Scholars still debate who crucified Jesus: The Roman or Jewish authorities

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Moviegoers who see *The Passion of the Christ* may go home confident they know who killed Jesus and why. If only the experts could feel so sure.

This much biblical scholars know: Jesus died on the cross at the hands of Roman prefect Pontius Pilate. But what led Romans to crucify an unarmed wanderer with a nonviolent following? The role of Jewish authorities continues to stir disagreement in scholarly circles, as does the question of how much to trust the four biblical versions that give filmmakers storytelling options.

“What the Gospels tell us is consistent with what other sources say, like Josephus, who was a Jewish historian,” said Craig Evans, author of *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Baylor University Press) and a New Testament professor at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia. “They tell how ruling [Jewish] priests used to machinate, to get rid of people they didn’t like, to stab people in the back. . . . But people [today] get so angry and they’re so touchy, I’m not sure it can be looked at rationally.”

Evans counts himself among an international set of scholars who constitute the “Third Quest” for the historical Jesus. Over the past 15 years, they have aimed to redeem the Gospels as sources of accurate historical information.

But dozens of others in the field continue to read the Gospels as texts that exaggerate the Jewish authorities’ role in Jesus’ death in order to win converts from traditional Judaism to Christianity. “If he was executed by crucifixion, then it was done by Romans,” said Alan Segal, professor of religion at Barnard College. “Jews found it cruel. And the charge of blasphemy was not a capital offense. Jewish opposition to Jesus is always depicted as religious, not political, but he was crucified for political reasons. You have to explain that discrepancy.”

In the Gospel narratives, Jewish authorities demand Jesus' execution from a reluctant Pilate. In Mark, generally accepted as the earliest Gospel, from about 70 AD—30 to 40 years after Jesus' death—the high priest Caiaphas charges him with blasphemy for calling himself "Messiah." Then "all of them condemned him as deserving death" (Mark 14:64, NRSV).

Matthew's later account—which filmmaker Mel Gibson uses primarily, along with a 19th-century drama based on Matthew's Gospel—adds a befuddled Pilate asking, "What evil has he done?" Pilate then goes before an angry Jewish mob who curse themselves: "His blood be on us and our children" (Matt. 27:23-25, NRSV). Gibson removed that line this year under pressure from Christian and Jewish critics. In John, the latest Gospel, written more than 60 years after Jesus' death, responsibility for the death rests not just with chief priests but with "the Jews" as a group.

Scholars who reject the Gospels' indictment of Jews as unfair have generally concluded that Judean authorities were little more than pawns in the Roman justice system since, as appointees of the emperor, they had to cooperate with Pilate to keep their jobs. "Of course, Caiaphas must collaborate with the one in charge," said John Dominic Crossan, author of *Who Killed Jesus*? *Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco). "The highest echelons of Jewish administration who had to cooperate with Pilate did go along."

According to the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars brought together by the Westar Institute of Santa Rosa, California, the Gospel accounts must be approached skeptically. Three Gospels seem to embellish on Mark's, they argue, which leaves Mark's as an uncorroborated, independent witness. As a genre, the gospel seems more concerned with inspiring faith than with capturing a perfect record, these scholars say.

Third Quest scholars, however, question whether Roman authorities really felt deeply threatened by Jesus, who in the Gospels frequently took aim at the hypocrisy of Jewish Pharisees and scribes rather than at Caesar or his minions.

The alternative theory of N. T. Wright and the late Raymond Brown, for instance, holds that Jews of the Temple, whose authority Jesus constantly challenged, had the most to gain from seeing him put to death.

“The old views, that Jews espoused a corrupt form of religion and therefore hated Jesus for preaching a better one, and that Jesus posed a straightforward revolutionary threat to [Roman] public order, are to be rejected,” writes British scholar Wright in *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus* (Fortress). “Someone, or more likely some group, wanted Jesus out of the way for somewhat less obvious reasons. But what were those reasons? . . . The current tendency, which I believe to be profoundly correct, [is] to associate the Temple with Jesus’ death.”

In the end, scholars are left with just one account of Jesus’ death—Mark’s, since Matthew and Luke follow Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ adult ministry and execution, and John apparently reworks many episodes from Mark. Crossan and a few other scholars have debated whether much of the apocryphal Gospel of Peter, of which only fragments have survived, preceded Mark or was mostly rewritten from New Testament Gospels. Pending more evidence, questions persist. “If something as important as the Passion didn’t have independent sources,” asks Crossan, “then how much creativity are we allowing for Mark?” *–G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Religion News Service*