

Give Us Barabbas!

By Michael A. Schuler
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Gleanings from Ancient and Modern Wisdom Sources The Gospel of Luke 23:1-25

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes, and they led him away to their council. Then the whole company of them arose, and brought him before Pilate.

And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

And Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” And Jesus answered him, “You have said so.” And Pilate said to the chief priests and the multitudes, “I find no crime in this man.” But they were urgent, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place. . . .”

Pilate then said to the chief priests and the people, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. . . . I will therefore chastise him and release him.”

But they all cried out together, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas—a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder. Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus. But they shouted out, “Crucify him, crucify him!”

A third time he said to them, “Why? What evil has he done? I have found in him no crime deserving death; I will therefore chastise and release him.” But they were insistent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed.

So Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be granted. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, whom they asked for. But Jesus he delivered up to their will.

Garry Wills, A Necessary Evil

The American view that government is a necessary evil ... is based on the premise that whatever power accrues to the state is subtracted from the citizen’s powers. One must be constantly vigilant, therefore, to see that the state takes away as little of one’s freedom as possible. Government labors under the constant suspicion that it will exact more from the citizen’s freedom than its services are worth. A person must resist it, make it justify any increase in its energy, be fearful of its every move.

Americans harbor certain attitudes that tend to fall in a cluster. At times, they can uphold liberal positions, at times conservative ones. They can show up on the left or the right; but wherever they show up, they bring along all or most of their fellows. . . . These are all good American values, and it is no wonder that people want to uphold them, especially if they believe—as they often do—that government would weaken or obliterate them.

Here are the values we find recurring wherever government is opposed: a belief that government, as a necessary evil, should be kept at a minimum; and that legitimate social activity should be provincial, amateur, authentic, spontaneous, candid, homogenous, traditional, popular, organic, rights-oriented, religious, voluntary, participatory, and rotational.

Values contrasting with those are not polar opposites, but distant points on the continuum of approaches to government—namely, a belief that government is sometimes a necessary good and that it should be cosmopolitan, expert, authoritative, efficient, confidential, progressive, elite, mechanical, duties-oriented, secular, regulatory, and delegative, with a division of labor.

Government should combine all these values in a tempered way, since one group does not necessarily preclude the other. But as a matter of empirical fact . . . group after group in our history does treat the first cluster of values as endangered by the second, under siege from them. And a recognition of this fact helps explain things that otherwise look merely perverse or irrational.

Reflections

The so-called “Passion” narratives of the Gospels cover the final hours of Jesus life, beginning with his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and ending with the crucifixion. The time frame is short: perhaps thirty-six hours in total. In rapid succession Jesus is seized by the authorities, interviewed by members of the Jewish religious hierarchy, sent to be judged by Pilate, the appointed Roman governor of Judea, duly sentenced, scourged, and crucified. In countries occupied by the Romans, commentators have noted, justice was meted out swiftly, and no avenue of appeal was available once a governor had rendered his decision.

Each of the four Gospels recounts these passion events, and they are similar in many respects. Pilate, for instance, figures prominently in every narrative, as does the Apostle Peter who famously denies knowing Jesus three times. And in all four we find reference to Barabbas, variously referred to as a “notorious” prisoner, a murderer

and insurrectionist, and a “robber.” Here it seems the intention is to create a stark contrast between the disreputable Barabbas and an inoffensive Jesus, who is then unjustly executed while the scofflaw goes free.

And why does this travesty of justice occur? Well, because the Jews clamor for Barabbas’s release. They demand that Pilate crucify Jesus because the latter has “perverted the nation” and declared himself a “king.” Although unconvinced of Jesus’ guilt, the governor caves in before this public pressure and, according to both Luke and John, “delivers Jesus up to their will.” In other words, two of the Gospels clearly suggest that the Jews and not the Romans were responsible for executing Jesus, their behavior differing little from that of a lynch mob.

Mark and Matthew *do* describe the Romans, not the Jews, as Jesus’s executioners, but even they depict the Jews as Jesus’s sworn enemies. Nor was it just members of the Jewish hierarchy who felt threatened by the teachings of Jesus; the general populace condemned him as well. The Gospels say that “crowds” were given the choice between Barabbas and Jesus, and the people were of one voice in calling for release of the former. And Pilate, representing the most powerful empire on earth and against his better judgment, surrenders to this populist insurgency.

If all of this sounds a little unlikely, it’s probably because it is. Contemporary Biblical scholars have raised serious

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questions about this element of the Passion story. How is it that the Jews lined the streets of Jerusalem to celebrate Jesus’s arrival on Palm Sunday, but a few days later are eager to see him killed?

And why would this particular Roman governor, notorious for his brutality and lack of concern for Jewish sensibilities, bow to their demand? The story hardly comports with Pilate’s methods of governance and with the absolute authority Rome granted its provincial overlords.

Moreover, the Romans themselves would have had ample reason to eliminate Jesus—they didn’t need a Jewish mob to persuade them. First century Israel was in a state of open revolt, and the Jewish historian Josephus cites numerous instances in which self-proclaimed “messiahs” were summarily crucified for inciting insurrection.

This was a time of vast inequalities and widespread resentment. Many Jews felt oppressed *not* just by the Roman occupiers, but by a class of religious and economic elites who collaborated with the Romans in order to maintain their privilege. Jesus himself was vocal in his criticism of this very class. It’s quite probable, therefore, that Jerusalem’s Jewish aristocracy shared with Pilate a desire

to crush the kind of popular resistance that coalesced around Jesus.

John’s Gospel contains a tantalizing hint at such collaboration. In an exchange not found in the other Gospels Pilate expresses the desire to exonerate Jesus, but the chief priests challenge him, saying, “If you release this man you are not *Caesar’s* friend; everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar.” In effect, the priests are arguing that Jesus should be executed on *political* grounds, as a threat to Roman rule, rather than as a Jewish heretic.

This episode aside, historians question many of the details of the Passion. They doubt that a “multitude” appeared outside Pilate’s palace demanding Jesus’s death and Barabbas’s release. Some doubt the very existence of a criminal or insurrectionist by that name. Nor is the custom of releasing a convicted prisoner at Passover referred to in any Jewish literature of the period. Thus, it seems unlikely the Pilate would have made such an appeasing gesture.

Serious students of the Bible don’t take what they read at face value. We now know that the Gospels were not composed by eyewitnesses, nor would there have been anyone around to transcribe the private conversations that took place between Jesus and his accusers. The Passion narratives themselves say more about what was going on at the time they were being written—40 to 70 years after Jesus’ death—than what took place during Jesus’s last days. So we need to ask, “Why is the story being told this way?”

After the crucifixion, the Palestinian Jews had continued to be a thorn in Rome’s side. If anything, unrest in Israel had escalated. By 70 A.D.—about the time Mark, the first of the four Gospels, was composed—the Empire had had enough. Roman legions under Titus ransacked Jerusalem, destroyed the 500 year-old Great Temple, killing thousands of rebellious Jews in the process. Members of the nascent Christian movement living elsewhere in the Empire were terrified, deeply concerned that they would be adjudged guilty by association. Thus, they wrote about Jesus and their faith in such a way that would distance them from the very religion—Judaism—from which Christianity had sprung. Their message to the Romans was clear: “We don’t like the Jews any more than you do, for look what they did—they killed the founder of our faith, a man even your own governor wished to acquit.”

If that first generation of Christians tried to deflect blame for Jesus’s death onto the unbelieving and hostile Jews as a means of self-preservation, the long-term consequences were calamitous. “Tragic as *Jesus’s* death was,” William Wilson writes, “its tragedy has been surpassed by the unspeakable abuse suffered in its wake by Jews of all eras.” The virulent anti-Semitism that produced the 20th century Holocaust can be traced straight back to these Passion narratives and their mischaracterization of an

entire people. Jews in general were put on trial for a miscarriage of justice in which they played, at best, only a minor role.

But the Bible is what it is, and the Passion story is still accepted by hundreds of millions as the “way things really were.” Few lay Christians are acquainted with the findings of modern Biblical scholarship, and they still see the “hardening of Jewish hearts” as a critical piece of the Lord’s redemptive plan for humanity. This stiff-necked people had failed to recognize and to accept Jesus as the savior and thus forfeited any claim to be God’s chosen.

But even if it doesn’t pass muster from a *historical* standpoint, there are elements of these accounts that ring true at the *psychological* level. And here I’d like to turn back momentarily to Barabbas and the disturbing way in which the Gospel writers describe the crowd’s behavior.

In each instance the chief priests and elders of Israel are the ones who lodge a bill of particulars against Jesus. Pilate merely reviews their accusations and finds them baseless. Still, he declines to release Jesus on his own authority but instead makes a futile attempt to convince the crowd gathered outside his residence that his prisoner is guiltless. They remain unappeased, having been egged on by the chief priests who have their own reasons for seeing Jesus dead.

Reading these passages, I couldn’t help but remember the raucous pre-election rallies staged by Donald Trump’s campaign. Like his ancient counterparts, a vociferous Mr. Trump flung accusations at his opponent, calling her a criminal and a traitor. He worked the crowds into a lather, and they took it from there. Cries of “lock her up,” and even “hang her,” echoed through campaign venues. Taunts could even be heard at the inauguration when the Clintons appeared and moved toward their seats. In a moment of candor and to the disappointment of his most ardent supporters, Trump later admitted that all this agitprop had been mainly for show and that he never intended to press charges against his rival. But the damage had been done, the poison pill inserted in our political discourse.

Donald Trump has been described as a “populist,” and much has been written over the last year about the rise of populist movements both here and abroad. And while a wealthy real estate developer may not fit the populist mold, Trump recognized a widespread hankering for such a leader, and he cannily responded to it. He was able to channel white working class anger with the economic and political “elites” who were blamed for stagnant wages, job loss, and unfair competition from non-whites. I’ll “drain the swamp” he promised his minions, and they took him at his word. Now, of course, Trump’s inner circle and cabinet is the wealthiest, most privileged collection of political apparatchiks ever assembled by a U.S. president.

Nevertheless, populist leaders like Mr. Trump always claim to speak in the “name of the people,” arguing that other sources of political authority—courts, legislatures, statutes—must submit to their will. The people are sovereign. The people draw the red lines. The people know best.

But not all expressions of populist discontent conform to the Trump model. There is, Michael Kazin writes, a brand of populism that focuses exclusively on “the corporate elites and their enablers in government” who pursue their own interests “at the expense of those men and women who do the nation’s essential work.” For populists of this stripe, the definition of “the people” is very broad. They believe in the “fundamental equality of all human beings and are inclusive in their demands for fairness and economic opportunity,” Kazin observes.

These are not ordinarily members of the “anti-government” crowd that Garry Wills described in the reading I shared earlier. Like Ralph Nader, they want clean government, better government, and a fairer allocation of public resources. They are respectful of expertise and scientific findings and demand public servants who are more responsive.

For a second brand of populism those who can legitimately claim to belong to “the people” are far fewer. During the campaign Donald Trump declared that, “The only important thing is the unification of the people ... because the *other* people don’t mean anything.” Yes ... those *other* people. The candidate’s supporters knew exactly what he meant. For him, and for them, only a certain *kind* of American can be counted as one “of the people.” Muslims, recent immigrants, and disadvantaged people of color more generally were all excluded on religious, racial, cultural, or economic grounds. Kazin writes:

Typically, this breed of populist alleges that there is a nefarious alliance between evil forces on high and the unworthy dark-skinned cabal below—a cabal that imperils the interests and values of the patriotic white majority in the middle.

All too frequently, spokesmen for this second species of populism engage in scapegoating to stir up resentment among and mobilize their supporters. They eschew meaningful analysis of the political and economic forces impinging on people’s lives and limiting their options, and instead

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appeal to the prejudices, lurking just below the surface, that their support base harbors. Rapid technological change, the global economy, rising costs for education and training—these just happen to be complicated problems that cannot be easily solved. How much more convenient—and persuasive—to pin the blame on the murderers, rapists, and drug dealers pouring across the borders, draining resources, stealing jobs, milking benefits from the government.

Such populists bypass the brain and aim directly for the gut. When the sociologist Arlie Hochschild interviewed scores of lower middle and working-class men and women in Louisiana for her book *Strangers in a Strange Land*—all of them white—she marveled at their voting behavior. So many of them routinely cast ballots for candidates whose stated policy positions undercut their struggling constituents' economic interests. Louisiana is the most environmentally toxic state in the union, life spans there are considerably shorter than the national average, and its schools rank forty-ninth out of fifty states in terms of funding. None of this seems to register because, Hochschild concluded, these are folks who vote to satisfy their *emotional* self-interest, not to elect representatives committed to improving their lives. Anti-government and racially coded appeals to their sense of grievance are the red meat they respond to.

Mr. Trump also received overwhelming support from religiously conservative white voters that, given his misogyny, unscrupulous business tactics, habits of deceit and lukewarm religious convictions, seemed incongruous. But Christian evangelicals have long been vocal critics of government, and they are accustomed to leaders in Mr. Trump's mold—authoritarian male pastors who demand unquestioned loyalty and prefer to make their own rules. And if such a leader violates a few of the Ten Commandments, well ... God forgives his own.

This is not something new under the sun. In the late 1800s a populist movement known as the People's Party gained enough traction to push the Chinese Exclusion Act through Congress—the first law in U.S. history to bar members of a specific nationality from entering the coun-

try. Another populist movement—the Working Man's Party—also took strong exception to Chinese immigration. In the United States, one spokesman complained, "... a bloated aristocracy rakes the slums of China to find the meanest slaves on earth—the Chinese coolie—and imports him here ... to further degrade white labor."

A few decades later the KKK, with a national membership of 5 million, lobbied to restrict immigration from the largely Catholic nations of Eastern and Southern Europe. They, too, were successful, and numbers were capped at a few hundred immigrants per nation per year. This discriminatory legislation remained on the books and in force until 1965. For every benign and inclusive manifestation of populism in this country, there have always been others that embraced xenophobia and exclusionary tactics.

So, although they are unreliable as historical documents, the Gospel stories do present a cautionary tale about the dangers of demagoguery and populist discontent. But some four hundred years earlier, another story unfolded in the sophisticated city-state of Athens which is worth remembering as well.

In this case, Socrates' fellow citizens charged the aged philosopher with "corrupting the young" and "making the weaker argument appear to be the stronger." He, too, was served up as a convenient scapegoat. Athens had recently suffered humiliating military defeats, and its influence was on the wane. Socrates' teachings were identified as a source of the city's internal weakness, and although he mounted a spirited defense before a court composed of 500 citizens, the Athenians sentenced to death. Eliminating him made no difference. Athens' fortunes continued to decline, and before long the city fell before the strong arm of a barbaric Macedonian, Alexander the Great.

Michael Kazin says that at certain periods an upsurge of populism may be necessary to "shock" those sitting in the seats of power out of their complacency. But such a movement can also be used to curtail the rights of minorities, to overthrow the rule of law, to empower opportunists with authoritarian proclivities, and to oppress the innocent. This remains a sober truth that the Gospels, despite themselves, can help us remember.