when the Gospel contends that those who gain insight through these sayings will “not taste death”?

What might an understanding of Jesus’ life that did not focus on death and resurrection — as so much of the canonical gospels do — mean for how we conceive of Jesus and our faith?

Chapter 4

“The Re-imagination of a Death: The Pauline Material”

Paul’s persecution of the early Christ communities may have had to do with his knowledge of their memorial meal tradition. Why might such a meal have caused consternation for someone like Paul? What was his breakthrough insight?

What are the two historical items that Paul said about the death of Jesus?

What is the “radical change” signified by Paul’s acceptance of Jesus as God’s anointed one? (Pg 42)

Chapter 5

“Pre-Pauline Traditions”

In this chapter, Art talks about how Jesus’ crucifixion story begins to morph in the midst of his early followers from something embarrassing to something heroic. How did this happen? What influences were at play?

The reshaping of this story allows it to be understood in the ancient world as a refusal to let Rome have the last word. It also positions Jesus — a condemned nobody — as someone who had inestimable meaning before God. What implications does this reading have for us today?

The memorial meal that begins to develop can tell us more about these early Jesus followers than it does about the facts of the last hours of Jesus' life. Does this change the way you look at the crucifixion narrative? The way you look at the Eucharist?

How does the pre-Pauline hymn in Philippians 2 characterize the death of Jesus?

Chapter 6

“Memory and Midrash”

Why is it important to see that ancient memory entails the inventing of a place in which to store images?

The developing Passion narrative wasn't a matter of relating facts, but rather one of invention and inventory — formulating stories in a way that would be remembered and convey meaning. How does the traditional composition of stories about prophetic martyrs fill this role?

Does placing the death of Jesus inside the tradition of heroic Jewish martyrs change how we look at Jesus' death?

Chapter 7

“The Markan Passion Narrative”

The gospel of Mark was not — nor was any other gospel — written to give later generations the facts of Jesus' life. How can we better understand the meaning being created for the Markan community, rather than seek factual answers for ourselves?

In this chapter, Art contends that the Markan Passion narrative might be a case of “true fiction.” How could this be possible? Does this possibility resonate with you?

How does the Passion narrative, understood as midrash, bring hope both to those in the midst of suffering, and those who face the end of days?

Why is the Markan scene of Jesus before Pilate a true fiction?

Chapter 8-9

“The Problem of Peter”

“The Earliest Layer of Peter”

Where does the Gospel of Peter come from? Is its earliest layer earlier than the composition of Mark?

The canonical gospels have come to be better understood as complex interpretive developments and constructions, such that including non-canonical gospels in our investigation of the Passion becomes imperative. How can this help open up your understanding of Christianity’s central story?

What do you think it means that the Passion tradition is “prophecy historicized,” not “history remembered”?

How does telling the story of the “vindicated Innocent One” cross social boundaries in the narrative *and* interpretation? What implication does this interpretation have for us today?

Chapter 10

“The Death Story of Jesus in Matthew”

The book of Matthew includes additions to the Markan source material to intensify the story of the Innocent One. How is this in keeping with the function of the ancient “memory place”?

How does a literal interpretation of the self-inflicted curse given by the Jews when sentencing Jesus to death, miss the point of Matthew’s Pilate material?

What do the insertions by Matthew into the passion narrative do?

Art mentions Elie Weisel and Marc Chagall as artists who have extended this narrative conversation about suffering. Who else comes to mind as people who help us face the reality of the Suffering Innocent One in our midst?

Chapter 11

“The Lukan Retelling”

As we’ve seen by looking at each gospel’s unique re-telling of the Passion narrative, the authors speak to their specific contexts. What is being offered to ancient listeners of Luke’s version?

How does the Passion narrative, as presented here, help make sense of both the suffering of the Jewish community, and the suffering of Jesus?

Chapter 12

“The Gospel of John”

The Gospel of John is an example of “doing theology.” It re-envisioned the earlier traditions through a creative use of memory and the presence of the “advocate.” What do you make of the idea that the community seemed to re-read the stories of Jesus through their own lens?

The death of Jesus is imagined by John not as a hero’s death, or a martyr’s death, but as the focal point of revelation — as the ultimate example of divine self-giving. Art suggests that everything is poured out, not as redemption, but as life itself. Does this interpretation resonate differently than the previous gospels’ interpretations?

Does the Gospel of John know Peter or is it the other way around?

Art discusses the significance of Pope Francis’ Papal Cross (see below). Does the Pope’s selection of a cross follow in a cultural retreat from the tortured scene of Jesus on the cross? Why or why not?



Chapter 13

“Remembering the Unspeakable”

How has getting a better understanding of ancient memory helped you interpret, or re-interpret, the passion narrative?

What conclusions can be drawn from this extended analysis of the layers of the historical traditions?

The re-working of stories in each of the Gospels, each for their own contexts, provides a framework of meaning-making for communities undergoing particular stresses. How can this framework be helpful in your context today?