

Jesus and His Passion

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SUMMARY

Examines what we know from history of Jesus' Passion.

JESUS AND HIS PASSION

As we approach Easter, Jesus' face will doubtless appear on the cover of many newsweeklies. Mel Gibson's unexpected blockbuster "The Passion of the Christ" has raised a storm of controversy which has filled the airwaves with interviews, talk shows, and documentaries. All this furor raises the question: who was Jesus of Nazareth, really? Was He God incarnate, as Christians believe? Or could certain contemporary radical critics be right that Jesus was a sort of social gadfly, the Jewish equivalent of a Greek cynic philosopher?

Revisionist biblical critics such as John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Paula Frederickson, who were interviewed on the NBC special "The Last Days of Jesus," argue that the actual events of Jesus' Passion were significantly different than those portrayed in Mel Gibson's movie. Now in one sense that's doubtlessly true. Gibson added to his film not only a good deal of artistic interpretation but also a good deal of Catholic tradition which goes beyond the bounds of history, such as the veil of Veronica, Mary's participation in the events of the Passion, and the pieta-like scene when Jesus' body was taken down from the cross.

But that's not what revisionist critics are concerned about. Rather they claim that the Gospels themselves are historically inaccurate in portraying Jesus' crucifixion as instigated by the Jewish chief priests and merely carried out by the Roman military authorities. The revisionist critics claim that ultimately it is the Roman authorities, not the Jewish authorities, who are to blame for Jesus' crucifixion. They point out that there was great unrest in Palestine under Roman rule and that with hundreds of thousands of visitors in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover, the Roman authorities must have been anxious to maintain the public peace. Nerves must have been on edge. Extra-biblical sources portray Pilate as a cruel and ruthless man who would not hesitate to bring down soldiers on the people to keep order. The Temple priesthood were collaborators with Rome and were basically in cahoots with Pilate to keep things under control.

Revisionist critics interpret Jesus' cleansing of the Temple as a symbolic attack on the Temple itself. Thus, not only was Jesus disturbing the peace, but the Jewish priesthood felt their authority

threatened by Jesus' actions. Pilate was about to bring his fist down hard in order to maintain public order, and this would have resulted in great loss of innocent life. So the chief priest Caiaphas, who felt his authority threatened by Jesus anyway, decided to deliver Jesus over to Pilate rather than let people be killed in a Roman crackdown. Therefore, the responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion really lay at the feet of the Roman authorities, not the Jewish authorities, as the Gospels say.

Now in assessing the claims of the revisionist critics, it's important that we don't miss the forest for the trees: What's remarkable here is the degree of *agreement* on the events of Jesus' Passion. Even the sceptical critics affirm the central events of Jesus' Passion: his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey as a herald of the Kingdom of God in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy, Jesus' disruptive action in the Temple driving out the money-changers and their animals, the involvement of the Jewish authorities in Jesus' arrest and trial (or hearing) before them, Jesus' being delivered to Pilate on the charge of sedition, and Pilate's condemning Jesus to crucifixion as a pretended King of Jews. It is stunning testimony to the historical credibility of the Gospels that even sceptical critics find themselves compelled by the evidence to admit the historicity of the fundamental outline of Jesus' Passion and death. Their main point of contention has to do with whether it was the Jewish or the Roman authorities that were chiefly responsible for Jesus' death.

Now some of you may be thinking at this point: *who cares?* Traditionalist and revisionist critics alike agree on the main events of Jesus' Passion. It's pointless to play the blame game now! In fact you might suspect that this whole debate is really spurred on by little more than political correctness. After all, there's a very strong motivation toward revisionism: namely, a wholly commendable desire to repudiate the ugly history of anti-Semitism that has too often characterized the Christian Church. So there's a strong suspicion, I think, to see all this revisionism as simply borne out of a politically correct desire to exonerate the Jewish authorities as far as possible. The Romans become the obvious scapegoat. After all, there aren't any Romans around today to protest when they're blamed for the crucifixion. Thus, we see in the NBC special even a conservative scholar like Craig Evans say, "The Romans crucified Jesus." What? Are all Romans to blame for the crucifixion of Jesus? Did Cicero crucify Jesus? Did Tacitus crucify Jesus? This is painting with as broad a brush as someone who incautiously says, "The Jews killed Jesus." But because there aren't any Romans around anymore, no voice of protest is raised and the Romans quietly take the fall.

Now I agree that there is a good deal of political correctness driving this debate. But if you think that's the whole story, you're seriously mistaken. There's a lot more at stake here than at first meets the eye. What most of you don't realize is that the revisionist account of the Passion is just a part of a broader revisionist picture of Jesus that the sceptical critics are trying to put through. You see, sceptical critics reject the Gospel portrait of Jesus as a man who claimed to be the Son of God and the divine Son of Man and who saw himself as the promised Jewish Messiah. According to John Dominic Crossan, Jesus was just a kind of social critic, the Jewish equivalent of a Greek cynic philosopher. Marcus Borg says that Jesus was a cross-cultural religious mystic who championed the rights of women and the poor against an oppressive religious establishment. The supernatural Jesus we read about in the Gospels is a myth, the product of theology and legend.

Now one of the greatest problems with this revisionist view of Jesus is the fact of his crucifixion. Everybody agrees that Jesus of Nazareth wound up on the cross. In fact, the revisionist critic Paula Frederickson says that the crucifixion of Jesus is the "single strongest fact we have about Jesus." But if Jesus was just a peasant, cynic philosopher, just a liberal social gadfly, as the revisionists claim, then his crucifixion becomes inexplicable. As Professor Leander Keck of Yale University has written, "The idea that this Jewish cynic (and his dozen hippies) with his demeanor and aphorisms was a serious threat to society sounds more like a conceit of alienated academics than sound historical judgment." New Testament scholar John Meier is equally direct. He says, "such a Jesus would threaten no one, just as the university professors who create him threaten no one." Revisionist critics have thus created a Jesus who threatens to be incompatible with the one indisputable fact about him, namely, his crucifixion.

It's in light of this problem that revisionist accounts of Jesus' Passion must be seen. Basically, the revisionist account of the Passion is an attempt to explain how you get a non-Messianic, non-divine Jesus to the cross, where everyone admits he wound up. The way you do it is this: you imagine a scenario according to which there was a hair-trigger tension in Jerusalem during Passover that year. The least disturbance could set things off. Pilate is ready to come down and come down hard on anyone disturbing the peace. That's what Jesus did, and that's what got him handed over to the Roman authorities, who crucified him as a public example of what happens to trouble-makers.

Now this sounds at first blush like a plausible scenario. But plausible scenarios must always be tested by the evidence. And when we ask about the evidence for the revisionist scenario, what's striking is the almost complete absence of any evidence for it. It is based almost entirely on

hunches and conjectures about what one would likely expect to happen. Thus, in the NBC special we hear Paula Frederickson talking about what she “in my historian’s imagination” thinks must have happened. Crossan says, “I can imagine there was a standing order between Pilate and Caiaphas” to arrest anyone who got out of line. And so we’re treated to all sorts of imaginative speculations about tensions in the crowd, about Pilate’s character and mood, even about what Caiaphas was thinking!

This is really quite extraordinary. This isn’t the way you do history. If history could be written on the basis of hunches and conjectures, historians would be out of a job. Life is often not neat and tidy, the course of events will often swing in unexpected directions, and people surprise us by sometimes acting in ways seemingly out of character. That’s why the historian’s picture of the past must always be guided by evidence, not by what we think should have happened. Certainly imagination plays an important role in historical reconstruction. But imagination must always be tested by the evidence.

So how does the revisionist scenario match up with the evidence? Well, not so well.

Take, for example, the crucial conjecture of a hair-trigger situation in Jerusalem during Passover that year, so that the least disturbance would bring down the authorities on even innocent parties. John Dominic Crossan says, “Anything could cause a revolution. You could imagine Pilate saying: ‘If anything moves, crucify him!’” But does the evidence bear out this speculation? To the contrary, Jesus’ provocative triumphal entry into Jerusalem early in the week in fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9.9, during which he was hailed by the crowd as inaugurating the Kingdom of David, didn’t elicit a peep from the Roman authorities. After looking around, Jesus walked back out to Bethany, where he spent the night. On the following day when Jesus disrupted the commerce in the Temple, no Roman troops sprang into action, no one arrested him. Nor in the following days did the Roman authorities move against him. He continued to teach daily in the Temple and returned unmolested each evening to the suburb of Bethany where he spent the night with his disciples. The idea that the Roman authorities saw Jesus as a significant threat to the peace, so that they would move against him, contradicts their actual behavior. Indeed, meddling in Jewish affairs by arresting a popular teacher might create more unrest than simply leaving him alone, as they did.

Moreover, there’s no good reason to think of Jesus’ action in the Temple as an attack on the Temple itself rather than as what the Gospels portray it to be: a cleansing or purifying of the

Temple. In the days following his action Jesus did not speak against the Temple as such but continued to teach there daily. And after his death, his followers continued to worship in the Temple like other Jews.

What about Jesus' arrest? The evidence unanimously supports the conclusion that Jesus was betrayed into the hands of the Jewish authorities. Not only is this attested in all four Gospels, but also in the extremely early information transmitted by Paul (I Cor. 11.23). It was the Jewish authorities, not the Roman authorities, who felt threatened by Jesus' person and teaching and therefore wanted him dead. Nor was this a last minute decision reached during Passover week. According to two independent sources, the plot to get rid of Jesus had been brewing among the Jewish leadership for some time (Mark 3.6; John 5.18). Both the Jewish historian Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud testify to the Jewish authorities' initiative in Jesus' trial. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a) justifies seeking his execution as appropriate action taken against a heretic.

At his trial before the Sanhedrin Jesus was sentenced to death for blasphemy. I quote:

Then the high priest stood up . . . and asked Jesus, . . . 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?'

'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

The high priest tore his clothes. . . . 'You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?' They all condemned him as worthy of death. (Mark 14:60-64 NIV)

In this saying Jesus claims to be the Son of God and the apocalyptic Son of Man, coming in judgment on the clouds of heaven, a quotation from Daniel 7. Especially blasphemous in Jewish ears would have been his claim to sit at God's right hand. Revisionists don't like this portrait of Jesus; but as Robert Gundry, a Gospel of Mark scholar, has argued, so subtle an account of a capital blasphemy case in a Jewish setting cannot be a later fabrication.

Since the Sanhedrin lacked the authority to carry out capital punishment, the Roman authorities had somehow to be convinced to execute Jesus. To Roman ears Jesus' claim to be the Messiah or the King of the Jews would come across as seditious, and therefore Jesus was cast by the chief priests in the role of a political rebel before Pilate. Revisionists protest that the Gospels' portrayal of Pilate as weak and vacillating contradicts what we know of his ruthless character from extra-biblical sources. But while Mel Gibson's movie can be fairly faulted on this score, the Pilate we read about in the Gospel accounts is not weak and vacillating; what he exhibits is not weakness

but his characteristic stubbornness in the face of Jewish demands. If Jesus was not arrested on Roman initiative as a threat to the peace, but on Jewish initiative on concerns that were primarily Jewish, then Pilate might well resist their attempt to get the Romans to do away with him.

We know that Pilate wasn't afraid to bump heads with the Jewish authorities—nor afraid to give in when it seemed politic. For example, Josephus tells us that when Pilate arrived in Palestine in AD 26, he deliberately provoked the chief priests by displaying Roman standards with the Emperor's image in Jerusalem, an action his predecessors had been careful to avoid. The Jewish authorities sent a delegation to Pilate which argued for five days for the standards' removal. On the sixth day Pilate ominously ordered a detachment of soldiers to enter the crowd and upon signal to draw their swords. At that point the Jewish delegates bared their necks, preferring death to violating Jewish law. Whereupon Pilate, realizing that he might provoke a general uprising, gave in and ordered the standards removed.

Pilate's action just four years later in the sentencing of Jesus follows this precedent. He stubbornly locks horns with the Jewish leaders until he sees that a riot is about to break out (Mt. 27.24). When the chief priests make the thinly veiled threat, "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar" (John 19.12), Pilate, realizing where his self-interest lies, relents and orders Jesus to be executed.

By giving the crowd a choice between Barabbas and Jesus, Pilate knows that the people will not rise up on behalf of Jesus. Revisionists sometimes claim that the crowd's calling for the release of Barabbas is inconsistent with Jesus' popularity. But we don't know how many sympathizers Jesus had nor which people the chief priests had assembled that morning before Pilate (Mark 14.11). In any case Jesus had proved something of a disappointment to those who had expected him to restore the throne of David. He had not followed up on his triumphal entry or his cleansing of the Temple by calling for insurrection; on the contrary in answer to the provocative question about paying Roman taxes, Jesus had given the very anti-revolutionary reply, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12.17). The bloody and broken image of Jesus presented by Pilate to the crowd was the very antithesis of the conquering Messiah they had learned to expect, and it is not at all improbable that Barabbas seemed to them a more honest-to-goodness Messiah than Jesus.

Traditionalists and revisionists alike agree that Jesus was crucified by Roman authority. But what happened to Jesus' body after his death?

This question is crucial for answering the question as to who Jesus really was. When I was

approached by NBC about being interviewed for the program "The Last Days of Jesus," I said I would do it only if they were going to be discussing the resurrection of Jesus. When the producer said, "No, we're just going to end at the crucifixion," I said to her, "Well, then, I guess you're not really going to be talking about the last days of Jesus, are you?" She replied, "I see what you mean. If it weren't for the resurrection, nobody would even care about the last days of Jesus, would they?" That's absolutely right. The resurrection of Jesus is the key to his identity.

So what happened to Jesus' corpse? John Dominic Crossan surmises that it was probably taken down by the Roman soldiers and thrown into a shallow dirt grave, where it either rotted away or was dug up and eaten by wild dogs. But not only is there no evidence for this colorful conjecture, but Jewish burial practices and sensibilities contradict it. In opposition to Crossan's conjecture let me summarize four facts which are agreed upon by the majority of New Testament critics who have written on this subject.

Fact #1: After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb. This fact is highly significant because it means that the location of Jesus' tomb was known to Jew and Christian alike. In that case it becomes inexplicable how belief in his resurrection could arise and flourish in the face of a tomb containing his corpse. According to the late John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge University, the honorable burial of Jesus is one of "the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus."

Fact #2: On the Sunday morning following the crucifixion, the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of his women followers. According to Jakob Kremer, an Austrian specialist on the resurrection, "By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements concerning the empty tomb." As D. H. van Daalen points out, "It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions."

Fact #3: On multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead. This is a fact that is almost universally acknowledged among New Testament scholars today. Even Gert L. demann, perhaps the most prominent current critic of the resurrection, admits, "It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."

Finally, fact #4: *The original disciples believed that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having*

every reason not to. Despite having every predisposition to the contrary, it is an undeniable fact of history that the original disciples believed in, proclaimed, and were willing to go to their deaths for the fact of Jesus' resurrection. C. F. D. Moule of Cambridge University concludes that we have here a belief which nothing in terms of prior historical influences can account for—apart from the resurrection itself.

Any responsible historian, then, who seeks to give an account of the matter, must deal with these four independently established facts: the honorable burial of Jesus, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the very origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection and, hence, of Christianity itself. I want to emphasize that these four facts represent, not the conclusions of conservative scholars, but rather the majority view of New Testament scholarship today. The question is: how do you best explain these facts?

Now this puts the sceptical critic in a somewhat desperate situation. For example, some time ago I had a debate with a professor at the University of California, Irvine, on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. He had written his doctoral dissertation on the subject and was thoroughly familiar with the evidence. He could not deny the facts of Jesus' honorable burial, his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection. Therefore, his only recourse was to come up with some alternative explanation of these facts. And so he argued that *Jesus had an unknown identical twin brother* who was separated from him at birth, came back to Jerusalem just at the time of the crucifixion, stole Jesus' body out of the grave, and presented himself to the disciples, who mistakenly inferred that Jesus was risen from the dead! Now I won't go into how I went about refuting his theory, but I think that this theory is instructive because it shows to what desperate lengths skepticism must go in order to deny the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the evidence is so powerful that one of the world's leading *Jewish* theologians, the late Pinchas Lapide, declared himself convinced on the basis of the evidence that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead!

In summary, the evidence does not support the claims of the revisionist historians. On the contrary, we have solid grounds for thinking that Jesus of Nazareth not only claimed to be the divine Son of Man and the Son of God and the Jewish Messiah, claims which provoked his condemnation by the Jewish court and led ultimately to his crucifixion, but also that those claims were true because God raised him from the dead. As the early apostles preached, "God would not allow his holy one to see corruption" (Acts 2.27). God has acted in history, and we can know it.

