The Image of Crucifixion:

An Exploration of the Relationship of Jewish Artists

to the Passion of Christ

By Carol L. Rizzolo, Ph.D.

On March 28, 2008, The New York Times published the following article:

> An Artist From Russia Disappears in Berlin: A prominent
> [Jewish] artist who had run-ins with both the church and state in
> her native Russia after taking part in a controversial exhibition
> has disappeared without a trace from her home. Ms. Mikhalchuk
> took part in *Caution! Religion*, a 2003 exhibition at Moscow's
> Andrei Sakharov Museum that opponents called blasphemous.
> (A6)

Regarding this incident, newspapers reported that men from an Orthodox church in Moscow ransacked the museum and destroyed many of the works on display. Ms. Mikhalchuk was fined by the Russian government and sentenced to two years in prison for her work. Among her "offensive images" was a re-imaging of the crucifixion; Ms Mikhalchuk had painted a crucified woman.

Early in the twentieth century, the Russian Jewish artist Marc Chagall painted the first of his many images of the crucifixion. In 1933, the Nazi regime in Germany had all works by Chagall taken down from museums and burned. Jewish artists working with the image of the crucifixion are noteworthy for their rarity, but more importantly, they are noteworthy for the personal risk they take when re-imaging Christian icons. As common as Old Testament themes are in the works of Jewish and Christian artists alike, Jews rarely depict images of themes from The New Testament.

Since as long ago as 332 AD, in the time of Constantine, Christianity has carried with it the shadow of political perversion. Tragically, many "non-believers" have died horrible deaths as a result of political distortion of the sacred. Jews as well as other non-Christians were murdered in the name of

Christianity, and yet this Christianity was not the Christianity preached by the

historic Jesus. Rather, it was the misapplication of something beautiful for the

purpose of political gain. Jews living in a Christian world must, by virtue of the

world in which they exist, have some relationship with Christianity and with the

image of Christ.

   For two thousand years, the image of Christ has been imagined, painted,

drawn, and sculpted. Commonly, the image is painted by Christian artists for

Christian patrons as a means of communicating a story from the New Testament

or the Christian spiritual ideal. In his book *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art,*

George Ferguson explains, "Many thousands of pictures of Christ were painted

that had no narrative significance, but were intended to convey the spiritual

quality and significance of the Son of God as the Saviour of Mankind" (125). It is

a Christian belief that Christ died for the original sin of Adam and Eve which is

believed to be present in all of humankind. The crucifixion of Christ on the cross

is an image of suffering and it is this image that is held out as a reminder that He

died for the sins of the common man and by doing so redeemed mankind from

eternal damnation. The spiritual teachings of the Church explain that the image

of the crucifixion is understood in conjunction with the resurrection of Christ, the

two images being the image of suffering redeemed by the image of hope. The

image of Christ evokes the mystical nature of human goodness and human

kindness and also of Christ as the representation of God on earth.

   In his book, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, Jaroslav Pelikan explains, "The

portrait of Jesus in any epoch [is not] confined to the history of faith, central

though it is for that history" (5). In nineteenth century Europe, anti-Semitism in the name of Christ was on the rise. State-sponsored pogroms were being carried out in Russia and Germany, and the persecution of the Jewish people had reached levels previously unseen in the modern world. The artistic world of the Jews sought to separate the historic Jesus Christ from the political corruption being carried out in His name. They sought to separate Christian dogma from the image of Christ, to highlight for the world the mass murders being caused as a result of the perversion of His teachings.

For the Jewish people, the crucifixion of a Jew is not an image of hope. The image of crucifixion was and is a reminder of the religious persecution of a Middle Eastern Jewish man at the hands of the political regime of Herod and Pilate. Late in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish artists and intellectuals began to speak out to remind the world that Christ had been a Jewish man who preached tolerance. This was a courageous and politically dangerous move for Jews to make in a time of religious intolerance in Russia and Germany. State-sponsored extinction of Jewish people had become a common experience for many Jews in those times. Yet, these bold men began to speak out in words and images to remind Christians that Jesus had been a Jew who neither preached nor condoned the murder of innocent men, women, and children. All Jews and Christians alike agreed that Jesus, a direct descendent of King David and Abraham, had been a Jewish man of Middle Eastern descent.

From temple pulpits, Rabbis spoke out to publicize the deep respect which the Jewish people had for the historic Jesus. Writing in 1903, Dr. Kaufmann

Kohler, a German born Jew and the late president of Hebrew Union College in

Cincinnati wrote,

> Jesus, the living man, was the teacher and practicer of the
> tenderest love for God and man, the paragon of piety, humility
> and self-surrender; his very failings were born of overflowing
> goodness and sympathy with the afflicted. He was one of the best
> and truest sons of the synagogue. He came only to weep with the
> sorrowing, to lift up the downtrodden, to save, and to heal. He
> was a man of the people. (Hunterberg 30)

Kohler speaks of the respect felt by the Jewish leaders for the historic

Jesus, the man who was a pious Jew and a teacher. The historic Jesus was a

Jewish man persecuted and ultimately murdered for preaching a belief system

perceived to be a threat to the ruling political powers of the land. The canonical

gospels each tell the story of a man who believed deeply in his faith and who was

ultimately willing to die for that belief. Unfortunately, these same gospel writers

repeatedly, yet perhaps mistakenly, accuse the ancient Jewish people of

abandoning Jesus and demanding his crucifixion. In his book *The Crucified Jew,*

Dan Cohn-Sherbock explains,

> The early church believed itself to be the authentic heir to the
> promises given by God in Scripture: Jesus' messiahship ushered
> in a new era in which the true Israel would become a light to the
> nations. Such a vision of the Christian community evoked
> hostility against the Jewish people, who were regarded as
> apostate and unrepentant. This animosity was fueled by the
> Gospel writers who described Jesus [as] attacking the leaders of
> the nation, whom he accused of hypocrisy and iniquity. (12)

The writings of Rabbis Kohler and Cohn-Sherbock give the reader insight into the Jewish conception of the historic figure of Jesus, as well as a Jewish perspective on the Christian hostility directed towards them throughout history. When one reads the words and deeds of Christ, it is clear that murder in His name is a travesty.

As Jewish rabbis were preaching the importance of religious tolerance as taught by Jesus, Jewish visual artists in Europe began re-imagining and re-imaging the crucified Christ. They removed Him from the traditional symbols associated with the New Testament and instead worked to represent Christ as the image of human suffering. This shift is explained by Pelikan,

> Whatever blurring of his image the welter of portraits of Jesus
> may create for the eyes of a faith that wants to affirm him as "the
> same yesterday and today and forever," that very variety is a
> treasure trove for the history of culture, because of the way it
> combines continuity and discontinuity. (5)

The image of Christ gives one insight into the Christian culture while at the same time giving one insight into the Jewish movements which were emerging in response to the anti-Semitic acts being perpetrated in the name of Christ. Late nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish painters and sculptors were exploring the image of the crucified Christ in terms of their own lives. Religious persecution for one's religious beliefs was defining the world of the Jewish people in Germany and Russia. Reigning political powers determined where Jews could live, what schools they could enter, what jobs they could hold, and where they

could and could not travel. The perceived hopelessness of the Jewish situation

found expression in the work of European Jewish artists.

The crucifixion of the Jewish Jesus was transformed into an expression of

Jewish suffering. Drawing from their own experiences, Jewish artists created

images of a Christ who was crucified for all eternity, a Christ with no hope of

redemption or resurrection. Ziva Amishai-Maisels, Professor of Art History at

Hebrew University, explains,

> This novel use of the Crucifixion derives from two separate but
> related artistic traditions that became popular in the nineteenth
> century. The most well-known of these utilized elements of
> Christ's Passion, either within or removed from a biblical
> context, to symbolize sufferings of humanity, especially in times
> of war. (143)

Figure 1   Otto Pancock, 193

One of these traditions is represented by the works of German artist Otto Pancock and Italian artist Renato Guttauso. Pancock painted a Christ with distinctly Jewish features rather than the Aryan features of the Nazi party members (Fig 1). Pankok was labeled as a "degenerate" artist by the Nazis and many of his creations were confiscated and destroyed. As dangerous as it was for a German artist

to pursue this re-imaging, the Italian Guttuso took a more direct risk in 1940

when he drew Hitler at the base of the cross of the crucified Christ (Fig 2).

Guttuso explained his

use of the crucifixion

image in this way,

"This is a time of war. I

wish to paint the

torment of Christ as a

contemporary scene ...

as a symbol of all those

who, because of their

ideas, endure outrage,

imprisonment and

torment." These were

dramatic re-visionings of
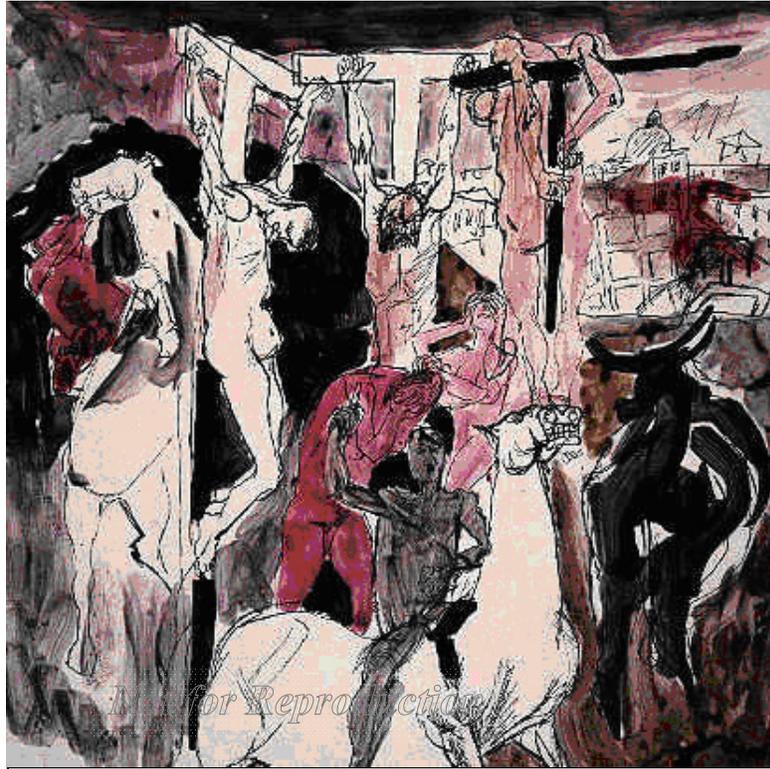
Figure 2   Die Passion. Renato Guttoso, 1940

the divine Christ. These artists had removed the hope of resurrection and all that

remained was the image of the very real suffering of a tortured and murdered

Jewish man at the hands of his oppressors.

The second tradition, explains Amishai-Maisels, "involves the use of

Christological symbolism by Jewish artists and is based on ideas current since the

mid-eighteenth century in both Jewish and Christian theology, which stressed

that Jesus was an orthodox Jew who had come first specifically to his own

people" (145). Exemplified by Russian sculptor Mark Antokolsky and American

sculptor, Moses Jacob Ezekiel, these artists gave Jesus clearly Semitic features while placing Christ amidst the suffering of Israel. Amishai-Maisels explains that these two artistic traditions were artistic reactions to the pogroms and anti-Semitic outbursts occurring in Eastern Europe (145).

Through subtle means of self expression, Jews had begun to explore the image of Christ from within the world of Christ himself, the world of ancient Judaism. From the Rabbinate to the world of the visual and literary arts, Christ was being re-imaged by the Jews. Using the power of the *imago Christi* itself, these artists were able to highlight the terrible price of human suffering which results from political corruption of the teachings of Christ. As Jewish artists were working with the *imago Christi* imagery, a Jewish theologian by the name of Max Hunterberg was writing a book again highlighting the Judaism of Christ. His book *The Crucified Jew* was published in 1926 and argues that Herod and Pilate had histories of anti-Semitic behavior. Hunterberg claims,

> Herod put the precursor of what looked to him like the coming revolution, to death. To the Jewish populace, the Christ was the deliverer who was to come to deliver them from foreign rule and oppression. To a Herod or a Pilate, or any Roman administrative agent, the Christ who was to come was the leader of the expected rebellion. For what looked to the so-called Jewish patriot like deliverance, of course, meant rebellion to the forces of Rome. (61)

Throughout the world of creative expression, both visual and literary, the Europe of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a Jewish attempt to reclaim and highlight the Jewishness of the historic Jesus. In the visual arts, this

was done by using the image of Jesus; an image which had been and has

continued to be central to Christian iconography and worship for generations.

Discussing the use of the image of Christ in Christian worship, art historian

Thomas F. Mathews explains, "Images not only express convictions, they alter

feelings and end up justifying convictions. Eventually, of course, they invite

worship. One cannot write history without dealing with the history of images"

(11).

Among the most prolific and well known Jewish artists of the twentieth

century was Marc Chagall. Born in 1887 into the Russian Jewish community of

Vitebsk, Chagall was a religious Jew whose work was deeply influenced by his

religious life in Vitebsk. No stranger to anti-Semitism, Chagall lived a life which

was constantly being redefined by laws and restrictions on the Jews of Europe.

At twenty years old, while living in Russia, he was denied a residency visa in St.

Petersburg because of religious restrictions. In 1933 Germany, the Nazis ordered

the works of Chagall to be burned. In 1937, The Nazi regime ordered all of

Chagall's paintings to be removed from museums. Ultimately, in 1940, Chagall

and his family were among the fortunate European Jews to be rescued by the

Emergency Rescue Committee in the United States, but he was again detained in

Lisbon as his family worked to make their way to the United States. Eventual

freedom from religious persecution allowed Chagall the liberty to exhibit his

works as well as to publish his thoughts about the paintings themselves. As

verified by the recent disappearance of the Jewish artist in Berlin, not all Jews

enjoy such freedoms. The town of Vitebsk, the religiously Jewish town of

Chagall's childhood, collapsed under the weight of the Russian pogroms. And as it disappeared, Chagall too became a part of the creative re-imaging of Christ that was occurring in the artistry of European Jewry.

Chagall painted his first image of the crucifixion of Christ in 1912. He named the painting *Dedication to Christ* (it was alternately entitled *Golgotha*). What could have driven Chagall to go public in his use of Christian imagery? There was no doubt of the anti-Semitic sentiment in Russia at the time or that this public use of a sacred Christian image by a Jew was extremely dangerous. Mathews explains,

> Images, no matter how discreetly chosen, come freighted with
> conscious or subliminal memories [. . .]. Often images
> overwhelm the ideas they are supposed to be carrying, or dress
> up with respectability ideas that in themselves are too shoddy to
> carry intellectual weight.

The Jewish exploration and use of the image of Jesus was a new way to imagine the power of the historic Jesus. Holding firmly to the belief that anti-Semitism was wrong and was surely not among the teachings of Christ, Jewish artists worked to remind the Christian world of the murder of an innocent man, an innocent Jew, who lived in a world controlled by an oppressive political system.

Amishai-Maisels suggests that Chagall painted *Golgotha* in response to a well-publicized act of anti-Semitism in Russia in 1911. That year, a Russian Jewish man named Mendel Beilis had been accused of murdering a Christian

child. The charge was one of blood libel, and public outcry emerged as he was

charged with murdering the child so that he could use the child's blood for "ritual

purposes" (Amishai-Maisels 147). Beilis was imprisoned for two years awaiting

his trial and there was a great deal of concern among Jews that pogroms against

the Jews were about to break out again. The issue of blood libel was very present in the culture of fear in which Chagall chose to paint his first image of the crucifixion, an image of the

Figure 3   Golgotha. Marc Chagall, 1912

crucified Christ child. (Fig. 3)

The focus of this painting is the crucified Christ child; his Jewish parents

in traditional garb are mourning at the base of the cross. The painting includes

the ladder, traditionally seen in renderings of the descent from the cross, being

removed. The removal of the ladder gives the observer the impression that this

innocent child, the Christ-child, will be crucified forever. Additionally, the child

on the cross is blue and the ground below him is stained bright red from his

blood. The visual reference of a murdered innocent and the charge of blood libel

against a fellow Jew are strongly suggested in this painting. Chagall's sketches of

Golgotha included elements which were not painted into the final work. The

sketch (Fig. 4) places Chagall's own name on the cross above the Russian

inscription of INRI. Amishai-Maisels explains,

> By substituting his own first name in Hebrew above what
> appears to be the Russian INRI inscription at the top of the
> cross, Chagall made it clear that the child is not Christian but
> Jewish. The sketch thus reverses the blood libel: it is the Jewish
> child, Chagall-Jesus, who is killed for ritual reasons by the
> Christians. (147)

Additionally, the early
sketch replaced the parents of
the child with two Russian
saints, one of whom is dressed
as a Russian bishop. Chagall's
Golgotha highlighted the
death of innocent Jews at the
hands of the Russians while at
the same time using the power
of the Christological symbol to
make a political statement
about the Beilis affair.
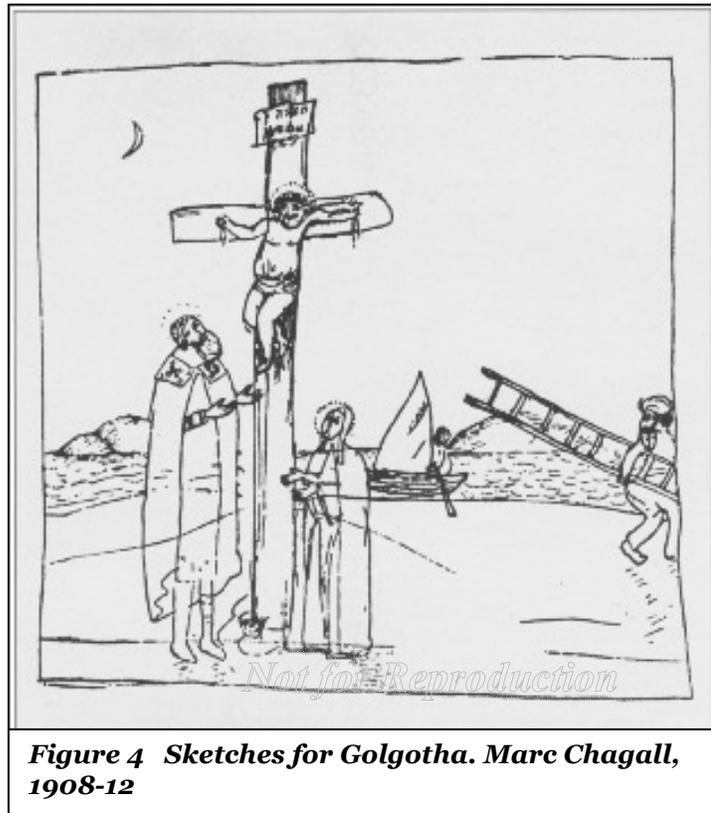
Figure 4   Sketches for Golgotha. Marc Chagall, 1908-12

Having completed *Golgotha*, Chagall waited ten years before returning to

the subject of the crucifixion. In the early 1920s, anti-Semitism was again

increasing in Germany. During this time, Chagall returned to working with the

image of Christ. His focus, like others within Judaism at the time, was to

highlight the essential Judaism of Christ and the political perversion of the

teachings of the historic Jesus. It must be noted that Chagall's own relationship

to Christ was one of respect and reverence. Chagall explained his relationship to

Christ in this way, "For me Christ was a great poet, the teaching of whose poetry

has been forgotten by the modern world" (Amishai-Maisels 152).

Sketching and painting in 1923, 1933 and 1947, Chagall created several versions of *The Falling Angel* (Fig. 5). Utilizing the image of the crucifixion in

Figure 5   The Falling Angel. Marc Chagall, 1923-47

the background, the foreground holds a bright red angel falling through the air.

Her expression is one of terror as the clock on her arm signifies that time is

running out for the Jews. The sketches and painting show a burning village in

the background as Jews flee for their lives carrying the Torah and an infant. The

viewer is drawn to the fantastical image of the falling angel in the center of the

work. In the book, *Chagall By Chagall*, the artist explains that his work did not

contain fantasy nor did it contain fairy-tale. He painted the reality of the world as

he experienced it, a world of terror and anti-Semitic horrors. (78)

In 1939, Chagall painted a tour-de-force entitled, *The White Crucifixion*.
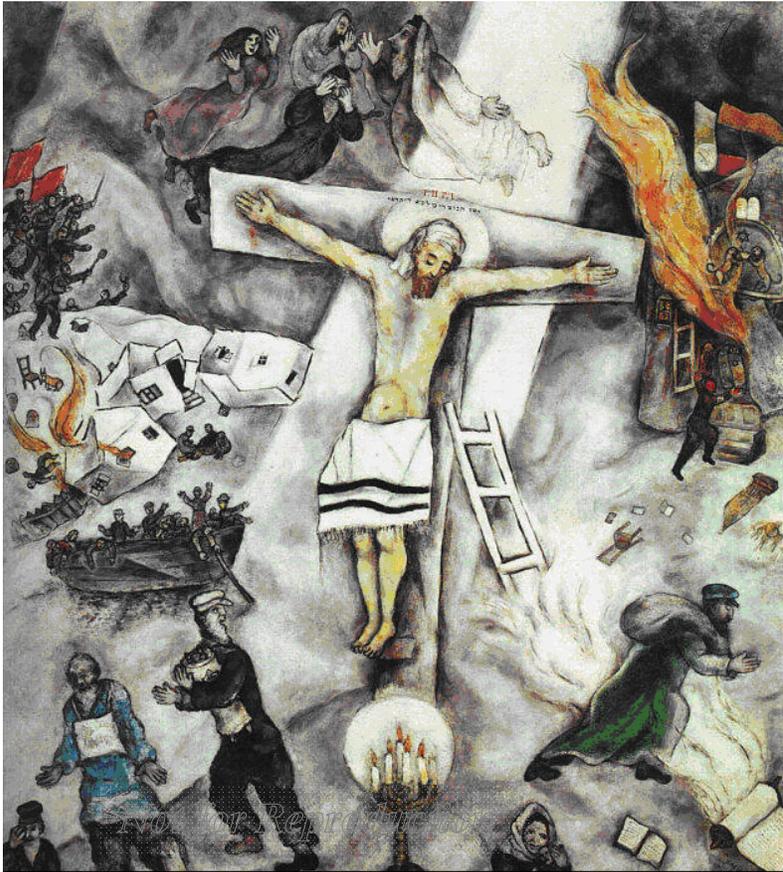
Figure 6   The White Crucifixion. Marc Chagall, 1939

In this work, the artist places the image of the suffering Christ on the cross in the midst of Nazi destruction (Fig. 6). For his own personal safety and the safety of his family, this work was painted over and hidden several times by Chagall prior to being brought into public view. In this work, the central focus is the image of the crucified Christ. Chagall has replaced

the traditional loin cloth with a tallis, the Jewish prayer shawl traditionally worn

by men for morning prayers. Above Christ is the traditional INRI inscription, yet

in the painting INRI is translated into Aramaic using Hebrew letters. At the base

of the cross is the menorah, an ancient and traditional symbol of Judaism. All of

these symbols surround and identify the crucified Christ with his Judaism. The

figures floating above him are three biblical patriarchs and Rachel, the matriarch, all in mourning for the death of their children. Amishai-Maisels explains, "Their presence here stems from a popular Jewish legend that, after the destruction of the First Temple, god summoned Moses and the Patriarchs to share His grief, for *they* knew how to mourn" (143).

Chagall has surrounded the Christ with pictures of Nazi destruction of a Jewish village and temple. As in the image of the Falling Angel, Chagall painted a Jewish man protecting the Torah as he runs away from the burning synagogue. The devastation of the world around the artist highlighted the terrible events that were occurring in Russia and Germany in the name of Christianity. Murder of innocents was not a part of the teachings of the biblical Christ. Murders were being committed in His name. The artists were expressing the distortion of Christianity that was occurring in their worlds.

Chagall continued to use the image of the crucified Jew throughout the remainder of his life. In 1941, only a year after his escape to the freedom of the United States, Chagall painted *The Descent from the Cross*. The image of angels removing the crucified Jewish man from the cross is replete with images of Jews at the base of the cross, welcoming Him with an intact menorah, all candles lit, in the hands of the man who stands at the base of the ladder, arm outstretched in a gesture of welcome. As he had done in *Golgotha*, Chagall painted his own name above the crucified Jesus. It was only from the safety of Chagall's new home that he was able to believe that his own salvation was possible.

The image of Christ has been utilized by Christendom for centuries to depict the stories of the New Testament. Jaroslav Pelikan reminds the reader that although the image itself is central to the Christian faith, its use gives one insight into the ways the image was being re-imagined by those who lived in its shadow. As is clear from the story of Ms. Mikhalchuk, the current Russian artist, Jews are not wrong to know that re-imaging Christ and the crucifixion is dangerous work, one that has and continues to threaten the lives of non-Christians to this very day.

About the Author

After practicing pediatrics as a Physician Assistant for over 20 years, Carol recently completed her Ph.D. in Mythological Studies with an Emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute.

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