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Jews in The Dock; Pilate in the Choir

On a day that can be placed between the years 26 and 36 CE, the Roman governor of Judea, a foreign Gentile named Pontius Pilate, ordered the crucifixion of the man known to history as Jesus Christ. The charge against him was that he claimed to be the King of the Jews without Roman authorization, which, if true, would constitute an act of treason against Rome and lead to his horrible death. The earliest substantial accounts of what happened appear in the four New Testament Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Based on the evidence presented there, the evidence of Jesus' guilt would appear to be overwhelming, at least from a Roman viewpoint.

Jesus preached the imminent coming of a new kingdom for the nation of Israel, one not sanctioned or authorized by Rome. His chief disciple, Peter, called him "the Messiah," a title signifying a special king of the Jews to be sent to Israel by God, and Jesus declared Peter's assertion to be a revelation from God in heaven (Matthew 16:16–17). Some of his disciples argued over what role they would play in Jesus' kingdom (Mark 10:37). Jesus arranged his entry into Jerusalem in a fashion designed to invoke messianic allusions from Jewish scripture (Matthew 21:4). When he entered Jerusalem, large crowds hailed him as the Son of David, a messianic title (Matthew 21:9). After entering Jerusalem, he publicly declared, "now the ruler of this world will be driven out" (John 12:31). He accused the Roman-appointed high priest of the Jews of turning the Temple into a den of thieves and a corrupt marketplace (Mark 11:17; John 2:16). When the high priest asked him if he was the Messiah, he said that he was (Mark 14:61–62). When the Roman governor questioned him about the charges against him, he refused to answer (Mark 15:4–5). Roman soldiers ridiculed and abused him by pretending that he was the King of the Jews (Mark 15:16–20). At the end of the trial, Pilate ordered him to be crucified and ordered the cross to be

inscribed with the words "King of the Jews" to indicate the charge for which Jesus had been convicted (Mark 15:26). The Roman soldiers took Jesus out and crucified him (Mark 15:20). By any reasonable standard of Roman judgment, Pilate acted according to the evidence before him, barbaric as this decision may have been.

So, who killed Jesus? No, this isn't a trick question, not if you read the gospel accounts and other Christian literature. The easy answer ought to be Pontius Pilate. But the gospel authors and their Christian contemporaries didn't seem to like this response. So they changed the question slightly and asked who was "responsible" for the death of Jesus. They blamed the Jews. And, as I hope to prove in this study of the gospel accounts of Jesus' death, they gave a deliberately false answer by distorting the evidence, misrepresenting the facts, and frequently lying about what happened.

In the course of this work, I will argue that the gospel authors concocted historically implausible conspiracies among Jewish leaders to kill Jesus; invented corrupt Jewish courts trying to frame Jesus through perjured testimony; and fantasized about howling mobs of blood-thirsty Jews screaming "Crucify him!" and "His blood be on us and on our children!" They even falsely accused Judas Iscariot, a loyal and trusted disciple of Jesus, of betraying his mentor. All of this came wrapped in plotlines that frequently lack narrative coherence and simple logic.

At the same time that they cobbled together these bizarre fables about Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus, they presented a stunningly inaccurate, almost laughable portrait of Pontius Pilate as a sincere, kindly dedicated jurist completely convinced of Jesus' innocence and determined to set him free, only to be rebuffed time and again by those demonic Jewish crowds.

Perhaps they were afraid of Roman persecution. Perhaps they were frustrated at their inability to convince Jews that tendentious Christian interpretations of Hebrew scriptures, coupled with frequent misquotes of the text and misunderstandings of the content, somehow proved that the dead Jesus was the living Messiah. But the damage was done.

Having falsely fixed the responsibility for the death of Jesus, it was not long before the gospel audiences identified the Jews instead of Pilate as the killers of Jesus. By the turn of the first century, Christian leaders such as Ignatius of Antioch, one of the early church fathers, would routinely denounce those "Christ-killing Jews."[1] So, who killed Jesus? For Christians, it was the sour Jews, not sweet Pilate.

To add milk to the meat, Pilate not only escaped Christian condemnation for his heinous act but eventually became a sort of Christian folk hero. You have to look far and wide in early Christian literature to find even a hint

1. Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* XI; ECF 1.1.4.2.0.11.

that Pilate had any direct responsibility for the death of Jesus. Early Christian writers often mention that Christ suffered "under" Pilate but almost never "because" of Pilate. This standard Christian formulation fixes the time of death but doesn't identify the Roman governor as the executioner. Over the centuries, only the Jews were identified with that act.

The Gospel Overview

As indicated above, our earliest full accounts of what happened with Pilate, Jesus, and the Jews come from the four canonical Gospels. Although the four reports contain several troublesome contradictions and numerous inconsistencies, a clear consensus emerges as to the essential accusations against the Jews.

According to all four sources, the chief priests of the Jews and other important Jewish officials, for one reason or another (jealousy, heresy, fear, hypocrisy, ignorance), wanted Jesus put to death. For reasons that are not particularly clear or convincingly set forth, these Jewish leaders had to turn him over to the Roman governor in order to have the fellow executed.

First, however, they needed to arrest him, but this was a problem. Even though he came to the Temple day after day to teach, they couldn't take him into custody in public because he was too popular and they feared that riots would break out. Fortunately for the chief priests, a member of Jesus' inner circle, Judas Iscariot, agreed to lead them to Jesus' secret nighttime location so they could place him under arrest.

After taking Jesus into custody and conducting some sort of inquiry into his teachings, the Jewish authorities brought him before Pilate and accused him of many crimes, mostly unspecified. But the one charge that appears to have resonated with the governor was the charge that Jesus claimed to be King of the Jews. Pilate conducted a hearing into the matter.

Although there seems little doubt, based on Pilate's inquiry, that Jesus was clearly guilty of the charge, the governor told the Jewish authorities that he wanted to release the prisoner. But an angry Jewish mob led by the chief priests rejected Pilate's offer. They demanded that the governor not only crucify Jesus but that he also release a homicidal Jewish revolutionary named Barabbas, who had just led an insurrection against Rome that led to a number of deaths. Pilate, in order to avoid the possibility of massive riots that would threaten public safety, gave in to the crowd's demands. He released Barabbas and had Jesus delivered for crucifixion.

Poor Pilate. Fair-minded judge that he was, the Jewish threat to public safety forced him against his will to give in to the crowd's wishes. Whatever happened, though, to those large crowds that hailed Jesus as king and whom the priests feared would riot if Jesus was taken into custody? Did they just slink away? The Gospels don't say. Had this large outpouring of support

shown up for Pilate's tribunal, they could have given him enthusiastic public support when he offered to release their Messiah. They could have changed the course of history. It doesn't seem to have served the gospel authors' purpose to explain this puzzling absence.

Pilate in History

Clear and convincing extra-biblical historical evidence tells us much about how Pilate functioned as governor, and we will examine that evidence in detail in chapters 4–6, along with a look at standard critiques of this evidence. For purposes of our present perspective, however, let me briefly summarize what his contemporaries thought of him.

They considered him "cruel," "merciless," "obstinate," "corrupt," "insolent," and "inflexible" once he had reached a decision. He was insensitive to Jewish concerns and did not permit crowds to protest his rulings or challenge his authority. He readily employed armed Roman soldiers for crowd control and threatened mass executions of peaceful protestors if they didn't disperse. Of particular importance for our purposes was his reputation for "his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity."[2] Jesus was apparently lucky even to appear before him to offer a defense.

Pilate did not tolerate popular religious outsiders and his overreactions in this regard eventually led to his removal from office. He massacred a Jewish prophet from Samaria (between Judea and Galilee) and his followers. This was too much even for the Romans, and the governor of Syria, who had legal authority over Pilate, removed him from office. In an act of appreciation, the inhabitants of Jerusalem gave the Syrian governor a hero's welcome when he came to their city shortly after Pilate's removal.

How might this Pilate view Jesus, then, a preacher who taught the imminent coming of a new non-Roman kingdom that would rule the world for all time, a prophet hailed by large Jewish crowds as their non-Roman king, a protestor who aggressively denounced the Roman-sanctioned Jewish government as "a den of thieves," and a political activist who disrupted Temple traffic and religious rituals? Let's just say that turning Jesus loose wouldn't appear at the top of the governor's list of things to do before dinner.

The Evolving Images in Early Christian Literature

As you proceed through Christian literature in chronological order, you can notice a clear pattern. The vilification of the Jews increases and the perfidy of Pilate decreases. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, almost universally

2. Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 302.

considered by New Testament scholars as the earliest of the gospels, Pilate hands Jesus over to the Roman soldiers and they carry out the crucifixion. In the later Gospels of Luke and John, Pilate hands Jesus over to the Jews and they carry out the crucifixion. In Mark, Pilate makes no specific finding that Jesus was innocent of the charges. In Luke and John, the governor makes three such declarations. In Mark, Roman soldiers abuse Jesus and mock him as King of the Jews. In Luke, the mockery is transferred from Pilate's Roman soldiers to Herod's Jewish soldiers. In Mark, no motive is ascribed to Judas's interaction with the chief priests. In Matthew, greed is the motive. In Luke, Satan influences Judas. And in John, probably the last of the gospels to be written, Judas acts out of both greed and because of Satan.

The *Gospel of Peter*

This trend toward enhancing Jewish blame and exonerating Pilate reached its apex in the noncanonical text known as the *Gospel of Peter*, a Christian text attributed to the Apostle Peter, although very few New Testament historians would accept such a claim. Most scholars date it to the late first or early second century.[3] Evidence suggests that during the second century, Christians already debated whether this gospel actually came from Peter's hand.[4] It appears to have been read as scripture in some Syrian and Egyptian Christian churches.[5] Around 200, Bishop Serapion of Antioch barred its use as scripture because it was either heretical or subject to heretical interpretations.[6] Its deficiency is that it seems to hint that Jesus may not have been fully human.[7] We have only fragments of the manuscript, and one fragment begins with a portion of the trial proceedings against Jesus.

> But of the Jews none washed his hands, neither Herod nor one of his judges. And since they did not desire to wash, Pilate stood up. And then Herod the King orders the Lord to be taken [sent?] away, having said to them, "What I ordered you to do to him, do."[8]

Next, Joseph of Arimathea, described in this gospel as "the *friend* of Pilate and the Lord,"[9] came to Pilate for help in retrieving the body of Jesus, and Pilate sent a request for the corpse to Herod.

3. Brown 1994a, 1332, 1342.
4. Ehrman 2003a, 15.
5. Brown 1994a, 1341.
6. Ehrman 2003a, 16.
7. Ibid.
8. Brown 1994, 1318.
9. Ibid., emphasis added.

Contextually, there seems little doubt that in this version of the Passion, the active judge is Herod, not Pilate, and that Herod ordered the crucifixion and the Jews carried it out. Pilate complained about the proceedings, ceremoniously washed his hands of the event, and waited for Herod and other Jews to do the same. But none did.

Where Luke earlier transformed some of the anti-Pilate attributions into anti-Herod assertions, the author of this document altered the remaining anti-Pilate material so that Herod became the wrongful actor. Pilate didn't even order the crucifixion, according to this text. This development is interesting in that the Gospel of Luke has Pilate send Jesus to Herod for investigation and Herod, finding Jesus innocent, returned him to Pilate for continued proceedings (Luke 23:6–12).

We should note that this Herod, a son of Herod the Great, was the Roman-appointed ruler of Galilee, where Jesus conducted his ministry, but he was also a Jew. Pilate, however, was a Gentile. So the shifting of responsibility from Pilate to Herod not only minimizes Pilate's involvement but also reinforces the Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death and exonerates the Gentiles.

The depiction of Joseph of Arimathea, who in the canonical gospels is responsible for the burial of Jesus, as a friend of both Pilate and Jesus, further softens the image of Pilate. That Pilate had to send to Herod for the corpse reinforces the idea that Pilate had no direct connection to the crucifixion. With the *Gospel of Peter*, the transformation of Pilate and the Jews is complete. Pilate was thoroughly innocent, having no role in or responsibility for the death of Jesus, while the Jews were solely responsible for the trial, verdict, and execution of the Jews. Christians never looked back.

Other Christian Accounts of Pilate

I briefly observed above that the late first-century–early second-century Christian father, Ignatius of Antioch, referred to Jews as Christ-killers. In his letter to the Magnesians, he writes about the suffering of Jesus "at the hands of the *Christ-killing Jews*, under Pontius Pilate the governor and Herod the king."[10] Ignatius clearly affixes blame for the death of Jesus on the "Christ-killing Jews" and lets both Pilate and Herod off the hook. The inclusion of Herod in this exoneration suggests that he was influenced by the Gospel of Luke. He mentions Pilate and Herod only for the purpose of fixing the time of the event, while they were both in office, but he gives no indication that he holds either of them responsible. Only the Jews are guilty.

The second-century Christian writer Irenaeus, noted as one of Christianity's premier heresy hunters, says that Jesus "was arrested by the priests, con-

10. Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* XI; ECF 1.1.4.2.0.11, emphasis added.

ducted before Herod, and condemned in the presence of Pilate."[11] Here, Pilate is only present while Herod conducts the trial. This version of events seems clearly influenced by the *Gospel of Peter*.

The third-century Christian writer Origen, considered one of the most brilliant of the early Christian scholars, contributes further to the process of exonerating Pilate. In his *Against Celsius*, he responds to a Jewish argument against the divinity of Christ, the argument being that nothing ever happened to Pilate because of his execution of Jesus. If Jesus were truly a God, the Jew argued, then Pilate would have received some divine punishment. Origen replied, "he does not know that it was not so much Pilate that condemned him (who knew that 'for envy the Jews had delivered Him'), as the Jewish nation, which had been condemned by God and rent in pieces and dispersed over the whole earth."[12] By this time, we can see that influential Christian thinkers condemned the entire Jewish nation for the death of Jesus while granting Pilate amnesty.

Bishop Hippolytus, a contemporary of Origen, says that Jesus was "scourged by Pilate and derided by the soldiers and nailed to a tree by the Jews."[13] While Hippolytus acknowledges that Pilate had Jesus whipped, he exempts the governor from blame for Jesus' death, stating that it was the Jews who nailed Jesus to the tree.[14] Both Luke and John blame the Jews for crucifying Jesus but only John depicts Pilate actually whipping Jesus. This suggests that the bishop's account may have been influenced by the Gospel of John.

Lactantius, another third-century Christian writer, had this to say about what occurred.

> And when Pontius Pilate, who then as legate had authority in Syria,[15] perceived that the cause did not belong to the office of the Roman judge, he sent him to Herod the Tetrarch, and permitted the Jews themselves to be the judges of their own law: who having received the power of punishing His guilt, sentenced Him to the cross, but first scourged and struck him with their hands, put on Him a crown of thorns, spat on his face, gave Him gall and vinegar to

11. Irenaeus, "Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus, LIV," in Roberts et al. 1997, I:577; ECF 1.1.7.2.0.0.

12. Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.34; ECF 1.4.3.6.2.34.

13. Hippolytus, "On Psalm II. From the Exposition of the Second Psalm, by the Holy Bishop Hippolytus," in Roberts et al. 1997, V:170; ECF 1.5.0.2.1.10.

14. A number of Christian writers sometimes refer to Jesus' cross as a tree. This is due to the influence of Deuteronomy 21:23, which instructs Jews that when a man is sentenced to hanging, his body should be removed and buried before nightfall. This passage was thought to come into play when Joseph of Arimathea went to claim the body of Jesus for burial.

15. This is obviously an expansive and inaccurate description of Pilate's legal authority.

> eat and drink . . . then the executioners . . . suspended him on the cross, and affixed Him to it.[16]

Elsewhere, he adds,

> Then Pilate was overpowered by their outcries, and by the instigation of Herod the tetrarch, who feared lest he should be deposed from his sovereignty. *He did not, however, pass judgment himself, but delivered him up to the Jews*, that they themselves might judge Him according to their law.[17]

In Lactantius's version of events, Pilate conducts no inquiry and passes no judgment of execution. The decision is made by Herod and the Jews execute judgment. He also adds that the Jews judged Jesus themselves under Jewish law. This implies that there was no crime against Roman law, such as claiming to be King of the Jews, and that Jesus was only put to death for violating Jewish law (or under false charges that he violated Jewish law). He even shifts the flogging of Jesus from Pilate to Herod and the mocking by the Roman soldiers to the Jewish executioners. Lactantius has completely exonerated Pilate and the Romans of any involvement whatsoever and transferred all wrongdoing to Herod and the Jews. He appears to have been heavily influenced by the *Gospel of Peter*.

Pilate: Christian Folk Hero

The process of exonerating Pilate led to the emergence of a number of folk traditions that cast the governor as some sort of Christian hero. The early third-century Latin writer Tertullian hailed him as a convert to Christianity who tried to persuade the Roman emperor to join the flock.[18] Eusebius, the fourth-century church historian, added that Pilate convinced the emperor that Jesus was a deity and the emperor referred the matter to the Roman Senate for consideration.[19]

In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, another fourth-century work, we find Pilate before the Roman emperor, who condemns Pilate to death for his role in the death of Jesus. Just before Pilate's execution, however, the governor prays to Jesus for forgiveness. As he finishes his petition, the voice of Jesus from heaven declares him blessed among Gentiles and announces that Pilate shall appear as a witness to the second coming of Jesus. When the executioner decapitates Pilate, an angel carries off the head.[20]

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16. Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divine Institutes* XLV; ECF 1.7.1.2.0.41.
17. Ibid., XVIII; ECF 1.7.1.1.4.18, emphasis added.
18. Tertullian, *Apology* XXI; ECF 1.3.1.1.0.21.
19. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.2.1–2.
20. *Acts of Pilate*, New Testament Apocrypha, in Roberts et al. 1997, VIII:465; ECF 1.8.5.10.0.0.

This account is especially interesting in that it acknowledges that Pilate ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, despite what many other Christian writers were saying, and that the Roman emperor executed Pilate for his actions. This at least acknowledges that Pilate was responsible for what happened to Jesus. But Pilate's conversion to Christianity leads him to become a favorite of Jesus. So Pilate is ultimately exonerated, as is the Roman emperor at the time of Jesus' execution. However, we know that Pilate wasn't executed for his role in the death of Jesus, although he was subsequently removed from office for killing a different Jewish prophet.

Augustine, the extremely influential fifth-century Christian scholar. praised Pilate as a prophet[21] and as the first Gentile at the death of Jesus to recognize his divinity.[22] By the sixth century, Pilate had such star quality that the Coptic Church declared him a saint.

Not only did early Christian writers attest to Pilate's Christian bona fides, by the mid-fourth century, he began to appear in Christian art. In some portrayals, the artist aligned him opposite Abraham, Daniel, or other biblical celebrities.[23] The Abraham scene depicted the sacrifice of his son Isaac, an act of supreme religious devotion. The Christian artist clearly implied a parallel with Pilate's delivery of Jesus for execution. The Daniel connection derives from the story of Susannah and the Elders, in which Daniel defended Susannah against false charges by the Jewish elders. Again, the parallel enhances Pilate's reputation.

Judas and the Jewish Nation

Judas didn't fare as well as Pilate did. No nominations for sainthood, no tomb depictions, not even a heavenly voice of forgiveness. Over the last two thousand years, hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of people have despised the man, making him the most hated man in all of history. His name is a synonym for traitor, and the Judas kiss, the act by which he consummated his deed, has become the metaphor for betrayal.

But Christians weren't satisfied with just pounding on Judas's reputation. They began to see him as symbolizing all Jews who didn't accept Jesus. Augustine, the sainted Christian scholar, wrote of him:

> For as some things are said which seem peculiarly to apply to the Apostle Peter, and yet are not clear in their meaning, unless when referred to the Church, whom he is acknowledged to have figuratively represented . . . so Judas doth represent those Jews who were enemies of Christ, who both then

21. Brown 1994a, 697n50, citing Augustine, *Sermones* 201.
22. Jensen 2003, citing Augustine, Sermon 201.
23. Ibid.

> hated Christ, and now, in their line of succession, this species of wickedness continuing, hate Him.[24]

In other words, when the Gospels tell us that Judas did something evil, we should understand that Judas represents the entire Jewish nation and his action is the action of the Jewish nation. His betrayal of Jesus means that the entire Jewish nation betrayed Jesus. When Jesus allegedly says of Judas, "woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born" (Mark 14:21), Augustine's teaching implies that this curse applies to all Jews who reject Jesus. This Augustinian analysis has imposed itself on Christian thought throughout the ages, and all Jews who rejected Christ were deemed evil and wicked, better that they not be born.

Augustine wrote in the late fourth–early fifth century, but the condemnation of the Jewish nation as a whole took root much earlier. We already saw that by the end of the first century, Ignatius referred to Jews as the Christ-killers. And we noted Origen's teaching in the third century that the Jewish nation "had been condemned by God and rent in pieces and dispersed over the whole earth." Augustine, however, elevated the degree of wickedness by equating Judas with the Jewish nation. If Satan entered into Judas, then he entered into all Jews who rejected Jesus.

While Augustine probably didn't need any special props to convince fellow Christians that Judas's wickedness applied to all Jews, he probably got an extra push from some scriptural connections to the disciple's name.

The name "Judas" is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Judah. In the Jewish scriptures, Judah was the fourth son of Jacob and a rival to Joseph for leadership of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob had designated Joseph as his heir to lead the twelve tribes and Judah hated Joseph, so he arranged to deliver Joseph into the hands of a foreign enemy by selling him into slavery. So this first Judah/Judas betrayed the designated leader of the nation of Israel by handing him over to foreigners and received money for his actions, just like the disciple Judas. This would have impressed many early Christian scholars who recognized the parallel.

Eventually, the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms, Judah in the south and Israel in the north. In 722 BCE, the last remnants of the northern kingdom were destroyed by the Assyrians, giving rise to the legends of the ten lost tribes of Israel. The kingdom of Judah survived the onslaught and survived as a political entity in one form or another down to the time of the Bar Kokhba rebellion against Rome at about 133 CE. In the time of Jesus, the political entity of Judah, usually rendered as Judea, encompassed mostly Jerusalem and its surrounding environs. Larger portions of the original

24. Augustine, *Enarrations on the Psalms* 109.1; ECF 2.8.1.1.109.0.

kingdoms of Israel and Judah were divided among other Roman administrative units, such as Galilee or Samaria or Idumea.

The term "Jew" (*yahud* in Hebrew) derives from the association of the remaining Hebrew people with the territory of Judah (*yahudah* in Hebrew). A Jew was someone from Judah.

For Christians, therefore, the name Judas/Judah had a double negative association. First, it suggested that Judas's evil act was foretold by scripture in the actions of Judah the son of Jacob. Second, the name corresponded to the political entity of Judea that rejected Jesus and turned him over to the Romans. It didn't take much imagination for Augustine to see in Judas a symbolic representation of the Jewish nation. No doubt, several Christian scholars had already put these two parallels together and shared their polemical joy by pointing it out to others.

But did Judas betray Jesus, or was he falsely accused of such a heinous act by the authors of the Gospels? In fact, there is very good evidence that in the years immediately following the death of Jesus, this disciple enjoyed a reputation as a loyal and trusted follower of Jesus. The charge of betrayal was a late invention that arose in the context of increasing hostilities between Jews and Christians. We will look at that evidence in more detail in later chapters and see how gospel authors twisted the facts around to create a different picture.

Given Augustine's pronouncement that Judas symbolized the Jewish nation, it is only fitting, therefore, that the title of this book, *The Judas Brief*, signifies both a defense of the Jewish nation and of the disciple Judas.

The Current View

Despite numerous inconsistencies, several narrative incoherencies, many historical errors, and frequent implausible allegations against the Jewish people (examples of which will be examined in later chapters), when read together, the four New Testament Gospels have provided Christianity with a generic plotline that has served to fuel intense hatred of the Jews for almost two thousand years. The trajectory of this virulent animosity encompasses centuries of constant anti-Jewish harassment, persecution, violence, torture, murder, and massacres, all leading to a climate of anti-Jewish revulsion that culminated in the Nazi execution of over six million Jews. At its base stands the accusation that Jews were criminally responsible for the death of Jesus, that the Jews were "Christ-killers," that the Jews, out of malice and spite, forced the Roman governor to crucify the innocent Jesus.

In recent years, primarily in reaction to the Holocaust, many New Testament scholars have wrestled with the problem of the relationship between the Gospels and the prevalence of Christian anti-Semitism and have written sensitively about the issue. Modern critical scholarship also recognizes an

enormous number of difficulties in using the Gospels as historically reliable sources. They have made long strides in showing us the many layers of development that led to the final shape of the gospel manuscripts, including some alterations and changes made to the received text after the Gospels were written. They point out many historical errors and challenge many claims as implausible or unproven. And they show clearly how the gospel authors frequently misrepresent, distort, or alter the content of earlier sources, whether quoting from Jewish scripture or from another gospel or from some earlier source. The scholars politely describe this latter practice as rearranging the material to accommodate the author's theological perspective. The more accurate charge would be that the gospel authors deliberately misrepresented the evidence to make a polemical or theological point.

Nevertheless, no matter how finely the scholars slice and dice the gospel texts, how thinly they peel off the various layers of development, how carefully they simmer theological claims in the historical broth, how delicately they reassemble the textual ingredients to recreate the original recipe, when it comes to the question of who killed Jesus, they still serve up the same cold gruel. Jews were responsible. The chief source of dispute is over which Jews were responsible and why. Even the most philo-Semitic exegetes adhere to some variation of the core gospel allegation that at least some Jewish leaders cooperated with the Roman governor in seeking the death of Jesus.

Raymond Brown, for example, one of the most respected modern New Testament historians, writes in his *The Death of the Messiah* that "an underlying hostile attitude toward Jews is religiously unjustified and morally reprehensible."[25] Yet he also concludes, "Because they disliked Jesus and what he did and said, Sanhedrin authorities [i.e., the Jewish court] were involved in seizing him and giving him over to the Romans to be put to death."[26]

John Dominic Crossan, another prominent New Testament scholar and author of several volumes on Jesus and early Christianity, argues that Brown does not go far enough in exposing the fallacious roots of anti-Semitism in the Gospels and critiques Brown's historical analysis of several elements in the Passion Narrative that cast aspersions on the Jews.[27] Yet, he concludes that Jesus died because he committed a crime against the Jewish Temple rather than for treason against Rome.[28] In his view, when Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers, he reenacted a symbolic destruc-

25. Brown 1994a, 385.
26. Ibid., 386–87.
27. Crossan 1996, ix–xi.
28. Ibid., 117.

tion of the Temple, and it was "that act of symbolic destruction, in deed and word, against the Temple" that led to his arrest and execution.[29]

In connection with the problems of anti-Semitism among Christians, the Second Vatican Council had this to say about blaming Jews for the death of Jesus: "What happened in Christ's passion can not be blamed without distinction on *all* Jews then living, nor upon the Jews of today."[30] The Council obviously concluded that *some* Jews can be blamed, and this would appear to be the most that current church and modern New Testament scholarship will concede regarding the involvement of Jews in the death of Jesus.

Today, New Testament scholars who are willing to subject the Gospels to the sort of historical criticism that questions the idea of scriptural inerrancy tend to see the gospel accounts as presenting a generally reliable overall picture of what happened but not necessarily a literally accurate one with respect to all the significant details. These scholars can be divided into two opposing camps with regard to how they understand the gospel portrayal of the interaction between Pilate and the Jews. The division concerns how they evaluate the extra-biblical evidence concerning the way Pilate governed.

On one side, you have those who accept the broad gospel picture that shows Jews bullying Pilate until he yields to mob pressure. They evaluate Pilate as a weak, perhaps spineless governor, unable to assert his authority when challenged and giving in to the crowd's demands for crucifixion, although they would be among the first to admit that not all Jews are responsible for what happened and that later generations of Jews shouldn't be held responsible for the acts of the irresponsible few.

For this group, the historical evidence concerning Pilate is unreliable, a distorted picture based on bias and polemic. In opposition to this negative portrayal, they cite other historical evidence and provide alternative interpretations of the existing evidence. They conclude that Pilate's administration was far less malevolent than depicted in these other sources and that the gospel picture could be historically accurate. I dispute this analysis in chapter 6.

On the other side, you have those who accept the validity of the extra-biblical evidence that shows Pilate as a strong-willed governor not easily cowed by protesting throngs. For this group, Pilate was also a wily politician who saw a good opportunity to do a favor for the Jewish authorities and win their support. His execution of Jesus was simply clever politics designed to appease his critics. I challenge this argument also, in chapter 13. This group, too, argues that most Jews had nothing to do with the death of

29. Ibid., 65.

30. Brown 1994a, 38, emphasis added.

Jesus, and that subsequent generations of Jews shouldn't be held responsible for the acts of a few misguided Jewish leaders.

What we don't see argued among New Testament scholars is the idea that Jews had nothing to do with the death of Jesus; that Pilate determined, without any Jewish input, that Jesus should be put to death, and that he ordered the Jewish authorities to turn Jesus over or suffer the consequences of a violent confrontation between the Roman military and Jewish defenders of Jesus, a confrontation that could lead to the deaths of thousands of innocent Jews in this dangerously over-crowded city during the holiday festival. Or, as the Gospel of John lets slip, "But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed'" (11:49–50).

The Argument Ahead

In the following chapters, we will take a close and critical look at the gospel accounts of what happened and at the relevant historical evidence. As the facts unfold and the gospel contradictions and inconsistencies mount, we will see that the charges against the Jews unravel and that a more likely historical scenario emerges.

The evidence will show that there was no plot by Jewish authorities to kill Jesus; Judas did not betray his mentor; Pilate never seriously offered to release Jesus; the followers of Jesus did not disappear from the scene; the Jews did not call for the release of Barabbas or demand that Jesus be crucified; and Pilate, from the very beginning, planned to execute Jesus.

At the end of the investigation, it will be argued that during the Passover holiday, matters had become volatile. An insurrection led by Barabbas had led to riots and deaths, with Roman soldiers among the casualties. Pilate put the Roman military on high alert, ready to suppress any elements of protest and immediately quell any outbreaks of violence.

Onto this scene came Jesus, who had developed a large following in Galilee with his message of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. As he approached Jerusalem, large crowds of Galilean supporters who had come to Jerusalem for the holidays hailed him as some sort of envoy from God who would usher in the new kingdom. To many of his followers and to the Romans, this would be heard as a challenge to the exercise of Roman authority. From Pilate's perspective, this was not the sort of gathering one wanted to have in the aftermath of a deadly riot.

Pilate would have wanted to suppress this movement, but any action on his part during the holiday season could easily have triggered massive riots by Jesus' followers and resulted in the deaths of an enormous number

of innocent Jews in the wake of the deadly insurrection that had just occurred.

The Jewish authorities were deeply concerned about the danger and wanted to avoid bloodshed. They went to Pilate and begged him to hold off on a military solution. They promised to find a way to keep the peace. The Jewish authorities then opened up negotiations with Jesus to figure out how to avoid violence. Judas acted as Jesus' representative.

A deal was struck. Jesus agreed that he would keep his followers calm by agreeing to remain a hostage during the holiday festival, staying at the house of Annas, a former high priest, father-in-law of the current high priest, Caiaphas, and one of the most influential political figures in the Jewish government. The agreement called for Jesus' release after the holiday season ended, the crowds had left Jerusalem, and his followers went home to Galilee.

Pilate initially agreed to the plan, but under pressure from his politically powerful rival, Herod Antipas, the Galilean ruler who saw Jesus as a threat to his own rule, Pilate reneged on his promise. After Jesus surrendered to Annas, Pilate demanded that Jesus be brought to the governor's headquarters to ascertain whether Jesus claimed to be King of the Jews. The Jewish authorities had no way to ignore Pilate's order without creating a military confrontation, but they hoped that Pilate would keep his promise.

Crowds assembled outside Pilate's headquarters and Jesus' supporters called upon Pilate to release their teacher, but Pilate taunted them by asking if he should release "your King." The large number of Roman soldiers surrounding the crowds, angry over the deaths of their comrades in the recent insurrection, wanted this revolutionary leader put to death and called for his crucifixion. The Jewish authorities, fearful of violent outbreaks in this hair-trigger situation, did what they could to keep the crowd from rioting.

Pilate, having abandoned his commitment to allow Jesus to remain with Annas for the holidays and then be released, ordered him to be crucified. Jesus, concerned that riots would lead to a great many innocent deaths, asked his followers to remain calm, told them that the kingdom was imminent, and said that when the kingdom arrived, he and his followers would be reunited. His followers heeded his words and dispersed.

In the early years after the death of Jesus, the apostolic circle did not hold the Jews or Judas responsible for what happened. As religious conflicts between Jews and Christians increased and as the Christian base became more Gentile, later Christians began to see what happened to Jesus as a betrayal and blamed Judas and the Jewish authorities for what happened.

Some Methodological Considerations

The so-called Jesus Quest, a scholarly effort to extract the historical facts about Jesus from the existing evidence, relies on a number of critical criteria

to evaluate gospel claims about what really happened. For example, if a story has multiple attestations in independent sources, we can be more certain that the story has some credibility than if a story appears in only one source. The goal is to find out what events in the gospel stories can legitimately be traced back to the time of Jesus and which stories may be later inventions. We will, of course, make use of such techniques from time to time. As with any such tools, however, they must be used judiciously and with caution and they can only take us so far. Enormous patches of the scriptural material don't yield to such analytical processes.

With that in mind, I want to propose that a few additional criteria be added to the standard arsenal, ideas that may linger subconsciously in the scholarly analysis but ideas that I never see explicitly stated.

1. *Where inconsistencies in the Gospels reflect differing degrees of hostility towards the Jews or Jewish figures, the least hostile text is more likely to be closer to the historical truth than the more hostile text.* The argument in support of this criterion follows:

All early Christian writers (that we know of) exhibit some degree of hostility toward the Jews and Jewish opponents of Jesus. As we move forward chronologically, we find the degree of hostility increasing. We also know from text-critical studies (and we will look at some examples later) that some gospel writers have altered information in their sources so that Jews sometimes appear in a more negative light than depicted in the source material. It would seem, therefore, that a writer hostile to the Jews, when evaluating a source (oral or written), is more likely to change the source content to make the Jews look worse than to change it so that Jews look better. There would seem little incentive for a hostile author to soften the Jewish image.

For example, Mark says that Pilate handed Jesus over to the Roman soldiers for crucifixion and the Roman soldiers carried out the execution. John indicates that Pilate handed Jesus over to the Jews and they were the ones who put Jesus to death. Logically, if the Jews were the ones who crucified Jesus, the fact should be well known and widely circulated from early on. If Mark had two sources, one that said Jews crucified Jesus and one that said Romans crucified Jesus, what would induce Mark to reject the charge against the Jews and accept the anti-Roman source? The most likely explanation is that Mark probably knew of no credible source that said Jews carried out the crucifixion and that the anti-Jewish allegation is probably a later invention.

Implicit in this principle is that if a later text has a version of a story that is more favorable toward the Jews than a version in an earlier source, then the author of the earlier source has probably altered the underlying story so that the Jews appear in a more negative light and the later source is more likely to be closer to the original underlying story.

2. *Where inconsistencies in the Gospels reflect differing degrees of approval for Pilate, the one containing the less flattering version is more likely to be closer to the historical truth than the more favorable version.* The argument here is similar to the one made above for the criterion involving less hostile versus more hostile views of Jews.

All of the gospels present Pilate in a better light than they do the Jews. As time went by, the image of Pilate continued to improve. It seems unlikely, therefore, that an author hostile to the Jews and favorable to Pilate would take a description of Pilate and make it more harsh than it appears in a source, especially since such an act would also have the effect of improving the image of the Jews, at least by comparison.

For example, in Mark, Pilate makes no explicit statement that he finds Jesus innocent of the charges, but in John, Pilate makes three such declarations. Now, if Pilate specifically declared Jesus to be innocent, it would be well known and widely circulated among the earliest Christians. So if Mark had two sources, one in which Pilate makes no declaration of innocence and one in which Pilate makes three declarations of innocence, why would he choose the one that presents Pilate in the worse light when he wants to present Pilate in the best possible light vis-à-vis the Jews? The likelihood is that Mark never knew of a reliable source that said Pilate declared Jesus innocent on three occasions, which suggests that the claim is a late invention.

Again, the test is not the chronological order in which the texts appear but the degree of favorability in the sources. So if a later gospel has an incident that shows Pilate in a harsher manner than does an earlier gospel account of the same incident, then the later gospel account is more likely to be closer to the historical truth than the earlier version.

3. *The attitude of Jews toward Jesus prior to the crucifixion should be judged based on what Jesus actually said while he was alive and not on teachings revealed after his death.* The basic principle here is that whatever Jews may or may not have reacted to while Jesus was alive can only be judged on the basis of what Jesus said and did while he was alive. Nobody can be held responsible for knowing something about Jesus that hadn't been revealed.

This criterion is particularly difficult to apply, because it essentially involves the whole range of tools used to determine what portions of the gospel texts reflect activities from the time of Jesus and what events appear to be later inventions. Nevertheless, there are some instances where such information can be elicited.

For example, there are a number of teachings in the Gospels that suggest that Jesus saw his mission as solely to the Jews and not to the Gentiles. Other evidence indicates that shortly after his death, Gentiles weren't admitted into the movement. Over time, however, there were revelations to Peter and Paul regarding the Gentiles and the Christian mission expanded to the

Gentiles. While there may be good theological explanations for why the nature of the mission changed, the more important concern for our purposes is to determine what the nature of the mission may have been before Jesus was crucified. If Jesus prior to his crucifixion addressed his mission only to the Jews and not to the Gentiles, then that is a factor that has to be considered in evaluating how Jewish authorities may have judged Jesus and what things Jesus may have said to the Jewish people.

In the next chapter, I take a closer look at a number of problems that we face when trying to use the Gospels as a historical source of evidence.