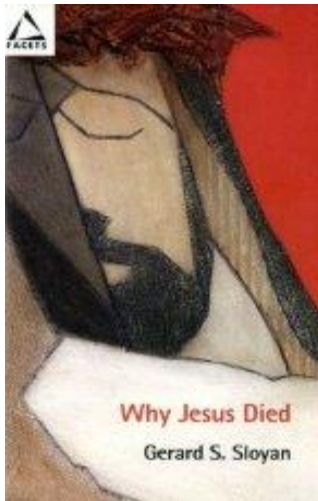


Gerard Sloyan Why Jesus Died



This slim volume is a surprising treasure. It comprises an introduction and 3 short chapters considering the practical causes of the crucifixion, why the cross came to be seen as redemptive and why “the Jews” were blamed.

Sloyan believes the gospel accounts themselves are unreliable as history because they were not intended as such, characterising them as dramatic interpretations of events. They are full of cardboard figures whose role in the drama is to bring out the meaning of Jesus. He acknowledges the role of the (Jewish) Temple Guard in the arrest of Jesus, citing the symbolic cleansing/destroying of the Temple as a likely catalyst. But actually it is the Roman Governor Pilate who condemns him for

insurrection placing the notice on the cross “King of Judea”. This, Sloyan suggests, may actually have been a case of mistaken identity on Pilate’s part – not that he would have cared or noticed.

Sloyan doubts there was, at the time of Jesus, a strong tradition of a messiah dying on behalf of the people (St Paul never refers back to Isaiah’s suffering servant) and he suggests that Jesus’ references to this were added later. The theory of atonement, Sloyan maintains, is an insight of St Paul, emerging from a reflection on the Temple incident. If Jesus is symbolically destroying the Temple, it stands to reason that he himself must replace the atoning sacrificial lamb. For Christians writing after the historic destruction of the Temple, this became an even stronger motif.

Sloyan suggests the Jews are implicated in the drama more than is historically probable owing to the relationship between the synagogue and the ‘Jesus Movement’ when the Gospels were written. Jesus’ teaching in his lifetime was not too dissimilar from standard Judaism and not particularly controversial. But later, as ideas about Jesus developed and both groups claimed to be the true inheritors of the Tradition, hostilities emerged and were written back into the Gospels. Added to this was the problem of how to make sense of the Jews as the Chosen People. Did God change his mind? And so it became important to show the Jews, rather than the Romans, as primary instigators in the death of Jesus, thus renouncing their inheritance through this act of disobedience.

The value of this accessible little book is in exploding the myths around Jewish culpability and Gospel historicity, both of which have done such harm. It is impossible to know whether Jesus saw himself as an atoning sacrifice – almost certainly not in the ways the doctrine developed - but even given the un-historical nature of gospel-writing it is difficult to imagine the words and actions around the Last Supper as being totally unconnected from such thoughts.

But Sloyan gets us thinking and gets us imagining, and that makes him very valuable indeed.