

“Why Was Jesus Executed?: History and Faith”
by John Clabeaux

As appeared in Philip A. Cunningham, editor, Pondering the Passion: What's at Stake for Christians and Jews, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

Many Christians would answer the question “Why was Jesus executed?” with the words of Paul: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” (1 Cor 15:3) This comes from the heart of Christian faith. It ascribes responsibility to no particular group. When controversies rage over presentations of the Passion of Jesus, many think this answer eliminates the controversy. “No one is blaming the Jews”; they say, “we are *all* responsible.” But for Christians this answer is not enough by itself. It needs to be accompanied by another answer. Consider this answer from Frank Matera: “Historically, Jesus stood trial only once, before Pilate. Persuaded by the chief priests that Jesus was a political threat, Pilate sentenced him to death for insurgency.”¹ This is a necessary supplement to the first answer, not a contradiction. But it is not evident from a reading of the Gospels and Acts.

In the four Gospels the Jews seem to dominate the inexorable movement toward Jesus’ execution. In *Acts* there are five explicit statements that the Jews had Jesus killed: Acts 2:22-23; 3:13-18; 4:10; 5:30; and 7:52. But one does not read the Bible *well*, if one ignores what else has been written. The Bible is only understood when placed alongside many other writings, which help us determine how the forms of writing employed in the Bible are to be understood. Not all Christians think this is necessary. I write this article with a Catholic understanding of the relationship between *faith* and *reason*. It is a view not peculiar to the Roman Catholic Church. It is held officially or unofficially by many Christian denominations.² To many it seems an unnecessarily subtle approach to reading.

The conviction that *history* is important for good *theology* springs from the Bible itself in that it reveals a God who acts in history. It is also supported by the Christian

1. Frank J. Matera, “The Trial of Jesus: Problems and Proposals” *Interpretation* 45 (1991) 5-16.

2. Traditionalist Catholics do not hold to this time honored view of the relationship between faith and reason, or they understand it in quite a different way. For a detailed discussion of the Catholic stand on this crucial issue see the article in this volume by George Smiga “Separating the True from the Historical: A Catholic Approach to the Passion Narratives” pp. xx-xx.

conviction of the *Incarnation*. Jesus lived and moved in time and space. The world in which He lived is the world in which we live. We know this world not only from the Gospels, but also by examining the writings and studies of those who have labored to understand the past.

The Christian Church, which believes in his saving death and resurrection from the dead, also lives and moves in history. And how it lives in the world is due in large measure to how it thinks and talks about the object of its faith. Beliefs strongly held affect behavior and events. The Christian who cares about the world, cares about the history of Christian dealings with Jews for 2,000 years—a history which has been tragic.³ Those who know it are sensitive to the slightest suggestion of Anti-Judaism, since history reveals that this vile inclination has been like gasoline near a flame. Jews comprise less than ½ of 1% of the world’s population. Adding to their vulnerability is the fact that, as a group that has striven to maintain its identity and ethno-religious *élan*, they are regularly seen as *other*. The world is a dangerous place for people whom most of the world sees as *other*. The Jews are especially prominent in the consciousness of the Christian world, since they are so frequently in the Gospel readings of Christian assemblies. Both they and we have reason to be concerned about what images of the events that took place in the year 30 dominate the minds of Christians.

The Gospels and History

The Gospels contain history, but they are not *histories*. They are the chief witnesses to the events of Jesus’ death, but they do not reveal all things without some hard work on the part of the reader.⁴ On many matters of detail they disagree with each other. Those who engage in historical criticism of the Gospels must go through a process that can be likened to sifting. The Gospels and all relevant literature is the sand or soil that you sift. As you shake the screen, much of the sand slides through, but certain large particles stay

3. See Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Antisemitism*, (New York: Paulist 1985) and Mary Boys, “Jews and Christians in Historical Perspective,” in *Has God Only One Blessing?: Judaism as a Source for Christian Self-Understanding*, (New York: Paulist 2000), 39-74.

4. Again I refer the reader to the more thorough discussion of this matter by George Smiga, in “Separating the True from the Historical: A Catholic Approach to the Passion Narratives” pp. xx-xx of this volume.

on the screen. These are the facts on which all the witnesses agree, like: Jesus died on a cross, or, Pilate was the prefect who sentenced Jesus. The large particles are not merely isolated. They must be examined in relation to all other large particles (strongly established facts) and arranged as a coherent whole. If they create a world in conflict with what is known from careful study of the time period, the construction is not good history. Many medium sized particles nearly pass through the screen. One must sift gently and watchfully. If these medium sized particles (plausible or partly established facts) cohere with what is emerging as solid, they can be integrated into the picture. So can quite small elements, providing they do not disrupt the coherence of the whole.

The careful historian must make judgments about the tendencies of particular witnesses. Also, lines of development must be traced, since they may contribute to arguments about what events are confirmed. For instance, if we note a tendency in Christian literature to place less and less blame on Pilate, we should have to conclude that the earliest versions are more historically reliable than the later.

The study of ancient histories reveals an important fact about speeches and dialogues. It is crucial for reading the Passion narratives, since most of the scenes in the Passion Narratives (65% of the Passion in John) involve such speeches or dialogue. The ancient world showed much greater latitude for reporting speeches and dialogues than is acceptable today. An Athenian named Thucydides, who was the gold standard of history-writing in the Greek speaking world when the New Testament was being written, said that in writing speeches his aim was, “while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.”⁵ Thus, in dealing with speeches and dialogues in the Passion accounts, it is unwise to take these as though they were transcripts of what was said.⁶

5. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, trans. R. Warner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), 24. That Thucydides was the *gold standard* for history writing is seen from Lucian of Samosota’s essay from about the year 170 C.E., *How to Write History*, in which he refers frequently to Thucydides, and the fact that the opening lines of Josephus’ *Jewish Wars* are modeled on the opening lines of Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*.

6. To insist that the Gospel writers broke completely from the standards of communication of their time for narrating past events, and wrote history as 21st century historians should, we would have to adjust our view every

The Context of the Passion Events

Historically, the execution of Jesus must be placed within the political and social context of First Century Judea. These are matters of which we know relatively little from the Gospels, but a great deal from the writings of the First and Second Centuries C.E.

The Roman Empire and the Power to Execute

In the First Century Mediterranean world, the Romans jealously guarded the power to kill. As with all historical matters the record is complicated. There are reports of killings by Jews of other Jews for which the Romans punished those who killed without Roman approval.⁷ In general it seems that the words attributed to “the Jews” who brought Jesus before Pilate in John 18:31 were accurate: “It is not permitted for us to kill anyone.”

The Temple and Internal Jewish Conflicts

A crucial feature of the historical context of the Passion is the situation of the temple as the focal point of Jewish identity and of the conflicts among Jews at this time. Since the rebuilding of the temple in 515 B.C.E., after the return from exile, the temple took on an importance for identifying the Jews as a worshipping people that exceeded its significance in the days of the kings of Israel and Judah. After the exile the monarchy was gone. Israel was a province in a foreign empire. Even the “independence” asserted by

time new standards of what constitutes *good history writing* emerged. The position of the Catholic Church and many other groups of Christians is that the ancient authors wrote “as true authors.” (*Dei Verbum* 11). Inspiration does not mean that their procedures and proclivities were taken over by God. They wrote using forms and methods they knew.

7. See Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 366-84. One important incident is the killing of James as told in Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* (20.9.1 #200-03). The high priest convoked the Sanhedrin and they took a decision to kill him after the Roman governor Festus had left and before the new governor (Albinus) had arrived. When Albinus arrived and found out that the high priest had done this, he removed him from office. Less than a year later, when a prophet named Jesus son of Ananias was arrested and whipped by “some leaders.” When they turned him over to the prefect, Albinus, he let him go thinking he was more to be pitied than feared. One exception to the Roman monopoly on execution involved the temple. The Jewish-Roman historian Josephus tells of inscriptions placed in the temple area in Jerusalem in Latin and Greek warning Gentiles against entering under penalty of death. Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 366, presents archaeological support for this statement by Josephus. According to Josephus (*The Jewish War* 6.2.4 #124-26) the Jewish authorities had been given the power by the Romans to carry this out. But it is a specific, limited situation: Gentiles passing into the parts of the temple reserved for Jews.

the Maccabees in the Second Century B.C.E. was short lived and limited. In 63 B.C.E. the Romans established control, which they soon delegated to a puppet king—Herod. But the temple and the worship ceremonial that enacted the presence of God in their midst remained. If anything, foreign domination intensified the importance of the great processions to and around the temple altar. The processions embodied “a march that protested against idolatry.”⁸ However much the people despised Herod or those who ruled after him, they loved the temple. The Romans were usually savvy enough to leave the temple alone. But they possessed subtle forms of control. The Roman prefect had custody of the high priestly garments and could give them or withhold them as he chose. The strongest Roman fortress in Jerusalem was strategically placed overlooking the temple courtyard.

The people’s love for the temple did not extend to the high priests. Jewish texts from 165 B.C.E. to 100 C.E. reveal that Judaism was divided into many groups sharply opposed to the other groups, but most especially to the temple authorities.⁹ There were not just three groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) but dozens of different factions, with certain traits in common, such as love of the Torah and love of the temple. One thing nearly all groups shared was opposition to the temple authorities. The high priests were appointed by the Romans from Judea’s wealthy elite, and they served or were removed at the pleasure of the Romans.¹⁰ The temple establishment represented what sociologists would call the “parent group.”¹¹ They were the group against whom nearly all the other groups defined themselves. Each group accused the others, and especially the parent group of lawlessness. Most claimed their own legitimate teacher as true interpreter of the law. The rhetoric was highly charged but rarely lethal. The *Sicarii* (dagger-men) and *Zealots* of a later period (post 66 C.E.) are exceptions.

8. Asher Finkel, “Prayer in Jewish Life of the First Century as a Background for Christianity” in R. Longenecker, ed. *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2001), 50.

9. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 1-71.

10. Frank Matera, “The Trial of Jesus,” 10, indicated that Annas was high priest from 6-15 C.E. Five of his natural sons were high priest after him, and his son-in-law, Caiaphas was high priest from 18-36 C.E. Warren Carter in *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*, (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2001) gives evidence that the ruling elite was carefully protected by the Romans against the interests of *the many*. As such they had a great deal of personal interest in being in a cooperative relationship with the Roman prefect.

11. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel*, 8-9.

These facts are crucial for understanding the conflict between Jesus and other Jews. It is no accident that his chief opponents in the Passion Narratives are the high priests and not the Pharisees, who only appear in John's passion in a minor role (John 18:3) and in Matthew's version are not mentioned until after Jesus' death. Jesus' conflict with the high priests, and earlier in the Gospels, with the Pharisees, was not a conflict between "Christianity" and "Judaism," but a regular feature of Jewish religious life in this time period. As heated as the debate became, it rarely involved the Romans. But public critique of the temple, at particular times of year, could be seen by the Romans as serious enough to warrant punitive action. And historically, the high priests were in a mutually beneficial relationship with the Romans. It was usual in the Roman system for local officials like the high priests "to maintain and advance the interests of the [Roman] ruling elite."¹² There is little doubt then, that the high priest and his supporters colluded with the Romans in getting rid of Jesus. But the Romans needed little convincing.

It is important to note that Jesus would not have been killed for his teachings or behavior relative to the law.¹³ He had engaged in disputes with Pharisees, but they were in no position to bring about his death. Most historians see Jesus' rather violent activity in the temple (in Mark 11:15-19 and parallels) as sufficient to raise the ire of both the Romans and the temple authorities. To this we now move.

The Passion Events Relevant to Jesus' Execution

The Temple Incident

Matthew, Mark, and Luke present the Temple Incident at the beginning of Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.¹⁴ The commercial business connected to the sacrificial system was a regular and essential feature of it. Scholars are split on Jesus'

12. Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 148.

13. Gerard Sloyan makes this point in *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995), 27 and 31.

14. John presents this episode years before Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem. We have to make a choice between his assertion and that of the other Gospel writers. Since John shows a tendency to move matters which the rest of the tradition seems to assert as being quite near the Passion to points earlier in his ministry (e.g. parts of the Last Supper are moved to John 6, and parts of the Jewish leaders' discussions of what must be done about Jesus are moved to John 11), it seems logical to most historians to accept Matthew, Mark, and Luke on the timing of the Temple Incident.

intentions in carrying out this act, but one thing is certain: the disruption of the temple system was a disruption of the public order—as important to the Romans as to the temple authorities. The wonder is that he was not arrested immediately. We must assume he escaped due to the confusion common to a pilgrimage season. But people responsible for the public order would have been deeply concerned.

The Arrest

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are vague in their descriptions of the force that came and arrested Jesus. They call it a “crowd” without reference to ethnicity. John (18:3) is more specific. He mentions a mixed force, Roman and Jewish, which he describes as “the cohort and attendants from the high priests and from the Pharisees.” His mention of the Pharisees is a problem, since they do not appear here in the other gospels, nor do they play any further role in John. But his mention of the “cohort” as a distinct group, is supported by a reference in 18:12 to “the cohort and its tribune.” Cohorts at full strength numbered 600—far too many for such an operation. But the mention of a specific Roman officer (*chiliarchos* is equivalent to an American Colonel), suggests high level Roman involvement in the arrest. One wonders why so many presentations of the Passion, which usually follow John in his special details (such as the presence of Mary the mother of Jesus at the cross), leave the Romans out of the arrest. Given the political context, it is more probable that the Romans were involved in the action from the start. There seems to be no reason why John would add them, had they not been there. Mark has a reason for not mentioning them. Robert Beck discerns that Mark’s Passion narrative has a tight dramatic structure in which Judas, one of the Twelve, hands Jesus over to the Council, the Council hands him over to Pilate, Pilate hands him over to the soldiers who beat him and kill him.¹⁵ The progression moves toward the most lethal setting (the soldiers). Then the pattern proceeds in exact reverse. A soldier, in fact their leader, declares him “son of

15. For a full presentation of this literary critical analysis see Robert R. Beck, *Nonviolent Story: Narrative Conflict Resolution in the Gospel of Mark*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 39-62. Not only did Matthew follow Mark in this presentation but nearly all modern presentations of the passion follow it too. We end up with Jesus being severely beaten by Jews and tried by Jews even before he is taken to the Romans.

God.” Pilate then has custody of the body. He is approached by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Council, who then hands the body over to the women. The women are told in Mark 16:7 that Jesus will appear to the other disciples in Galilee. There is a clear pattern here of disciples-Council-Pilate-soldiers and then the reverse, with a startling contrast between Judas (one of the Twelve) and Joseph (a member of the Council). It is memorable. You walk out of the drama by the same steps on which you entered it. If Mark had mentioned the Roman soldiers and their officer as part of the arresting party the tight literary structure would be ruined. But John’s mention of the Romans is more probably correct.

Interrogation by the High Priest

Here the Gospel record is conflicted. This should not surprise us, since no one from the community of disciples was with Jesus inside the house of the high priest. The *beloved disciple* and Peter get no further than the courtyard (John 18:15-18). We are not told that any official discussions happened in the courtyard. Matthew and Mark describe a meeting of the Sanhedrin. We know precious little about the size and functioning of the Sanhedrin at this time. Mark presents a night meeting. But Luke (22:54-71) says only that they went to the high priest’s house, and then he describes Peter’s denial which takes place outside. He does not take us inside the house. John does (18:13-24), but it is the house of “the high priest’s father-in-law” (Annas not Caiaphas), and there is no trial—only an interrogation. The historian should conclude that we do not know exactly what happened that night, beyond that Jesus was taken to a house of a current or former high priest, and that Peter denied him. John’s scenario of an interrogation seems the most plausible, but Matthew’s and Mark’s are more effective as drama. But, we must stress, they are drama, not courtroom transcripts. The subjects discussed in the trial Mark describes are Jesus’ identity, something he said about the temple, and a statement about the coming of the Son of Man, all of which are matters that occur in the sayings of Jesus tradition. They represent what is likely to have been said, not the memories of an eyewitness to the events.

And yet, what happened on that night is quite important in answering the question “Why was Jesus executed?” If there were a formal trial by the Sanhedrin, we would have to place more emphasis on the violation of Jewish (rather than Roman) law. If it was only an interrogation by one of the power-brokers of the Jews who cooperated with the Romans, then more weight is placed on Roman interest in public order.¹⁶

Judgment by Pilate

This was not a *trial* by current standards. Pilate himself was judge and jury. Even in John, which is the longest account, Pilate only asked a few questions—in Matthew and Mark, only two. Only Jesus, Pilate, and possibly some guards would have been present. Ancient writers were free to construct a dialogue of what is likely to have been said. What is clear in all accounts is the importance of the question of kingship. This was most reasonably the heart of the matter, since it is what appeared on the placard above Jesus’ head when he was crucified, and this placard was viewable by the public. The questions about kingship seem an accurate representation of Pilate’s chief interest in the matter.

The Release of Barabbas

This episode is almost more important than the *Judgment by Pilate* in the picture one paints of how the decision to execute Jesus was made. In this episode Mark is probably closest to the events as they occurred. Pilate judged Jesus, a crowd approached asking for Barabbas, and, when this was settled, Jesus was led to scourging and death. Luke and John have Pilate making repeated efforts to set Jesus free—exactly three. The power shifts more and more to “the crowd.” The crowd is an enormous problem since we have no idea how large it was, or who was in it.¹⁷ But the later the Gospel was written, the more power is given to the crowd, and the less the blame placed on Pilate. In Mark, the crowd has come specifically to demand the release of one prisoner. That would make it a

16. Someone once asked me, “What charge did they arrest him on?” Next I expected: “Did they have a warrant to search the garden?” Of course, neither question was relevant to Roman rule in Judea at this time. I do not believe they would have read him his rights either.

17. See John Crossan’s short discussion of the problem of the size and make-up of the crowd in “Crowd Control” in *The Christian Century* (23 March 2004): 18-22.

self-selected “pro-Barabbas” crowd. In Luke (23:13) Pilate summoned “the high priests, the leaders, and the people.” This implies an entirely different form of “crowd” than Mark’s. Luke’s version has the ring of a formal summons—the equivalent of “the Senate and People of Rome.” Mark knows nothing of this formal summons by Pilate, neither does Matthew, who is rather close to Mark here. But Matthew has “the high priests and leaders persuade the crowds” so that in Matt 27:25 “the *entire people* said, ‘His blood be on us and on our children.’” By this Matthew connects the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. to the rejection of Jesus in Jerusalem a generation earlier. Historicized by Christians over the centuries it has meant horrendous suffering for Jews. Many famous Christians—Justin, Hippolytus, Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine among them—have gone on record saying that it explains the wandering and sufferings of the Jews. Such an interpretation was firmly rejected in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*: “...the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from sacred Scripture.” (#4)¹⁸

The historian has to be careful in assessing the importance of the crowd. The role of the crowd in each Gospel narrative has a dramatic function. The selection of Barabbas is loaded with irony and dramatic possibilities. It may have happened, but it may not have happened just at that moment. And the historian cannot dismiss the fact that Christian tradition reflects a steady trend toward diminishing the blame placed on Pilate and increasing the blame placed on the crowd, or *the Jews*. Mark does little to deflect the blame from Pilate himself. Matthew and Luke increase the role of the crowd.¹⁹ John intensifies this. In *Acts of the Apostles*, Peter asserts that the Romans tried to release him, but “The Jews” insisted he be killed (see Acts 2:22-23; 3:13-18; 4:10; 5:30; 7:52). By the

18. This line has received entirely too much play in Christian history. Until relatively recently this line was pronounced *three times* at the great Passion play at Oberammergau in Germany. Many great figures within Christian history, including John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo, interpreted it as referring to Jews in their own time. Augustine’s specific words in “Reply to Faustus the Manichaean” (book 12 #9) were “...the Church admits and avows the Jewish people to be cursed...” This is precisely the kind of thing the council fathers of Vatican II meant to repudiate. See Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, 47-55, Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?*, 48-57, and Gerard Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus*, 72-97.

19. This view of Matthew has been forcefully challenged by Warren Carter in *Matthew and Empire*, especially 145-68. He sees Matthew as being quite critical of Roman abuses of justice. He cites the important work of Peter Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970).

Second Century the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* says that Herod had Jesus killed, and later Christians either excused Pilate (like Tertullian ca. 190) or styled him “a prophet of the kingdom of God” (as Augustine).²⁰

Three historical arguments mitigate against an explanation of the execution of Jesus, which assigns a decisive role to the crowd. First, the power to execute rested squarely in the hands of the Romans. Second, Jesus’ teaching about *the kingdom of God* and his temple disturbance were enough to alarm the Romans about him. Finally, the little information we have about Pilate indicates that he was ready and willing to use violence against his Jewish subjects. Literary criticism of John suggests that the way in which Pilate is presented in the trial has more to do with “a dramatic character type...having to decide between truth and falsehood” than a carefully drawn historical description of the Roman prefect of Judea.²¹ John’s trial scene was mapped by Raymond Brown as “a series of seven scenes outside and inside the praetorium,...Outside the praetorium there is frenzy and emotion as Pilate struggles with the Jews over the fate of Jesus. Within the praetorium there is a mood of awe and fear as Pilate speaks to Jesus.”²² It is powerful drama that takes us into the meaning of the event. But it is not a transcript of what was said.

The custom of a yearly release of prisoners is fraught with historical concerns.²³ Would the Romans favor such a policy? There is no evidence in Roman writings for such a general policy. Would an individual governor have some such special practice? That we

20. R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 696. The trend was continued by Fourth and Fifth Century literature like *The Acts of Pilate*, *The Tradition of Pilate*, and *The Letter of Pilate to Herod* have Pilate (or, in one case the Emperor Tiberius) become a believer in Jesus. All three place the blame on the Jews. See Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press 2003) 6-10. As preposterous as this idea of Pilate becoming a Christian might seem, Carter has found a modern commentator on Matthew, Robert H. Gundry, who holds essentially that position.

21. R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 704, near the end of a discussion of what we can know about the historical Pilate (693-705). He judiciously argues against Christianizing Pilate, as several early Christian writers did, or excessively vilifying him. For more on Pilate see Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate*, especially his first chapter “Would the Real Pilate Please Stand Up?” 1-20. Both Brown and Carter think it wrong to present Pilate as anti-Jewish or especially prone to violence, but neither was he a secret Christian. He was something in the middle: a Roman career functionary from the business class (*equites*) with a military background.

22. Frank Matera (“The Trial of Jesus,” 8) describes this analysis by Raymond Brown from *The Gospel according to John xiii-xxi*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1970), 857-59.

23. For a full discussion see Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 811-20.

cannot rule out. Given power, individuals often use it in irrational ways. Practically speaking, Pilate may have used such a practice to diffuse popular animosity against the Romans. It is unlikely that he would put himself entirely at the disposal of his subjects. It is hardly conceivable that *any prisoner* would qualify for potential release. If Pilate had such a custom, it was meant to serve his ends.²⁴

Jesus' Death on a Cross

This incontrovertible fact weighs most heavily in answering historians' questions about why Jesus was executed. All four Gospels indicate Jesus was crucified, between two other condemned men described as *brigands* or *insurrectionists*, with a placard containing the words "King of the Jews." Crucifixion was public terror used by the Romans to maintain control of subject populations. Flogging was a normal part of it. The flogging prepared the victim for a bloody death in full view of the public. They reserved this barbaric treatment for "deserters, rebels, and those guilty of high treason."²⁵ The fact that Jesus was sent by the Romans to such a death, along with two other violent men, with a charge of kingship attached to his cross, all suggest that, to the Romans, the three men crucified were in the same category. Christian attention is focused on Jesus in the middle. But there is no evidence that the other two were treated differently from Jesus. An important detail from the Barabbas incident is that Barabbas was one of those "who [the plural form of the pronoun] had committed [the plural form of the verb] murder during the rebellion." (Mark 15:6) If the Barabbas episode rests on an historical memory from the day or near the day of the death of Jesus, it means that there had been a rebellion and men had killed people. This would cohere with the gospel presentation of two men crucified with Jesus. The Romans were concerned with public order. To them, Jesus and

24. Warren Carter (*Matthew and Empire*, 167) argues that the benefit Pilate would get from giving a crowd the chance to ask for Barabbas would be that Pilate could get a sounding as to how much trouble killing Jesus would bring him. This explains why after he was told they wanted Barabbas, he asked what he should do with Jesus. The words "seeing that he was getting nowhere" imply that he knew everything he wanted to know: there would be no rebellion over the death of Jesus. If this is what he intended, he was correct. There was no rebellion. In the meantime he had the chance to appear magnanimous to the crowd. If Barabbas were a real threat he could pick him up the next day. When the power imbalance is entirely in your favor, you have many options.

25. Gerard Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus*, 18.

the rebels had disturbed it. We have no way of knowing whether Pilate made much of a distinction between Jesus and the other two. We have no report from him. We have only the memory of three men killed by a means reserved for “deserters, rebels and those guilty of high treason.” Neither Jesus nor the others were soldiers or high ranking officials, so to the Romans they were some kind of rebels.

The Limits of History and the Need for History

The historical reconstruction of the crucifixion is unsatisfying to most Christians. It should be. It is not a complete description. Christian faith sees more than three men on crosses. There are questions of Jesus’ identity, his mission, his conflict with the religious powers of his time. The Gospels, or at least those who read them and speak on them, focus on the religious conflict to the near exclusion of the political motivations of the Romans, because the evangelists were not writing political history. Jewish religious authorities *were* involved. Their conflict with Jesus did include religious differences.²⁶ And, as Raymond Brown pointed out, to eliminate those religious conflicts from the picture would diminish the message of Christianity.²⁷ It is good that the evangelists addressed the intra-Jewish conflict, and the fact that many religious people opposed Jesus. This gives Christianity a basis for challenging the motives of (Christian) religious leaders who for reasons of selfishness or ignorance oppose Jesus as he appears in the Church and the world today. But historically, that emphasis on the death of Jesus as being chiefly due to jealousy or ignorance by Jews (both are mentioned in the Gospels and Acts) does not address important historical realities about the Romans and their forms of control in the Mediterranean world, which, although they may not have been the primary concern to the Christian writers, must be of concern to us. From a 21st century vantage point, we must take the Romans more seriously. Their form of control is repugnant to us. We must place blame where blame is due as we see it. We must learn from the Gospels

26. In the ancient world *religious issues*, were not separable from *political issues*. I am not sure that they are now, but we often like to act as if they are. In *Matthew and Empire*, Warren Carter makes a convincing case that the evangelists themselves are far more interested in political matters than we often assume.

27. R. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 391-97.

about the harm involved in religious opposition to Jesus, but we must also deal with the terrible political forces that perpetrate murder in the name of public order. A Christianity which is separated from the hard realities of politics is ripe for manipulation by secular powers—and this has happened in the 20th Century. And so we must deal responsibly with history. This includes the history of the effect that particular views of the execution of Jesus have had on the Jewish people.

The *view from history* does not replace faith, but people of faith dare not ignore it. A Christianity that is contemptuous of history is a Christianity turned in on itself, that has retreated to a mythical world of individual salvation. Such a Christianity will never fulfill its mission to the world. As Christ lived in the real world, so must the Church.