



THE BLOOD SLANDER

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THE MURDER ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 27, King James Version

NARRATOR: When the morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death: They bound him, led him away, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor.

PILATE: Are you the King of the Jews?

JESUS: So you say.

NARRATOR: The chief priests and elders made accusations, but Jesus did not answer.

PILATE: Did you not hear the many things they accuse you of?

NARRATOR: Jesus did not answer. Now at that feast time, the governor's practice was to release a prisoner, whomever the people wanted. There was a notable prisoner, Barabbas.

PILATE: Whom will I release? Barabbas... Or Jesus, whom you call the anointed?

NARRATOR: When Pilate was seated on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message: "Have nothing to do with that just man. I have suffered many things in a dream because of him". But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus.

PILATE: Which of the two shall I release to you?

VOICES: Barabbas.

PILATE: What shall I do then with Jesus whom you call the anointed?

VOICES: Let him be crucified.

PILATE: Why, what evil has he done?

VOICES: Let him be crucified.

NARRATOR: When Pilate saw that he could not prevail over the tumult in the crowd, he took water, and washed his hands before them.

PILATE: I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see to it yourselves.

VOICES: His blood [will] be on us, and on our children.

NARRATOR: Pilate released Barabbas and had Jesus scourged. Then he delivered him to be crucified. Over his head this accusation was written, ‘THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS’.

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Matthew 27 (NIV)

25 All the people answered, ‘**Let his blood be on us and on our children!**’

Luke 23 (Oxford)

13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders and the people, and said to them, “You brought this man as one perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of the charges against him.... Indeed he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him”. ... 18 Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow!”... “...they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” 22 A third time he said to them, “Why what evil has he done” ... But they kept urgently demanding with loud shout that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed.

In these and other Gospel passages there is a widely “understood” subtext, taken as the “Gospel truth” in Hitler’s Germany, in which phrases like “the people”, “they all” and “they” are really saying “the Jews.”

HITLER’S HELPERS

In cities and towns throughout Europe in the 1930’s and 40’s Jewish parents kept their children indoors on Good Friday. It was a frightening day because some loosely wrapped Christians were stirred by the reminder of an ancient Jewish “crime” to retaliatory violence. They had been moved by a retelling of the Passion (i.e., condemnation, torture and execution) of their Lord by “the Jews.”

With that context in mind, consider these not-unrepresentative Gospel passages -

Matthew 27

25 All the Jews answered, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!'

Luke 23

{13} Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders and the people, and said to them, "You brought this man as one perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of the charges against him.... Indeed he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him". ... {18} Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow!"... "...they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" {22} A third time he said to them, "Why what evil has he done" ... But they kept urgently demanding with loud shout that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed.

In these and other Gospel passages there is a widely understood subtext that taken as the "Gospel truth" in places like Hitler's Germany, in which phrases like "the people", "they all" and "they" are really talking about "those murdering Jews."

And Pilate is somehow exonerated.

I believe to the core of my being that this is slander. Some of my fellow Christians have become aware of the problem. They and I wince with pain during a traditional reading of Jesus' last hours, his "Passion" as told in one of the gospel accounts. This should be a glorious chronicle of a holy hero, but for me it was poisoned by a falsehood, innocently repeated, that Jesus was murdered by a mob of his fellow Jews who forced a reluctant Pontius Pilate (that worldly and sophisticated humanist!) to kill an innocent Jewish teacher.

In effect, Pontius Pilate leers at us from history's stage like some bloody Shakespearean figure, holding a dripping knife and shouting: "The Jews made me do it!" I submit that Christians are still reading "The Passion According to Pilate", an account with about the same credibility as a document called "Hitler's liberation of France" written by the Vichy government.

During the Easter season Christian congregations hear about the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, including this passage from the gospel of John (John 20:19)

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, "Peace be unto you".

What if we were to adjust that passage for its missing context? Recall that Jesus was a popular Jewish spiritual leader who was executed by the Roman occupiers as a revolutionary threat. Recall that the Temple authorities were much like the collaborationist Vichy government in Nazi-occupied France.

When the Nazi's ruled Europe, not everyone was enthusiastic. Most French citizens longed for the removal of their German overlords. Some of them undertook active resistance at great risk to their lives. One hero of the French resistance, **Jean Moulin**, met secretly with fellow freedom fighters in German occupied France for the last time on the 21st of June 1943. The meeting was behind closed doors for good reason. But someone had betrayed them. The Gestapo raided the place and arrested Moulin. He died not long after while in Gestapo custody.

Now imagine how one might describe Moulin's last meeting—

When Moulin met with his fellow resistance leaders the doors were shut because of fear of the (a) the French people, (b) German soldiers, (c) Nazi collaborators.

Only in the scenario where the Nazis won would the account read, "because of *fear of the French people*".

As I hope to show in the following pages, the reason for the following proposed historical correction should become bright line clear --

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Roman authorities and their collaborators, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, "Peace be unto you".

The gospel accounts of Jesus life, death and resurrection are preserved only in Greek, although the entire narrative originated in the languages spoken by the main characters, Aramaic and biblical Hebrew.

In the Gospels, scholars often encounter the Greek term, Ἰουδαῖοι. This term is usually translated as "Jews," sometimes as "Judeans", but never as "some of Jesus' fellow Jews".

In this way, tradition has so far preserved the malicious myth that the impetus for Jesus' brutal torture and execution came from Jesus' bloodthirsty co-religionists, the Jews, exonerating that putatively warm and cuddly Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, falsely

portrayed as the reluctant judge, Pilate the brutal, who actually ordered the torture and execution **as he had many times** before.

Thus two concomitant insights were artfully concealed – that the whole Christian drama is a Jewish story, and that Christianity, from its very inception, was a Jewish variant.

Ever since I first read Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* as a teenager, I have been fascinated by that elusive, First Century Palestinian Jewish Hassidim whose life altered all subsequent human history, the so-called "historical Jesus," the flesh and blood man who was more...

My own spiritual path has led me full circle from a naïve Childhood Christianity through a secularist wilderness to a more developed late adulthood Judeo-Christianity. In this journey, I've become increasingly troubled by the painfully apparent anti-Jewish elements in the Gospel accounts. *How could this be?* I thought. *After all, wasn't Jesus himself, a devout, practicing Jew?*

Much of the trouble stems from the wrong answer to a single question: "Who killed Jesus?"¹

My recent attempts to uncover the actual events surrounding the Passion can be seen as a detective story written by a veteran criminal defense attorney trained in weaving alternative versions of events based on clues buried in crime scenes and contradictory witness accounts. But it also represents the relentless lay scholarship of someone strongly driven to get closer to "the real story." The work of several years of reading and reflection, my project is a work still in progress, but a careful reading of all the available evidence leads to one broad conclusion: Not only are "the Jews" factually and morally innocent of the killing of Jesus, the Gospel accounts minimize the obvious, primary responsibility of the Roman authorities.

For years, Gospel scholars have engaged in a sort of destructive reduction, engaging in endless debates over each phrase. This has led to an increasingly impoverished, doubt-ridden account of the life and teaching of the most popular Jewish religious leader of all time. Thankfully, this stage has ended, replaced by a progressive enrichment of our picture of Jesus by other scholars who, by reincorporating Jesus' robust Judaism, are

¹ The question is correctly posed differently by the Jewish scholar, Ellis Rifkin, "What Crucified Jesus?" – See the Bibliography at page 52.

adding information and insight back into every phase of his life and teaching. The book, *Rabbi Jesus*, by Bruce Chilton is an excellent example of the reintegration of Jesus' Judaism.

A disclosure: I am writing this from the mindset of a *Judeo-Christian*, i.e., as one who sees Christianity as the form of Judaism that fate (or social evolution) or the intervention a benign God brought to the gentiles. That history **was** changed is beyond argument. Among many results: about a billion more men, women and children hear stories and moral wisdom from the Torah every week than otherwise would have been the case, had not "the Jesus Event" taken place. The power of love was unleashed.

It seems that far too many Christians have lost touch with their religion's essential Jewish provenance, many to such a profound degree that it resembles a sort of collective historical amnesia. For me, Judaism forms the essential, living core of the Christian tradition. In effect, Christianity is the living branch of Judaism that carried Judaism's universal themes into the larger world.

My perspective is *universalist* in this very sense, leading me to mine all religious traditions for their embedded universal truths. Surely, I think - the recaptured universal spiritual and ethical wisdom of the human experience is beyond sect and tribe. Such universal truths tend to be radically ecumenical in their most essential message. For this, among many other reasons, I find the Blood Slander embedded in the Gospels to be deeply painful.

I was called to this project several years ago after encountering the work of the growing number of scholars who are actively exploring the life of Jesus of Nazareth as part of the history of First Century Judaism. This project became more timely because of the impact of Mel Gibson's widely viewed film, "The Passion of Jesus Christ", and the concerns of the Jewish community about resurrecting the "Christ killer" war cry of some loosely wrapped anti-Semites.

No one can claim to have finally "proved the case" in any particular detail. At this remote historical distance, that would be unrealistic. But my larger theme, that the historical blame for Jesus' torture and execution can be squarely placed on Imperial Rome and Pontius Pilate, but not so much on the Jewish religious establishment at the time, and not at all on the Jewish masses or ordinary people, is on very solid ground. Relying on a lawyer's intuition (and truth be told, on a degree of revelation) I have arrived at a radical departure from the current views, even those liberal revisionists who would generally agree with the second sentence in this paragraph. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

My footnotes (whose sources are listed in Appendix II, the Bibliography) are designed to be read along with the text, especially in my formal Passion reconstruction, “The Passion of the Rabbi Jesuhua, the Unauthorized Account”, Appendix I, that follows the main argument.

ORIGINS

By the time Jesus’ entourage rolled into Jerusalem for the last time, he was an immensely popular holy man, revered by thousands of his fellow Jews as a prophet like Isaiah, by some followers as the Son of God, and revered by others as the Messiah. That reverence and popularity was very reason that the occupying power of the day wanted Jesus out of the picture. The bottom line of history is that the Roman Empire murdered Jesus for political reasons, among many, many other similar murders, part of a larger pattern of Jewish oppression.

There were *thousands* of crucifixions of Jews by the Romans during the period. The Roman oppression of occupied Judea and the brutal suppression of Jewish resistance in the region was the First Holocaust.

Many Christian scholars recognize the Gospel accounts of the Passion as a problem, but are stuck, frankly, with the plain words of the scriptural texts. Left to subtler remedies, they are usually reduced to more careful selection of the texts used in worship, and minor tweaking of hot button phrases like “the Jews”.

Of course, this leaves the central problem untouched: The canonical Gospel accounts have perpetuated a grave error in their portrayal of the last hours of Jesus. These accounts falsely attribute the torture-murder of Jesus to “the Jews” and seem almost to exonerate the Roman occupation. In making the contrary case, I hope to help restore the sense of commonality that binds the Christian and Jewish peoples whose collective “Judea-Christian” ethos has contributed to the deep normative architecture of modern civilization. Christians must never forget that the Jews, after all, were Jesus’ family and the community of his first followers. Their rich spiritual and ethical heritage was the wellspring of his religious education. Nor should the Jewish peoples feel at all inhibited by the separate, parallel Christian tradition from reclaiming Rabbi Jesus (Jeshua) as one of their own. After all is said, Jesus was one of Judaism’s most dearly revered figures, a charismatic teacher in the tradition of Rabbi Hillel, a Galilean rabbi

whose stories, lessons and example were at once exemplary of the Jewish ethical tradition and profoundly influential in the world culture.

Slander and Scripture

This will not be the first time or the last that literal scripture must yield to a reasonable, non-destructive challenge. Most scholars – the devout and otherwise -- recognize that not every phrase and paragraph that has found its way into canonical scripture has captured history in a completely accurate way.

Those of us who have dealt with witness reports from accident or crime scenes immediately understand the nature of the problem. Even when scripture is held to capture a divine message, scholars still need to account for the fallibility of the witnesses and scribes.

Every word we now read in the canonical religious texts was first recorded by some fallible human being (“fallible” and “human” are inseparable), sometimes a whole line of them. Our sacred texts are most often based on the telling and retelling of oral narratives and on the copying, recopying, translating and retranslating of manuscripts derived from those oral narratives. But this hardly means that scriptures don’t contain the truth. It just means that sometimes we need to work to tease out the intended message.

The original documents are almost always of such ancient provenance that their existence and contents can only be inferred from the copies. But an unbroken, authenticated chain of custody cannot now be produced. Many of these accounts have been redacted or modified in some way before reaching us, because it is human nature to edit and tinker and elaborate. This is true of the written traditions as it is of the oral traditions. Which presents the classic problem: We have inherited a precious legacy but we can’t always be completely sure which parts were changed, whether the changes were incidental or essential, and whether they added or subtracted wisdom and truth from the long-missing original.

But, for the spiritually receptive among us, there is a golden thread of wisdom, truth, and divine inspiration throughout all these texts, carrying a recognizable signature. This is something that impressed even that 19th century atheist, Earnest Renan. I count myself among those who detect that thread in the best scriptural accounts of several traditions and as particularly compelling in the Gospel accounts. I see this sort of thing as a sort of divine self-authentication that has survived the eons and will survive long

after the readers of this short piece and their children and children's children have passed into history.

But I will be describing an error perpetuated by the Christian church that can properly be described as a *slander* against the Jews. The Gospel accounts of the Passion have maligned the Jewish people as complicit in the murder of their greatest gift to the world, the remarkable, charismatic, holy Palestinian Jew now worshiped as "the Christ" by more than one third of the world. But the slander was probably innocently repeated by those who relied on the erroneous accounts in the earliest Greek texts; to date, no one has enjoyed the benefit of any alternate authoritative written accounts.

My deep hope is that enlightened and informed Christians everywhere will use this opportunity to squarely face the fact that the scriptures, themselves, embed a core falsehood, the claim that a reluctant Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, was pressured by "the Jews" to execute an innocent holy man. On a philosophical level, fair minded people would agree that "not all Jews" were responsible for what a few may have done, and that no living Jew could ever be held responsible for such an ancient crime in any case. But that is hardly an adequate response to the original lie. Our concern should be for the truth of the matter, for the historical fact, insofar as it can be discerned.

A slander is repeated in hundreds of thousands of Christian churches throughout the world during Holy Week, especially when the Passion is reenacted on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. The *gravamen* of the slander captured in the portrayal of a blood cry, clearly attributed to the Jewish establishment and a large Jewish mob. In all four Gospel accounts we are told of the same malign chant (coming from "the crowd" or "the people" or the Judeans" or "the Jews" depending on the translation):

"Crucify him!"

If we could directly consult the Rabbi Jesus today, he would certainly tell us: *The time has come to repair this slander.*

The account of Jesus' execution has remained problematic for decades. Consider just one obvious feature of traditional Christian practice, the liturgical use of the Gospel references to "the Jews" (in English translation of the Greek), as if Jesus and his students and followers were already "Christians" in a sea of unbelieving, apostate "Jews".

The historical truth, obvious to all serious scholars, is that throughout Jesus' entire ministry, the Gospels are telling the story of developments and conflicts entirely within

the Jewish community, all under the shadow of a brutal Roman secular/Pagan rule. The key to the recovery of the underlying facts is that the very occupation by Rome, the oppressive shadow of imperial power and repression has colored the historical record.

Amnesia

The four surviving canonical Gospel accounts (the three so called “synoptic,” Gospels - Mathew, Mark and Luke, plus the Gospel of John), and a contemporary history written by the Jewish-Roman historian, Josephus (*The Jewish War*), each describe the execution of a charismatic, holy figure, who preached in Aramaic and Hebrew to his fellow Jews early in the first century CE, and was recognized by many of them as the Son of God.

Jesus of Nazareth was executed by the occupying Roman authorities sometime late in the first half of the first century, probably around 35 CE. Leaving aside the theology of resurrection specific to Christian faith (a theology that even fair minded agnostics must take seriously, in my opinion), Jesus operated within the pluralistic and contentious Judaism of the early first century. Like many other religious figures arising within the Jewish tradition, his life became the subject of internal religious conflict. But, unlike his putative cousin, John the Baptist, whose prophetic moral criticism offended Herod Antipas, the local king, Jesus’ execution came about almost exclusively because his movement worried the occupying Roman imperial authorities. Jesus was not murdered because his conduct had offended the religious establishment, but because he offended the Roman-dominated political establishment. The Romans maintained a stranglehold on the Temple clergy in Jerusalem and lived in fear of a popular Jewish uprising led by a messiah, a liberating king.

Jesus’ brief ministry to his people was a messianic threat to the Roman overlords, and it ended in the most spectacularly failed execution in human history.

The canonical Gospel narratives have survived only in their Greek versions. The non-canonical accounts, fragments included, are also in Greek. [Miller’s “The Complete Gospels” cited in Appendix II contains the lot of them as of 1994]

To remind us of the obvious: Jesus remained a devout Jew throughout the Gospel accounts. Like John the Baptist, Jesus was hugely popular among his fellow Jews during his lifetime. Of course, it was Jesus’ very popularity among his fellow Jews that got him into trouble with the occupying Roman Imperial authorities. Jesus, his mother, siblings, cousins, and apostles, all were Jews. As was his father, Joseph, if we accept human male genetic paternity. The early “Christians” were Jews before the Greek term

for “Christian” was coined. The story of Jesus of Nazareth is, from inception, the account of an immensely important development within Judaism, of a history changing series of events centering around a single, holy person. This sense of Jewish origin and context holds whether one is seeing these First Century events through the lens of Christianity, where Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, or through the lens of the Buddhists, for whom he is a “bodhisattva”, or through that of the humanists for whom Jesus is a supremely important humanitarian figure.

Because the Greek language Gospels reveal a pervasive amnesia about Jesus’ essential Jewishness, we can reasonably wonder whether there were much earlier, more “Jewish” Gospel accounts, written pre-war. [Pre-Jewish War, 66-70 CE — the cataclysm chronicled by Josephus.] These would certainly have included at least one account written in Hebrew-Aramaic, for use in one or more of the Jerusalem synagogues where Jesus was accepted as the Messiah. It would be particularly valuable to find such an account written before the growing schism between the traditional synagogues and those that had accepted Jesus had become so bitter that polemic overcame historical accuracy. I hope and strongly suspect there is at least one missing Jewish gospel that, if it is ever found, will shed new light on the Passion, among other things. Archaeologists and scholars have yet to find anything in writing that can reliably be dated from before the Jewish war except the letters of the Jewish convert to the Jesus movement, Paul. But Paul’s letters are silent about the specific circumstances of Jesus execution, what we now call the Passion narrative, an event that took place years before his own epiphanic conversion. But I would not give up hope of arriving at such a discovery, even now in the 21st century.

But we are not helpless, even at this late day and remove, to discern what probably happened. Historical accounts, even those captured in the separate the Gospel narratives, are a product of their times. The Jewish War, a failed rebellion that utterly crushed the attempts of the subjugated Jewish people to throw off the yoke of Roman occupation, had a shattering impact that cannot be understated. As we will see, the war and its aftermath undoubtedly distorted some aspects of the surviving Gospels, possibly during that sensitive period when were preserved largely as a collection of oral accounts, and possibly when early oral accounts in Hebrew or Aramaic were translated into the Greek.

Consider the following context:

The Roman occupation of the Jewish region had begun a full century earlier, administered by collaborationist kings like Herod the Great,² the last regent to govern a united Jewish kingdom. Herod was succeeded after his death by his quarreling sons,³ and eventually by the appointed governor, Pontius Pilate.

At the Emperor Tiberius's order, Pilate assumed direct authority over the entire Jewish region (AD 26-36)⁴ following the erosion of local authority when Herod's sons failed to unify the kingdom. Ultimately, Herod's sons were reduced to vassals of Imperial Roman authority. Herod Antipas, the ablest of Herod's sons, had retained control of the disconnected areas of Galilee and Peraea in 4 BCE and remained uneasy with Pilate's authority over Judea during his reign.⁵ During Pilate's later period, Pilate worked closely with the High Priest in Jerusalem, Joseph Caiaphas, who served solely at the pleasure of Rome. Caiaphas presided at the Sanhedrin, a sort of privy council largely dominated by collaborationist appointees.⁶

The appointment of the High Priest, not by the Jewish religious authorities, but by the Prefect of a pagan, occupying power, was contrary to Jewish law. And the overt symbols of Roman supremacy within the Temple were unlawful, as were generally, all of the symbols throughout the Jewish region that endorsed the Emperor's status as deity. All pagan and imperial symbols of Roman rule were a source of constant tension with the devout Jewish population. The threat of open rebellion, especially one led by the long hoped for Messiah, the liberator of the Jewish people, the authentic "King of the Jews", was an ongoing nightmare for the Roman occupation.

The Gospel accounts should be read in the light of what we know about the ruthless and devious character of Governor Pontius Pilate and the stubborn resistance of his Jewish subjects. There are two incidents, captured in Josephus' classic history, *The Jewish*

² King Herod assumed power under Anthony 37 BCE under condition that he return the region to Roman rule. He was from an Arab family, a recent convert to Judaism and his rule as a "half-Jew", put him at odds with many of the Jewish Council of elders most of whom he had executed. Grant, pp 66-67. Toward the end of Herod's reign, messianic elements within the normally pacific Pharisees were implicated in a failed plot to assassinate him. Herod's wife and a number of radical Pharisees were killed by Herod in retaliation around 5 BCE. Interestingly, in light of the Christian account of the star in the east, these events coincided roughly with a prophesy in Numbers about a star that "shall come out of Jacob to foreshadow the Messianic coming." Grant pp 80-81.

³ Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, reigned during Jesus' execution. Antipas was assigned by the Roman Emperor Augustus to the rebellious Tetrarchy of Galilee. Augustus died in 14 CE, succeeded by Tiberius. Grant, p 93.

⁴ Grant, p 99.

⁵ Grant, pp 102-3

⁶ Grant, p 99.

War, that leave a vivid impression of Pilate's authoritarian *modus operandi*. And they give us a glimpse of the implacable quality of Jewish resistance.

Early in Pilate's administration, he introduced effigies of Caesar into Jerusalem, in violation of Jewish law. Recall here, that our modern notions of a division between the secular and the religious realms don't apply. Every aspect of what we now think of as the secular was also a religious matter in the century Jerusalem. The law was both religious and secular and the prohibition against idol worship was absolute. The Jewish protests were immediate and dramatic. In response, Pilate arranged a huge stadium appearance, ostensibly to answer the critics. He then surrounded the crowd in a ring of soldiers, threatening to cut them down, unless they capitulated. *Instead, the Jews offered their necks rather than submit.*

On that occasion, Pilate backed down. But some time later, he again ran afoul of Jewish law when he appropriated Temple treasure to fund the construction of an aqueduct. Jewish law governing the proper use of Temple proceeds was very clear on the matter. Pilate was forbidden to use these funds for a Roman "secular" purpose. Pilate again convened a huge gathering, but he had learned from his past experience. He would not be forced to back down. *So Pilate sent soldiers, disguised as Jewish civilians, into the crowd.*

At a signal from Pilate, the soldiers began clubbing people, beating anyone within reach. Many died. All who didn't, fled. Pilate had won, using a brutality and cunning typical of his regime.

Throughout Pilate's reign, all forms of religious and political dissidence were deemed equivalent, each a direct threat to the rule of Rome to the same extent that they began to gather a popular following.⁷ Particularly threatening were popular figures from the surviving Davidic line, such as John "the Baptizer", Jesus' putative cousin.⁸

Just before Pilate's appointment as governor, Antipas, son of Herod, and prefect of the northern region called Judea, had put John the Baptizer to death. Antipas' decision to execute John was driven in part by the charismatic leader's criticism of the prefect's violation of Jewish law in his personal affairs. No doubt from the Roman point of view, John's execution by Herod Antipas was welcomed. Any popular and charismatic religious figure was a threat to Roman hegemony. A policy of proactive, ruthless

⁷ Rivkin, p 41 "The Roman authorities, however, made no distinction. To them, revolutionaries and charismatics alike were outside the mosaic of Judaism.

⁸ John, son of Zechariah, had begun his mission 27-29 CE, attracted a huge following, and was executed by Herod Antipas at the request of his second wife's daughter, Salome, after having baptized Jesus. Grant p 103-105.

oppression was necessary whether John, in whom the Jewish prophetic tradition was revived, had proved to be a messianic revolutionary or “merely” a prophet.⁹ The Romans were practical above all.

Such lessons in preventative brutality were part of Pilate’s “on-scene” education.¹⁰ So the stage was set when an even more charismatic religious figure emerged who many Jews believed to be the Messiah. He typically described himself only as the “son of humanity,” itself a reference to the Prophet Isaiah, while others called him the Son of God.¹¹ This Jewish holy man, the rabbi named Yeshuah (Jesus is the Hellenized version transliterated into English), was someone who had immense charismatic powers, a power to influence people about which even the secular scholars agree.

Jesus had emerged from the rebellious northern region of Galilee.¹² His challenge to Temple authorities in Jerusalem was of a piece with earlier Jewish challenges to the occupying Roman authority and popular Jewish discontent with the collaborationist religious establishment. His timing – when huge crowds of worshippers converged on the Jerusalem Temple for the annual feast days – presented a risk to Roman rule precisely because of his popularity with his fellow Jews.

As we will soon see, his execution was a Roman exercise from the beginning.

THE CLAIMS OF HISTORY

There are really just two passion narratives in the canonical Gospels, the first, with minor variations, is captured in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. The second major narrative is contained in John.

⁹ Rivkin, p 40 “It is evident from Josephus’s writings that there were influential Jews who drew the line between outright revolutionaries who called for the overthrow of Rome in God’s name and charismatics who, like John the Baptist, called upon the people to repent or who, like James, the brother of Jesus, preached the risen Christ. They saw no danger to Rome in religious preachings that looked to God rather than to arms for salvation.”

¹⁰ Eisenman, p 73 “One thing is certain, Pontius Pilate was not the gentle individual later generations took for a Christian or even of Gospel portrait. Rather he was cruelly repressive, not hesitating to shed innocent blood at the slightest provocation. In fact, it appears to have been largely as result of protests of individuals as influential as Philo that he was removed from Palestine and returned to Rome in disgrace.”

¹¹ Vermes argues, from the Jewish perspective, that the Son of God description was an honorific used during the period to describe an extraordinary holy man, a Hasadim, a *zaddik*. As one of these acknowledged figures, Jesus could be described in Jewish terms as the Son of God and that term’s use would not have constituted blasphemy.

¹² Rivkin, p 50 “His teachings, preachings, and actions were bound to sway the loyalties of the Jews: God disapproved of the Emperor, God disapproved of the procurator, and God disapproved of the procurator-appointed high priest.”

► *The Synoptic Passion Account*

In the synoptic version, Jesus is accosted after dark by a contingent led by Judas that includes “priests, scholars and elders” from the Temple. After a confrontation, Jesus is taken before the high Priest, Caiaphas, then to an informal trial before the “ranking priests and the whole Council” which takes place at an undetermined time (Mark) or the next morning (Matthew & Luke).

At this “trial” there is conflicting testimony and false witnesses. Caiaphas interrogates Jesus, and, after getting an ambiguous admission from Jesus, allegedly of his messianic status, the high priest asks, “What do we need witnesses for?”

At his point, we have a split: (a) Jesus is to be referred to Pilate because the death penalty is warranted but the Council can’t impose it (Mark & Matthew, but NOT Luke); (b) in Luke Jesus is referred to Pilate for three charges: corrupting the people, opposing taxes for the Emperor, and claiming to be the messiah or king.

In all three synoptics, Pilate plays the same game with the Temple authorities: He offers to free “your king”. [*As we will see, this is a trick question because the admission that anyone in authority even entertained the notion that a messianic pretender could be king would be arrested for treason against the Roman Empire.*] Getting the anticipated answer, Pilate refers Jesus for crucifixion, when the temple authorities affirm that only the Emperor is king.

In Matthew, only, Pilate does a public “hand washing”, ostensibly to absolve himself from the very execution he will authorize and the “people” (in the now disapproved Matthew translations, “the Jews”) shout that ‘his blood is on us!’ [*As I develop later, the hand washing description, may be nominally correct, but undoubtedly misses the significance of Pilate’s action. I think he is doing a parody of a sacred ritual. Temple priests performed this cleansing ritual **before** performing an official act. So why is Pilate doing this **now**? As I argue later, this is strong evidence that the priests balked at doing Pilate’s bidding, evidence corroborated by an otherwise mysterious fragment of the non-canonical Gospel of Peter discovered in Egypt in 1886.*]

In Luke, only, Pilate sends for Herod, who reigns in Galilee but happens to be in Jerusalem. Herod mocks Jesus, but declines to exercise jurisdiction.

In all three versions, Joseph of Arimathea appears and petitions Pilate for the release of Jesus' body for a proper Jewish interment, but there are small variations in his description:

- Mark: he is “a respected council member”.
- Matthew: he is “a rich man” ... “himself a follower of Jesus”.
- Luke: he is “a *council member*, a decent and upright man who had not endorsed their decision or gone along with their action.”

► *The Passion According to John*

Jesus is accosted after dark by a contingent led by Judas that includes **police** from the Temple and a **detachment of Roman soldiers**.

The presence of the Roman soldiers is significant because it tells us that Pilate's hand is in the process from the very beginning. This should not be a surprise, given the historical context and Pilate's character as a brutal ruler.

After a confrontation, Jesus is taken **before Annas**, father in law to the High Priest, Caiaphas, he is then **interrogated directly by Caiaphas himself**. There is no reference to any informal trial before the “ranking priests and the whole Council”, except that Caiaphas is identified as the one who had argued (at presumably some earlier time) that it would be expedient to sacrifice Jesus than risk the whole people.

*This raises a number of intriguing questions: If Caiaphas, who directly served the Roman governor, felt it **necessary** to make this argument from political expediency, doesn't this strongly imply that the Romans, i.e., Pilate, were pressing the temple authorities to “do something with this meddling rabbi”? And doesn't it also strongly imply that Caiaphas is making this argument to a group where there is substantial opposition to Jesus' arrest?*

The next morning, Jesus is taken to Pilate's residence whose “What's this?” inquiry prompts, the “if he were not a “trouble maker” / “criminal” (note the translation variations here), we would not bring him to you” statement. This is followed by the observation that “we” (the Temple authorities? the Council?) “cannot” impose the death penalty.

Here it is important to keep the observations of the Oxford Jewish scholar, Geza Vermes in mind (see the later footnotes and bibliography): Neither the phrase “Son of God” used to describe a charismatic holy man of the period, nor a claim to messianic status would have constituted blasphemy in the Judaism of the period. Just as John, a

*popular Jewish religious figure, was beheaded by a corrupt king earlier, without any pretensions of religious authority, it is very **unlikely** that the Jewish **religious** establishment of the time would have decided that this troublesome rabbi deserved death for blasphemy.*

This is followed by a slightly different version of the Pilate interrogation and the Barrabas– “Who is your king?” trick question, and the Pilate-ordered crucifixion, an execution form reserved by the Romans largely to quell threats to the Imperial rule.

REDACTION?

Circumstances Suggesting Redaction

After Jesus’ execution, the empty grave, and his reappearance to his Jewish followers, there was a period during which some synagogues practiced a form of Judaism that would later be called Christianity, while others did not. As the schism deepened over the years, and many Jewish supporters of Jesus/Yeshuah began to be evicted from the traditional synagogues, the Jewish convert, Saul/Paul carried the Jesus-based messianic branch of Judaism across cultures where it began to take root.

Then the first rebellion of the Jews against the Roman occupation of Jerusalem (the First Jewish War) changed the situation radically and forever. The war began with a declaration of religious independence by the High Priest in 66 – something that Pilate’s ever-loyal appointee Caiaphas would never have done. This bloody conflict ended in 69-70 with a siege that may have cost a million deaths, if the numbers of Jewish historian Josephus are to be credited. The Temple of Zerubbabel, successor to the Temple of Solomon, was burned to the ground, and thousands of surviving Jewish soldiers were slaughtered, many in public games.¹³

It is likely that the surviving Gospel accounts of Jesus’ execution by the Romans were altered after 69-70 to protect worshipping communities. After all, the Roman Imperial authorities could not be expected to tolerate a religion that was based on their torture and execution of God’s Only Son. I am personally persuaded that the Greek language versions of the Gospel accounts were changed (either by overt redaction and alteration, or gradually as the various oral traditions were committed to Greek) to appease the

¹³ Grant, pp 193-205.

Roman Imperial authorities circa A.D. 75.¹⁴ As Episcopal Bishop Spong has speculated, the Greek Gospels were undoubtedly used as lectionaries in four separate worshipping Jewish communities, and a number of editorial changes (affecting chronology, for example) would have been made for that reason alone to accommodate the Jewish liturgical calendar.

Consider that in these traditional accounts, an angry Jewish mob attempts to lynch one of their own charismatic religious leaders, but is temporarily restrained by a humanistic and worldly Roman procurator, who finally succumbs to pressures from “the Jews” and allows the execution to proceed. This strange portrait, vividly evident in Gibson’s film, is more obvious in John, but is also captured in all three synoptics. The flaw is not in the Gibson film so much as it is an embedded one, the product of perpetuated errors in the canonical accounts of the Passion.

To my mind, this version of Pilate, otherwise known to be a cynical and brutal ruler, is surely a transparent distortion of the truth, a classic whitewash. The translators of the canonical Greek language Gospels may in effect have given Pilate and the Romans a “pass” by changing the anti-Roman “spin” in the written versions of their lectionaries.

Thus four frightened and oppressed 1st Century communities of worshippers, who were attempting to carry on following the brutal Roman victory, perpetuated a lie. Why? I am tempted to paraphrase the argument from expediency attributed to *Caiaphas: Better to sacrifice one (part of the truth) to preserve the greater value (i.e., the memory of the messiah for all time).*

It is difficult for us now to imagine the tense and deeply oppressive atmosphere during the time that the surviving Gospel accounts were probably revised.¹⁵ A major Jewish anti-Roman rebellion had been completely crushed. The great Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was utterly destroyed; to this day, all that remains is the Temple Mount, the “Wailing Wall.” In this atmosphere and for the next two decades at least, Roman authorities lumped rebellious Jews of all stripes together, including the Jews who were followers of Jesus. What we now call “Christianity,” was seen by first century Romans (accurately) as one of several extant forms of potentially rebellious Judaism. The Roman sword was poised to strike at the first sign of further resistance. It was as if, in modern terms, the Nazis had conquered the world and there was no America to come to the rescue of the oppressed.

¹⁴ Eisenman, p XX “In historical writing, it is an oft stated truism that the victors write the history.”...“There is in this period one central immovable fact, that of Roman power.”

¹⁵ Eisenman, p 55 “From internal textual considerations alone, however, it is possible to show that all the Gospels probably made their appearance after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.”

It is necessary to argue from circumstance and historical probability because we have no pre-war versions of the Gospels, no Hebrew or Aramaic texts at all. The existing Gospels are written in Greek for individual worshipping communities, some of whom were Hellenized Jews and others of whom were “Gentiles.” Yet: Had the four canonical Gospel accounts not been made acceptable for use in worship services in the occupied regions, there might not have been any worship at all.

The circumstantial evidence strongly supports the theory that the references to the primary culpability of Pilate and of the Romans were “sanitized” out of practical necessity, to avoid provoking the brutal Roman overlords.¹⁶ Regrettably, such a whitewash of Roman authority, of Pontius Pilate’s initiating role in Jesus murder, and the implicit “gentilization” of Jesus and his other Jewish followers, became the source of much violent injustice in the following centuries.¹⁷

But the verdict of history should be clear by now: The “Christ killers” and the “Jew killers” of the first Century were one in the same entity: “The First Reich”.¹⁸

Miraculously, this three-year ministry was to become the center of a history changing chain of events. News of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection would unleash an epoch-shattering vortex, eventually bringing down the Roman tyranny. The world would never be the same...

A RECONSTRUCTION

In general, scholars seeking to tease history from scripture tend to think like lawyers. With respect to each passage, the following questions arise: Who are the witnesses? When and to whom would the witnesses give their story? What time delay was involved? What perspectives or biases might color the witness accounts?

In order to arrive at a combined historically plausible Passion narrative from the available accounts, I believe we must incorporate at least four additional elements:

¹⁶ Spong, p 17 “So it was that Christianity entered its gentile exile, denied its Jewish roots, ignored its Jewish womb, and, in the process, distorted its deepest insights.”

¹⁷ Eisenman, p 59 “It should be categorically stated, as noted in the Introduction, that a Jewish document can be sectarian, that is, anti-Pharisee or even anti-Sadducee, as the Dead Sea Scrolls most certainly are and the Gospels at their most authentic sometimes are, but it cannot be anti-Semitic.”

¹⁸ Recall that the “Third Reich” was, in Hitler’s account, modeled on the First, inaugurating a glorious “ethnically cleansed” era of Aryan-Germanic purity, once again putting down those noxious Jews.

1. the large scale historical context;
2. an informed portrait of Pilate's character and *modus operandi*;
3. the significance of the ritual hand washing performed by the temple priests;
4. a fragment of the Gospel of Peter dealing with the Passion, discovered in Egypt in 1886.

What Really Happened?

► *The Hand Washing Issue*

Judaism preserves the tradition of ritual hand washing. First Century Temple practice was to provide a ceremonial basin or laver for priestly use. The ritual contemplated a cleansing **before** performing the priestly function, presumably including a judgment calling for capital punishment. [See generally Exodus 30:18-21; Exodus 40:30-32.]

Below, I discuss a fascinating Gospel fragment, discovered in Egypt in 1886, in which the temple priests **refuse to wash** after having deliberated over Jesus' alleged offenses. As we will see, Pilate's reputed washing of the hands may well represent an arrogation of priestly authority following some kind of dispute with the religious authorities. As the Jewish scholar Vermes has argued (see footnote 10), nothing about Jesus' ministry would have constituted blasphemy or a capital offense, which in any event would have been administered by stoning not the brutal, degrading Roman torture of crucifixion. This seems to strongly corroborate and explain the surviving Gospel accounts that have the temple authorities saying to Pilate, "but he has done nothing deserving death."

Given the obvious argument from character and motive that Pilate **above all** wanted Jesus' to be executed as a threat to Roman rule of the region, and given the historically undisputed fact that Roman soldiers did the torture and murder of Jesus at Pilate's orders, it is simply not credible that the Roman governor was a minor, reluctant player in the drama. My footnotes to "The Reconstructed Passion of the Rabbi Yesuah" spell out my argument in more detail as the narrative unfolds. I believe that the Temple authorities -- Caiaphas excepted -- retained some measure of religious integrity: Because Jesus did not deserve execution under Jewish law, even after his challenge to the Temple itself, **they refused to authorize the execution.**

So we are entitled to wonder how an authentic Jewish gospel would have treated the Passion. In this section, I outline a bare bones reconstruction, by examining the existing canonical accounts through the lens of historic probability and adding a new element, the so called "Peter fragment".

► *Fitting in the Peter Fragment*

My source for the Gospel chronology and the fragment of the Gospel of Peter is – “*The Complete Gospels*”, Robert J. Miller, Editor, Robert Junk, Editor in Chief, Harper Collins 1994. This work contains all or nearly all the non canonical gospels and fragments so far unearthed, together with the original four Gospels in fresh translations.

The Gospel Chronology (Miller page 6)

Mark 70 CE
Matthew 80 CE
Peter 50-100 CE
John 90 CE
Luke 90 CE
Mark, canonical 100 CE

The Key Missing Fragment: Peter’s Gospel (Miller, page 402)

This “gospel” consists of some Codex fragments Found in Egypt, in 1886. Once thought to date from the 8th century, that estimate was modified in 1972 when the “Oxyrhynchus Papayrus 2949” was found. Interestingly, the “2949” Codex fragment contained a single, much earlier fragment that agrees with the otherwise unique account in Peter’s Gospel to the effect that Joseph of Arimathea made his request for the body *prior* to the crucifixion.

The 2949 fragment is from late 2nd century and is thought to capture an even earlier fragment. This has led some scholars to the revised estimate (see above) that Peter’s Gospel might date from *as early as 50 CE*. [I note with interest that Chilton dates “the adaptation of Peter’s Gospel by James, the brother of Jesus, in Jerusalem” at 40 C.E. See Chilton, Timeline, at page xv.]

The key fragment follows:

The Peter Passage #1

“...but of the Judeans no one washed his hands, neither Herod nor any one of his judges. Since they were unwilling to wash, Pilate stood up.” (Op. Cit., page 402)

This appears to be an independent fragment from the rest of the Peter Gospel. “The text begins in the middle of a scene. The ornamentation at the beginning of the material indicates that the writer copied an already fragmented text.” Thereafter in the Peter

fragment, Herod is portrayed as ordering Jesus taken away and Joseph as asking Pilate for the body before the crucifixion. (ID, p 402)

One may argue that this Peter passage refers only to the account in John (missing from the synoptics) wherein Pilate attempts to get Herod to take the matter, and not to the later confrontation when Pilate and the Temple priests take it up for the last time. I find it more plausible, however, that the passage implies a scenario that played out at the very end. **And in any case, we clearly learn from this passage that the “refusal to wash” is the equivalent of a refusal to enter the judgment sought by Pilate. This places Pilate’s hand washing in its proper context.**

Compare Luke 23:13 where Pilate (portrayed as opposing execution) says that Herod has refused to approve execution. “Nor has Herod, since he sent him back to us. Indeed he has done nothing to deserve death.”

Compare Mathew 27:24 “Now when Pilate could see that he was getting nowhere but that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in full view of the crowd, and said, “Don’t blame me for this fellow’s blood. Now it’s your business!” 27:25 “In response, the people said, “So smear his blood on us and our children.” 27:27 “Then [Pilate] had Jesus flogged, and then turned him over to be crucified.”

As to the Jewish “trial”, **compare Mark: 14:55** “The ranking priests and the whole council were looking for evidence against Jesus in order to issue a death sentence, but they couldn’t find any. 14:56 although many gave false evidence against him, their stories didn’t agree. 14:57 And some people stood up and testified falsely against him. 14: 58 We have heard him saying, ‘I’ll destroy this temple made with hands and in three days I’ll build another, not made with hands.’ 14:59 Yet even then their stories did not agree.” After confronting Jesus and tearing his own vestments, he says] 14:64 “You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think? And they all concurred in the death penalty.”

Mathew’s account 26:59-66 is similar.

But compare Luke 23: following the Council meeting at which Jesus refuses to say directly that he is “the anointed.” Luke **23:1** “At his point the whole assembly arose and took him before Pilate. **23:2** They introduced their accusations by saying, “we have found this man to be a corrupting influence on our people, opposing the payment of taxes to the Roman emperor, and claiming that he, himself, is an anointed king.” [At this point, Pilate calls Herod who treats Jesus with contempt. Then he offers to free

Jesus, but is persuaded to release Barabbas instead and “reluctantly” orders the crucifixion.]

And compare John 18 where Jesus is brought to Pilate after being interrogated by the high priest. **18:29** “Then Pilate comes out and says to them, ‘What charges are you bringing against this man?’ **18:30** “‘If he hadn’t committed a crime,’ they retorted, ‘we wouldn’t have turned him over to you.’” **18:31** “‘deal with him yourselves,’ Pilate said to them. ‘Judge him by your own law.’” “‘But it’s illegal for us to execute anyone,’ the Judeans said to him”.

After Pilate’s interrogation, presumably witnessed only by temple priests] he brings Jesus out and asks **18:39**, “‘So do you want me to free the king of the Judeans for you?’”

Thereafter Pilate taunts the crowd, offering again to free Jesus.] **19:12**....”But the Judeans screamed at him, ‘if you free this man you’re not the Emperor’s friend! Every self-appointed king is in rebellion against the emperor.’ [Pilate taunts again.] **19:15**... “Am I supposed to crucify your king?” asks Pilate. The ranking priests answer him, “The emperor’s our king. We have no other! **19:16** “And so in the end, Pilate turned him over to them to be crucified.”

A Chronology

As scholars have observed, the four Greek language Gospels currently accepted by the church as canonical were probably used by four separate worshiping communities as lectionaries. As such, the chronological sequences in their narratives were undoubtedly altered to fit the liturgical year, one largely fixed by the Jewish calendar of feasts and holy days. In the same way, the modern church tells the story of Jesus’ life in a way that is molded to fit the worship calendar with various teachings and events used when thematically appropriate

1

Mark 14:55 “The ranking priests and the whole council were looking for evidence against Jesus in order to issue a death sentence, but they couldn’t find any.”

Mark 14:56 ‘Although many gave false evidence against him, their stories didn’t agree.’”

Mark 14:57 “And some people stood up and testified falsely against him.”

Mark 14:58 “We have heard him saying, ‘I’ll destroy this temple made with hands and in three days I’ll build another, not made with hands.’”

Mark 14:59 “Yet even then their stories did not agree.”

2

Luke 22:1 “At his point the whole assembly arose and took him before Pilate.”

Luke 22:2 “They introduced their accusations by saying, ‘We have found this man to be a corrupting influence on our people, opposing the payment of taxes to the Roman emperor, and claiming that he, himself, is an anointed king.’”

[**Comment:** the Luke account is the only one specifying charges, and for that matter referring to them as accusations (in this translation) *rather than as findings*. I also note that, with the possible vague exception of “corrupting the people” which can also be translated as “subversive activity”, the accusations are essentially secular, relating to the kind of trouble that would concern an occupying power, more than religious authorities of the people who were being occupied. We don’t hear about the “Son of God” claim –noting Jesus typically described himself as “son of Man”–as blasphemy, nor do we hear about the “I’ll destroy this temple” claim at all.]

3

John 18:31. “‘But it’s illegal for us to execute anyone,’ they said to him.”

4

Luke 23:13 “‘Nor has Herod, since he sent him back to us.’” [Pilate says.]

5

The Peter Fragment “...*but of the Judeans* no one washed his hands, neither Herod nor any one of his judges. Since they were unwilling to wash, Pilate stood up.”

6

Luke 19:15 “‘Am I supposed to crucify your king?’ asks Pilate. The ranking priests answer him, “‘The emperor’s our king. We have no other!’”

[**Comment:** This is the famous “trick question” since to acknowledge Jesus’ kingship, even by implication, would be treason against the Roman Emperor.]

7

Mathew 27:24 “Now when Pilate could see that he was getting nowhere but that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in full view of the crowd, and ...”

8

John 19:16 “Pilate turned him over to them to be crucified.”

A MORE HISTORICALLY PLAUSIBLE ACCOUNT

In general, my approach was to treat the canonical gospels and the Peter fragment taken together as encoding the accurate historical account. Where individual accounts differed with each other, the lens of historical probability was used (including the principle that people tend to act consistent with their established character traits) to select the most likely historical scenario.

Whenever possible, and as consistent with historical probability, I adopted the approach that a factual narrative trumps an omission, and that a more detailed narrative trumps a generalized account. John’s account of the passion, though straying from historical probability in its character portrayal of Pilate, captures a number of telling and persuasive details about the passion; they retain for me a strong presumption of validity.

But character and historical probability trump the wildly improbable. I have located a few occasions where the words reportedly spoken contribute significantly to the narrative, but only when *attributed to a different speaker*. It seems highly likely - in these rare but important instances - that the words were preserved with adequate fidelity, but equally likely that the identity of the speaker was fudged in a redaction process designed to whitewash the preeminent Roman role in Jesus murder. I begin this attempt at a more plausible account with Pontius Pilate, the governor appointed by a conquering army.

Pilate was no negligent servant of the Roman masters of the region, slow to respond to a threat to the Imperial rule, and indifferent to reports of trouble on the horizon. He was devious, ruthless and proactive.¹⁹

He was wary from the very beginning of the annual gathering of Jewish pilgrims to the Temple, swelling the population of Jerusalem many fold with the devout, most of whom saw the Roman occupation as sacrilege, and many of whom had traveled from that rebellious region of Galilee. And he was given reports concerning the popular rabbi from Galilee, Jesus, and the rumors that this man was considered by some to be the Messiah. (Though it is not emphasized in the Gospel accounts), many in Jesus' entourage were armed, a fact that was brought to Pilate's attention.

So Pilate ordered the Temple hierarchy to keep a watch for this Yeshuah, and to warn him at once if Yeshuah made any trouble. Of course, Caiaphas immediately reported the Temple incident with the money changers. And Pilate directed Caiaphas to immediately convene the Council to authorize Jesus' arrest. After all, it was much better for Pilate if the Jews themselves could do his dirty work for him.

But the Council (whatever number of which could actually have convened) resisted Caiaphas. ["But not *now*, the people will be in an uproar!"] The high priest was reduced to making an argument from expediency, in effect that it was better to sacrifice one innocent rabbi than to imperil the peace. Because the Council balked (at least) as to the timing of any arrest (probably with dissent as to *whether* to act at all), Caiaphas was reduced to acting without the Council's formal sanction. The Caiaphas clique within the Temple hierarchy put out a bounty for Yeshuah's whereabouts, and Judas responded.

When Pilate learned that Yeshuah and his entourage could be trapped at the garden near the brook, Kedron, he sent a detachment of his soldiers, accompanied by Judas, and the Temple police to accomplish the arrest. After capture, Jesus was spirited by the Romans to the home of Caiaphas, father in law. Then Caiaphas was notified and rounded up support. Another rump version of the Council was hastily assembled, a handful of members loyal to the high priest who had voted to support Yeshuah's arrest. After an acrimonious discussion during which some doubtlessly argued against Caiaphas (recall that the Joseph who requested Yesua's body is described in Luke a dissenting Council member), there was a plurality favoring *secular* offenses – i.e., not

¹⁹ As Chilton concludes, speaking for a number of scholars: "But the realities of power in Rome and Jerusalem, as well as Pilate's own temperament, make the theory of general Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus completely implausible in historical terms." Chilton pp 264-265.

blasphemy and nothing warranting the death penalty. Because of Pilate's prior demands, Caiaphas, ever loyal to Pilate, transferred their prisoner directly to the Roman procurator, first thing the next morning.

Given the hour and short notice, only a tiny crowd could have been assembled in front of Pilate's residence that morning. Pilate, above all, would not have tolerated a larger one, given this rabbi's immense popularity among a Jewish population hungry for a liberating messiah. Then Pilate was told the bad news: Yeshuah was being presented to him without having been condemned by his peers. This should have unsurprising, given the long tradition of strict religious integrity of the Jewish clergy and laity. The High Priest had not "delivered" the Council... and Pilate was **not** pleased.

So the Roman procurator interrogated the putative messiah for a time, after which he berated the Temple clergy and the crowd. Then he baited them. Finally, he delivered a clever ultimatum, calling on them to impliedly acknowledge that this rabbi was the true messiah, the King (instead of the Emperor Tiberius) so that he can be "released" per the annual tradition. When the expected denials came from the priests ("We have no king but the Emperor!") Pilate once again demanded their sanction for the execution he had intended all along. But the all the priests, Caiaphas, included, refused to do so, declining to wash their hands in the ritual basin, which was the cleansing that would have necessarily preceded such an act. Angrily, Pilate took the basin himself, washed in the manner of a priest, and ordered the crucifixion of the Son of Man. All the rest: the scourging, the robe, the crown of thorns, the sarcastic words on the cross... all of these things bore Pilate's unique signature.

What is an Enlightened Judeo-Christian Community to Do With This?

To put the matter plainly, we Christians and the larger world that listens to us seem to be stuck with our Canonical scriptural sources. Whether that will always remain the case, certainly we are not strapped into specific translations, nor are we forbidden from restoring important missing context.

Let's start with something fairly easy. I find it extraordinarily painful and jarring to sit through some of the Gospel narratives especially when they are read between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, and particularly when we are treated to references to "The Jews." [Fortunately, the explicit references to "The Jews" are increasingly rare, often substituting a transparent – and somewhat lame – reference to "the people".]

One among many painful examples: In the infamous blood curse in Matthew c27p25, many earlier versions translated-- "**The Jews said his blood is on us and all our**

children”, while later translations softened this to-- “**All the people said his blood is on us...**”. If you have been following my argument here, you can understand why I assert that the translation change does not really solve the problem. Of course, many scholars openly doubt that the blood curse (which is unique to Matthew) was authentically historical.

Do we redact it? This would present a vexing issue: What is the test for a complete departure from a canonical Gospel? One solution, often followed, is to avoid Mark in favor of the other three accounts on this point.

All of the references to “the Jews” throughout the Gospel accounts remain problematic, since the original narratives were about Jewish events and people rendered for Jewish, Greek speaking congregations (especially the Mark community). One just would not have said, in such a setting, “the Jews,” any more than, in a classic Western before an American audience, we would typically hear something like --“the Americans attended the lynching”.

Some translations substitute “the Judeans” for the Jews ...as if no one would make *that* connection.

Surely the better practice is to look very closely at the context and to adjust the description accordingly. For example, we all realize that individual crowds vary widely in size and composition, never actually representing “the people”, the race or the religion from which they may, by circumstances, have been drawn. And we know from common experience that when one or a few voices in a crowd shout something, “the crowd” isn’t really shouting it – coordinated football chants aside.

In some contexts it makes perfect sense to translate “the Jews” or “the people” as “Jesus’ fellow Jews”, while in other contexts it makes equally good sense to translate “some voices in the crowd,” and in others we might even use “many of the Jews”. It rarely, if ever, makes sense – in context - to translate to “the Jews”. For this reason, the translations should not say “the people” or “the Judeans” except where, from the immediate context, it is very clear that we’re talking about a particular, well differentiated subset of *the people* or of *the Judeans*.

There is a practical problem. How does one supply the missing context in the context of a narrative that is read to a congregation directly from a Gospel account? For example, in a typical Passion reading, an otherwise benign statement by Pilate would take on an entirely more sinister tone, if we are allowed to restore the necessary context that Pilate

was an evil man who had long sought Jesus' execution, in order to show that the statement was sarcastic or manipulative.

One solution is to introduce the new voice, the one who explains.

I have attempted to address this in two different ways.

In the first, I've written a narrative in play form, with the literary license typical of these things. I've supplied the missing context through the narrator without doing too much damage to the character's spoken parts as recorded in the Gospel accounts.

In the second, I've written a composite Gospel account, taken selectively from each of the four sources, letting my plausible overall narrative reconstruction guide the editorial choices.

The following is the first of my two Passion "corrections". In this one, I've composed a traditional Passion Play, along the lines of the readings conducted by many Christian congregations during Good Friday services. I've used the Narrator to add the missing context and to give Pilate's words the menace appropriate to his character and the historical circumstances. I've blended elements of the Synoptic accounts and John, but have refrained from changing any of the characters' words, except within normal limits of "artistic license" typical for these plays. The new "spin" on the account (if it is "spin") comes from my editorial omissions, and from the Narrator's comments.

Appendix II is a longer work, "*The Passion of the Rabbi Yeshuah - The Unauthorized Version*". There, I've employed heavy editing tools to create a composite account, stitched from the canonical Gospel accounts, cafeteria style, augmented by the Peter fragment and adding some departures that are identified, supported and explained in the footnotes. Therefore it is fiction.

Appendix I is my attempted comprehensive reconstruction of a hypothetical narrative as it might have predated the cataclysms following the destruction of the Temple. If it holds together and has the ring of truth for you, we may yet hope to find corroboration. The case is never closed.

Unlike my attempted reconstruction in **Appendix I**, the following "Passion Play for Good Friday" is not annotated.

A PASSION PLAY WITHOUT SLANDER

Narrator: After their last Seder dinner together, the Rabbi Jesus and his most trusted disciples crossed the brook Kedron and returned to the garden at the Mount of Olives, where they prepared to spend the night. Jesus asked them to stand watch for him. Then he walked a distance away from them and began to pray. Jesus knew and dreaded what was to come. He prayed and prayed, sweat falling to the ground like blood. Finally, he returned to his disciples. They had not kept the watch, but had fallen fast asleep.

Jesus: Wake up! Could you not stand watch with me this one night?"

[Voices speaking in the distance.]

Judas: This way. He'll be here, I'm almost sure.

Narrator: Judas arrived leading a detachment of Roman soldiers and temple police. Approaching Jesus first, he leaned over and kissed his Rabbi on the cheek.

Jesus: Hello Judas. So you betray me with a kiss?

Roman Centurion: Is this man Jesus?

Jesus: Yes, I am Jesus, the one you seek. You will let these other men go.

Narrator: Before the Centurion could answer, Peter had leapt to his feet, drawn his sword, and struck the man nearest to him. Peter had deeply cut into the ear of the servant of Caiaphas, the High Priest.

Slave: Ooooooh.

Jesus: Peter, put away your sword or surely you will die by another sword.

Slave: Moans.

Narrator: Jesus comforted and healed the stricken slave; then he turned to face the soldiers.

Jesus: Why have you come with swords to take me? Am I a common bandit?

Narrator: Now Jesus faced those who had come from the Temple.

Jesus: Surely you saw me teaching in the Temple day after day. Why are you letting them arrest me?

Narrator: But the soldiers had their orders. They seized Jesus, bound him, and brought him to the closest official residence, while Peter followed the band at a distance. Peter then cautiously entered the courtyard, and stood near a fire there while the High Priest was summoned. As Peter warmed himself by the fire, a servant noticed his face in the firelight.

Servant: Aren't you one of the prisoner's students?

Peter: No. Not me.

Another voice: Yes, yes. I think he is one of them.

Peter: Definitely not me.

Narrator: An hour passed, and Peter could hear the muffled voices of soldiers and servants inside the residence where Jesus had been taken.

Voice One: Is this that Galilean prophet?

Voice Two: So they say.

Voice One: Blindfold him.... Tighter. Good!

[Sound of a blow being struck]

Voice One: You are a prophet. So prophesy now! Tell us: Who hit you?"

[Laughter.]

Narrator: As dawn approached, one of the servants outside had been watching Peter closely.

Servant: Hey you. I heard you. That accent. You are a Galilean. You are with Jesus. Admit it.

Peter: No! Not me.

Narrator: Just then a cock crowed. Peter remembered that Jesus has foretold his weakness and disloyalty “before the cock crows three times”. Peter turned to hide his face. Crying uncontrollably, he fell back into the shadows. As the sky brightened, Caiaphas, the High Priest arrived, dressed in his full vestments. He passed through the courtyard with several other priests and entered the main residence where he would question Jesus. Peter stayed in the shadows, straining to listen...

Caiaphas: What school of teachings do you follow? Some say you sound like an Essene, other say you teach like a Pharisee. Some compare you to John the Baptist.

Jesus: I spoke openly to the world. I have taught in the synagogue and in the temple, and I said nothing in secret. Why ask me about my teaching? Ask those who heard me.

[**Sound of a slap.**]

Soldier: How dare you answer your high Priest that way?

Jesus: If I have been teaching evil things, then present testimony of the evil. But if I have been teaching the good, why do you strike me?

Caiaphas: Enough of this. Tell us now, once and for all: Are you the Messiah?

Jesus: If I tell you, you won't believe my answer. And if I question you, you won't answer me. And you certainly won't release me from these bonds, will you? But I will tell you the truth. Soon the Son of man will sit at the right hand of God.

Caiaphas: Are you the Son of God?

Jesus: You say that I am.

Caiaphas: I do not say that! [Caiaphas turns to the other priests.] This is pointless. We don't need testimony here. Tell our Governor that the arrest went smoothly and that we are holding the Galilean until I can convene a Council. There will be three charges: (1) that this man was perverting our nation; (2) that he is forbidding the people to pay taxes to the Emperor; and (3) that he is pretending to be our king.

Narrator: Jesus was held prisoner at the residence while Caiaphas assembled those members of the Council who were available on short notice. When that group met, Caiaphas argued to them that it was expedient “that one man be sacrificed, rather than many. Do I need to remind you how the Romans handle insurrection?” After argument and conflict, the council reached agreement on two points: (1) Jesus had done nothing to warrant an execution authorized by the Council; (2) it was necessary and expedient that he be turned over to the Roman Governor. So Jesus was led to the residence of the Governor Pontius Pilate later that morning. The three charges sought by the High Priest were stated, but Caiaphas also disclosed that the Council did not agree to the death penalty. So Pilate began his own interrogation.

Pilate: Where are you from?

[Silence]

Pilate: How dare you refuse to speak to me? Don’t you know that I have power to crucify you, and I have power to release you?

Jesus: You have no power over me, except that given to you by God.

Narrator: Then Pilate decided to involve the Galilean provincial ruler, Herod Antipas, who had executed John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin. Pilate sent Jesus away while his messengers tried to locate Herod. As it happened, Herod was in Jerusalem for the annual feast time. But Herod Antipas declined to take the case, and Pilate ordered Jesus brought to him for further interrogation.

Pilate: Well, should I bow to you? Aren’t you the “king of the Jews”?

Jesus: Are you saying this on your own? Or is this what someone said about me?

Pilate: On my own? Do I look like a Jew? I know why the temple priests have turned you over to me. Tell me about your kingdom.

Jesus: My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, a great army would have fought to prevent my delivery to you.

Pilate: So you admit to being a King.

Jesus: You say that I am a King. I was born for one purpose, and for this one cause I came into the world: I must testify to the truth. Every one who lives in the realm of Truth hears my voice.

Pilate: Really... (With weary sarcasm) What is truth?

Narrator: Pilate did not expect an answer to his question. He went out to address the Temple authorities.

Pilate: You charge that this man you have sent me is your Messiah, the “King of the Jews” Do I have it right?

Caiaphas: Our “king”? Of course not. He is not our king.

Pilate: (mockingly) But you sent him to me for some purpose. What about your custom that one prisoner should be released at the Passover? Why won’t you ask me to release the “King of the Jews”? Or would you prefer someone else?

A voice in the crowd: Barabbas!

[Laughter]

Narrator: Everyone knew that Barabbas was an outlaw, not a Messiah, but no one standing in the small crowd was foolish enough to openly support anyone as king but the Roman Emperor. Not in the presence of Pilate and his soldiers. To ask them to call for the release of the king of the Jews was a trick question.

Another voice: Release Barabbas, not Jesus!

Pilate: Enough. Prepare the king!

Narrator: Pilate ordered Jesus to be scourged and mocked. After the brutal whipping and beating, the Roman soldiers taunted Jesus and made him a crown of thorns. They put it on Jesus head and dressed him in a robe made of royal purple. The soldiers mocked him again, laughing. Finally the soldiers were done. In a dramatic flourish, Pilate ordered Jesus brought to the front in full view of the crowd and the temple priests. Jesus was bleeding from his scourging and the crown of thorns. His robe was royal purple.

Soldiers: Hail, King of the Jews!”

Pilate: Behold your king!

Caiaphas: We have no king but Caesar.

Pilate: Well then. Shall I release this “king” or Barrabbas?

Several Priests: Release Barrabbas then. We have no king but Caesar!

Pilate: So I am to release a killer. Then what shall I do to your “king”?

A Priest: He is not king. We have not approved a punishment.

Narrator: Pilate was grimly silent for a moment. It was the preparation of the Passover, about the sixth hour and Caiaphas has warned him that the Council could not agree to Jesus’ execution. Pilate fumed. So Caiaphas had failed him. But there were some voices from the crowd friendly to Rome. They called for brutal Roman justice.

Voices: Crucify him! Crucify him!

Narrator: Pilate’s patience was at an end. These stubborn people! The Jewish law, indeed! Yes, it would be a Roman execution, as Pilate had always intended, one reserved for all those who threatened the Imperial authority. Insurgents and pretend Messiahs were too dangerous to the Empire to be tolerated. This Galilean Rabbi was not the first to be dealt with as an example nor would he be the last. Pilate took the High Priest’s’ ritual basin, filled it with water, and washed his hands.

Pilate: [Heavy with sarcasm.] There is no fault in this man.

Narrator: Smiling at his own joke, Pilate sat down on the judgment-seat, in a place called Gabbatha, the Pavement.

Pilate: The King of the Jews shall be crucified.”

Narrator: Pilate gave his soldiers the execution orders. And the soldiers took Jesus and led him away. Jesus was made to carry his own cross through the streets of Jerusalem, but eventually he fell down, weakened by the scourging and beatings. A man named Simon was ordered to pick up the cross, and the procession resumed. Many of the people of Jerusalem followed the cross, and women wept and wailed openly along the way as Jesus’ passed by them. Finally, Jesus and his tormentors

arrived at the place called Golgotha, the Skull. There Jesus and two other condemned prisoners were placed against the wooden beams while large nails were driven through their hands and feet. When he was firmly nailed in place, Jesus' cross was raised, one condemned man on his right and one on his left.

Jesus: Father, forgive them for they do not understand what they have done.

Narrator: The soldiers mocked Jesus and cast lots for his clothing.

A soldier: You are the king of the Jews? Save yourself!

A temple priest: See he cannot save himself!

Narrator: More of this went on while Jesus' mother, Mary, and Mary of Magdalene stood close by the cross, weeping. When Jesus noticed his trusted student was with them, he caught his mother's eye.

Jesus: Mother: My student will be your son. My student: Behold your mother.

Narrator: And so it was. Though it was about noon, the sun grew dim, and darkness began to fall over the whole land.

Jesus: My God, my God why have you abandoned me?

Narrator: More time passed and the sky became darker still. Then...

Jesus: I thirst.

Narrator: They gave him a wet sponge, attached to the end of a long pole. Jesus sucked the liquid. A moment later, he cried out.

Jesus: It is finished!

Narrator: Jesus had breathed his last. Nearby, a Centurion watched in awe as darkness covered the world; the earth trembled; and the curtain of the temple was torn asunder....

The Centurion: Surely this was God's son.

APPENDIX I

The Annotated Passion of the Rabbi Yesuah - Reconstructed



Introduction

This is a longer, annotated attempted reconstruction (composed primarily from the canonical sources with some historically plausible departures). I cite the passages from John, Matthew, Mark, and Luke by chapter and verse in the traditional manner. My original text was taken from the Oxford 1983 Bible translation. That was first modified only to eliminate inconsistent or archaic tense, punctuation, and expressions (such as “he goest”). To assist in this process, and to clarify the meaning of certain passages, I relied on the excellent Andy Gaus Gospel translation from the “original” Greek, published as *The Unvarnished New Testament*, by Phanes Press 1991.

Then I inserted the *Aramaic forms* for the most important figures in the narrative names. The names are courtesy of Bruce Chilton from his biography, *Rabbi Jesus*, cited along with other sources in the Appendix II. [Chilton is among those few scholars who have accomplished a full back-translation from Greek to Aramaic.] Using the Aramaic names for the key players tends to correct the tendency of the earlier translations to blind us to the Gospels as a collection of Jewish stories.

My goal here was to approximate the flavor and content of a hypothetical 1st Century unredacted version of the Gospel accounts as they relate to the Passion.²⁰ I do depart from parts of the Gospel texts in certain places. When this happens, I identify each substantive departure in a footnote and make my argument in support there. So the footnotes definitely should be read along with the text.

Then I reworked the language, hopefully with a light touch, in an attempt to refresh the narrative flow. Think of this as historical fiction, if you will. But, if the foregoing analysis is persuasive, this fiction tracks the historical reality of the Passion at least as well as the surviving, canonical version of the Gospel of John.

Our story begins near Jerusalem....

²⁰ Scholars are in general agreement that the surviving Greek gospels date from about 70-73 C.E. (Mark), 80 (Matthew), 90 (Luke), and 100 (John). [See the chronology in Chilton, at xvi.]

**The Passion of the Rabbi Yesuah,
*The Unauthorized Version***

The Movie Begins. Imagine these words on a scrolling screen over a picture of ancient Palestine:

The Rabbi Yeshuah, (using the Aramaic form of Jesus) like John the Baptist (hereafter in the Aramaic form “Yochanan”) before him, was a descendant of King David. Coming from rebellious Galilee, he was even more popular with the general Jewish population than his recently beheaded cousin, Yochanan. In the Roman occupied Jewish regions, two of the sects of Judaism, the Pharisees and the “Scribes”, were more or less closely allied with the occupying authorities. [Of the two, the Pharisees were more independent, and their doctrine, including belief in resurrection, was closer to that of Yesuah.] Pagan Imperial rule, however, was in constant, sharp tension with Jewish religious law and tradition. There were earlier violent conflicts between the Jews and the Roman occupying power over pagan symbols and the misuse of temple funds in violation of religious law. As our story unfolds, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, a man with a track record of utterly ruthless tactics, has noticed the stirrings of rebellion. Rumors of a popular new messiah, the Jewish liberator, have reached him. Jeshua’s visit to Jerusalem during Passover was a clear warning of trouble ahead....

As the time of Passover approached, Yeshuah took his small Galilean entourage to Jerusalem. After entering the city, he went upon the Temple grounds, and began to preach to the crowds.

“Is it not written, he said, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer by all nations?’ You have made it a den of thieves.” Then Yeshuah threw out the sellers and the buyers who clustered throughout the entrance to the Temple. He upended the tables of the money-changers, and the chairs of the dove vendors, and would not let anyone transport goods through the Temple. Representatives of the Temple High Priest, Caiaphas, heard this, and began looking for a way to get him to leave. But the Temple authorities were afraid to confront him, because he had the crowds.

Finally, at nightfall, Yeshuah left the city. (Mark 11:15-19)

The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, fearful of the huge crowds that followed Yeshuah, and worried that the popular Rabbi had stirred dangerous messianic hopes,

met with Caiaphas, his Roman appointed High Priest ²¹, hoping that he could arrange Yeshuah's arrest by the Temple authorities.²²

So Caiaphas called an assembly the chief priests, the Scribes, and elders in the palace of the High Priest. Thus he convened the Sanhedrin (whose membership was also composed of Pharisees). He sought authorization for a plan where the Temple guards could arrest Yeshuah by some subterfuge.²³ But members of the Sanhedrin objected.

“During this holy feast time? There will be an uproar.” (Matthew 26:3-26:5)

On the third day of the feast, Rabbi Yeshuah's students came to him. “Where should we find the place for you to eat the Seder?”

Yeshuah said, “Go back into the city to one of our supporters and say, ‘The Rabbi says, My time is at hand. I would celebrate the Passover with you and my talmidim (a Rabbi's disciples or students are “talmidim”).’” His talmidim did that, and the Passover preparations were readied. (Matthew 26:17-19)

Before the feast of the Passover, Yeshuah became aware that his hour had come. (John 13.1) He gathered for a special Seder meal with his talmidim that he knew would be his last with them. As was the custom, Yeshuah took the unleavened bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his talmidim. But then he said:

“Do this to remember me. When you eat the bread remember it is my body.” Then he took the cup of wine, blessed it, and he gave it to them to drink in turn, saying, “This is my blood.” (Mark 14:22-25)

Later in the meal, Yeshuah announced, “One of you will betray me.” The talmidim looked at one another, wondering who he meant. (John 13:16-22)

A favored talmid was leaning on Yeshuah's chest. Kepha (Simon's Aramaic nickname for “Rock”, commonly “Peter”) beckoned to that talmid, to ask who was Yeshuah was referring to. So the talmid asked, “Lord, who is it?”

“It is the one I give the bread when I have dipped it.”

Then Rabbi Yeshuah dipped the bread and gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of (a different) Simon. “What you will do,” Yeshuah said, “do it quickly.”

²¹ This is not the canonical version, of course, but I believe that nothing in the province this significant could have been ordered without Pilate's direct involvement at the very outset.

²² Zannoni, p 111 “The theory that Caiaphas and Pilate must have has a strong working relationship geared to the maintenance of the public order is supported by the action of the Roman legate, Vitellius, in deposing Caiaphas shortly after the recall of Pilate in 36 C.E.” [John R Donahue, S.J. -Chapter, author]

²³ Rivkin, p 19 “Indeed, when Josephus uses the term sanhedrin in his writings, it always refers to a council appointed by an emperor, a king or high priest. He never uses the term when he is speaking of a permanent legislative body such as the Roman Senate. Such a body he calls a boulé. Thus whenever Herod wishes to have one of his sons, wives or other relatives put to death for treason, he would convoke a sanhedrin, not a boulé.”

No one at the table knew why Yeshuah said this. Some thought, because Judas carried their bag of coins, perhaps to buy things for the feast, or to give something to the poor. When he received the bread, Judas went immediately out into the night. (John 13:23-30)

After the supper, Yeshuah traveled with his talmidim over the brook called Kedron, into a garden. (John 18:1) There he warned them: “Tonight, you shall be offended because of my actions. Remember it was written that ‘I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.’ But I will rise again and go before you into Galilee.”

About this same time, Judas Iscariot, was meeting with the Temple priests, offering a deal. “What will you give me to deliver Yeshuah to you?” After discussion, they agreed on thirty pieces of silver. Judas took the money and began to wait for the best time to betray Yeshuah. (Matthew 26:14-16)

Then Yeshuah traveled with his talmidim to a place called Gethsemane. There he said, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray. He took Kepha, and the two sons of Zebedee with him, and he became sad and very heavy of heart. (Matthew 26:36-37) Night fell...

Judas knew Gethsemane well for Yeshuah often went there with his talmidim. Before dawn, Judas led the Roman authorities there. Accompanied Judas, an armed (Roman) contingent arrived with lanterns, torches, and weapons. (John 18:2-3) Judas had told them. “The man I will kiss is the one you seek.”

So Judas came up to Yeshuah in the dark, and said, “Hail Rabbi,” and leaned down and kissed him.

“Friend, Yeshuah said, “Why are you here?” Matthew 26:48-50)

Then Yeshuah looked up and saw the soldiers. “Who is it you are looking for?” he called out.

“Yeshuah of Nazareth.”

“I am he.” As Yeshuah stood up, Judas stumbled backward and fell to the ground. Yeshuah asked them again-- “Whom do you seek?”

“Yeshuah of Nazareth.”

Yeshuah answered, “I have told you who I am. You seek me alone. Let these other men leave.”

Suddenly, Kepha, leapt to his feet, drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. [The servant’s name was Malchus.]

Yeshuah turned to his stalwart talmid. “Put away your sword, Kepha. Remember the cup that my Father gave me? Am I not to drink it?” (John 18:4-11) “For

all who take up the sword, shall perish by the sword. I could pray to my Father, and he would send more than twelve legions of angels to defend me. Could I not? But then how would the scriptures be fulfilled? So this must be.”

Then Yeshuah turned to his captors, “You have come here as if I am a thief. Do you really need swords and staffs to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the Temple. Why didn’t you arrest me then?” (Matthew 26:52-55) But the band seized Yeshuah and took him away.

First they presented Yeshuah to Annas, (father-in-law to Caiaphas). Annas ordered Yeshuah bound. (John 18:12-13)

When Yeshuah was taken at Gethsemane, nearly all his talmidim fled, (Matthew 26:56), but Kepha followed Yeshuah with another talmid. That talmid, who was acquainted with Caiaphas, accompanied Yeshuah into High Priest’s palace, while Kepha stood at the door outside. After a while, the talmid went out and spoke to the woman who kept the door, and brought Kepha in.

The woman asked Kepha, “Aren’t you another one of this Rabbi’s talmidim?”

“I am not.” The servants and officers stood there, having made a fire of coals (for it was cold), and warmed themselves. Kepha stood with them and warmed himself. (John 18:15-19)

Caiaphas then questioned Yeshuah, who was still bound at the order of Annas. The High Priest asked Yeshuah about his talmidim and about his doctrine.

“I spoke openly,” Yeshuah answered. “I often taught in the synagogue and in the Temple, where our people always attend. I have said nothing in secret. Why ask me? Ask those who heard me preach. They know what I said.”

One of the guards struck Yeshuah with the palm of his hand. “How dare you speak to the High Priest so?”

“If I am speaking evil, then you swear to the evil. But since I am speaking truth, why strike me?”

During this exchange, Kepha was standing just outside, warming himself. Someone looked at him closely. “Aren’t you one of his talmidim?”

Kepha denied it. “No, I am not.”

Then one of Caiaphas’ servants (a relative of the man whose ear Kepha cut off) spoke. “Didn’t I see you in the garden with him?” (John 18:20-26)

Once again Kepha denied with an oath. “Damn it,²⁴ I do not know the man.”

After a while the bystander came to him and said to Kepha, “Surely you are one of them; your Galilean accent betrays you.”

Kepha cursed. “Damn it, I said do not know the man.” Immediately the cock crowed. Then Kepha remembered Yeshuah had said to him-- “Before the cock shall

²⁴ We can assume a common oath, but one not repeated in the Gospel accounts.

crow, you will deny me three times.” Kepha went outside, and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:72-75)

From his interview, Caiaphas knew that Yeshuah had not broken the law,²⁵ but he quickly reassembled chief priests and elders, again convening the Sanhedrin. He then argued that it was expedient that one man should die for the good of all the people to appease the Romans.²⁶ (John 18:14)

To support the charge of blasphemy, Caiaphas and his assistants produced false testimony against Yeshuah, hoping the Sanhedrin would order him stoned. Although many false witnesses came, the Sanhedrin found no cause for execution.²⁷ (Matthew 26:59-60) Because the Sanhedrin would not approve the death penalty, Caiaphas turned Yeshuah over to Pilate for judgment.²⁸

The Temple soldiers led Yeshuah from Caiaphas to the Roman Hall of Judgment. It was early, and they, themselves, could not enter the Roman Judgment-hall, because they would be defiled and not be able to eat the Passover Seder. So Pilate came outside to meet them.

“What accusations do you bring against this man?”

Caiaphas answered: “If he were not a trouble maker, we would not have brought him for your judgment.”²⁹ (John 18:28-30)

Then Pilate said, “I want you to judge him according to your law.”

Caiaphas reported the decision of the Sanhedrin.³⁰ “This man has not done anything under our law that requires he be put to death.”

In frustration, Pilate brought Yeshuah into the Judgment-hall again, and asked: “Are you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:31-33)

Yeshuah answered, “Are you saying this on your own, or did others say this about me?”

²⁵ Again, I depart from convention, persuaded by the Jewish scholar, Vermes. “Son of God”, a status colloquially conferred on holy men of the time, could not have been blasphemy, nor could have been Yeshuah’s self references as “Son of Humanity.” The disruption of the Temple money-changers and merchants would not have been a capital offense either (though Chilton disagrees on this point). Yeshua had not repeated the messianic claims made by others for him. It would be necessary for Caiaphas to create a trumped up case against this popular Rabbi in order to please the Roman Procurator.

²⁶ This assertion rings true as Caiaphas’ best argument under the circumstances.

²⁷ The Greek Gospel accounts are a bit muddled on this, but it is clear even from them that false testimony was presented (we can infer by the efforts of Caiaphas and his staff) but that nothing supporting the death penalty resulted.

²⁸ Given Pilate’s obvious interest in stopping any messianic movement and his ruthlessness, Caiaphas would not dared release Yeshua.

²⁹ i.e., “The buck stops with you, Sir.”

³⁰ We can infer that Caiaphas, well aware that the death penalty was neither lawful nor agreed to, would let Pilate know he had not been able to deliver the Sanhedrin.

“Do I look like a Jew? Your priests have turned you over to me. What have you done?”

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my followers would have fought to prevent my delivery to you. But my kingdom is not from this world.”

“You are a King then.”

“You say that I am a King. But I was born for one purpose, and for this one cause I came into the world: I must testify to the truth. Every one that is of the truth hears my voice.” (John 18:34-37)

Then Pilate said to him wearily: “What is truth?”³¹ Not waiting for an answer, and still frustrated, Pilate stormed out again to address the Temple authorities—

“Is this your Messiah, the King of the Jews? Should I release the King of the Jews?”

“No,” they answered.³²

Pilate mocked them. “But you have a custom that I should release to you one at the Passover. Won’t you tell me to release the King of the Jews?”

Someone shouted: “Not this man, but Barabbas.” [Everyone knew that Barabbas the outlaw was no Messiah.] (John 18:38-40)³³

So Pilate ordered Yeshuah to be scourged. After the whipping, the Roman soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head. Then they dressed him in a purple robe, and shouted, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They beat him with their fists.

After this brutality, Pilate appeared outside the Hall of Judgment: “Behold, I will bring you the ‘King of the Jews!’” In a dramatic flourish, Yeshuah was brought out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate shouted --“Behold the man!”

³¹ This is a beautifully preserved conversation. Assuming it is historical, we need to believe –as I do- that: (a) Yeshua and probably the Greek-speaking Pilate were at least bi-lingual, if not tri-lingual, or (b) that Caiaphas who was multi-lingual served as translator, and (c) that someone other than Pilate and Yeshua – I assume Caiaphas or another high priest sympathetic to Yeshua – was a witness to this exchange and later provided the account to outsiders.

³² This is another departure from the canonical version. But this seems to be the only question-answer sequence that makes sense under the circumstances. Pilate is trying to force the recalcitrant temple Jews into a trap. They dare not acknowledge that they have an authentic messiah in custody, and they are certainly not foolish enough to release one in the face of Roman authority.

³³ Rivkin, p P 64 “As one given to provoking Jews with wily stratagems, Pilate was not beyond using a politically naïve charismatic, one who claimed to be their king, to entrap the Jews. By giving the crowd a choice between the release of a revolutionary such as Barabbas, who made no claim to be King of the Jews, and a charismatic who did make such a claim, Pilot was, in effect, compelling the crowd to choose the revolutionary. They would fear to choose the other lest Pilate loose his soldiery on them for acknowledging a king other than Caesar.”

When the Temple authorities saw Yeshuah in this state, they shouted-- “This is no king of the Jews!”

Pilate said to them “Then take him; put him to death.”

But Caiaphas answered. “By our law we cannot put him to death.”³⁴

For the last time, Pilate went again into the Hall, and questioned Yeshuah. “Where are you from?” But Yeshuah gave him no answer. Angrily Pilate said to him, “You refuse to speak to me? Don’t you know that I have power to crucify you and I have power to release you?”

“You have no power over me, except that given you from above.”

Pilate returned to Caiaphas, shouting- “If you let this man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king, speaks against Caesar!” (John 19.9-12) Still, Pilate saw that he could not prevail over the stubborn Jews,³⁵ and he saw that a tumult was arising among the growing crowd. So Pilate seized the High Priest’s’ ritual basin, filled it with water, and washed his hands. ³⁶ Demonstrating his authority before

³⁴ Again it is logical that Caiaphas, the High Priest, would be the one to inform Pilate of this legal impasse.

³⁵ I have transferred the words attributed to the High Priest to Pilate because it clearly is Pilate’s position and there is ample precedent for the “stubborn Jews” sticking to their ecclesiastical guns under pressure. At this point in the narrative it is more plausible that the Gospel accounts fudge the truth. Note that, immediately before this moment, the Temple authorities have **repeated** the statement that they cannot order Yeshua to death. And note that the Rabbi from Galilee had already drawn adoring crowds sympathetic to his message. Is **this** crowd suddenly clamoring for his execution by the Romans when their own religious authorities have refused to cooperate? Are the Temple authorities clamoring for a Roman style execution of a popular rabbi? **Not likely.**

³⁶ This scenario is my most serious break with the canonical Gospel tradition based on an understanding of Temple practice and on the implications of the Peter fragment. It might have been easier just to dismiss or marginalize the hand washing scene as an implausible invention, as some scholars have, or treated it as a ruse, given Pilate’s known brutality and the irrefutable truth that crucifixion was a characteristically barbaric Roman punishment, not at all within Jewish practice. But we must take into account that the presiding Jewish High Priest **began** all official acts with the ritual washing of hands. So I was amazed to later read the fragment from the lost Gospel of Peter (discovered in Egypt in 1886) that reads in part “Since they were unwilling to wash, **Pilate stood up...**” [From *The Complete Gospels*, Robert J. Miller, Ed., Harper Collins 1994. See pp 399-402.] I am suggesting that, just as the Gospel accounts suggest, it is Pilate who washes his hands but that the significance of Pilate’s act of hand washing has been distorted. So why would Pilate do this ritual? **To assume the authority of the High Priest, of course.** The circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that both Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin had balked. Recall the subsequent plea from Joseph, a member of the Jewish “council” to recover this holy man’s body for a proper Jewish burial. We are told in the gospel account that Joseph had opposed the execution and that he was a member of the Council/Sanhedrin. Without question, there was other opposition to Pilate on the Council as well. I would submit that the alternative scenario that the Sanhedrin had actually refused the execution is fully reconcilable with the Greek Gospel accounts. Moreover, if this is true, then the sole impetus for execution would have come from Pilate whose attempt to get the Temple authorities to take the heat had failed. As a ruthless ruler who would not permit any hint of

the crowd, he had appropriated the ritual cleansing of the priest that preceded the High Priest's official acts. "This is my judgment," Pilate said. "This man shall be crucified."³⁷ (Matthew 27:24)³⁸

So it was to be a Roman execution, one reserved for the basest of criminals. Pilate immediately ordered his soldiers to bring Yeshuah forth, and he sat down on the judgment-seat, in a place that is called the Pavement (in the Hebrew, Gabbatha). He said to the crowd of Jews, "Behold your King!" It was the preparation of the Passover, about the sixth hour.

Pilate's soldiers and other agents who had scattered in the crowd and dressed in disguise cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!"³⁹

Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?"

Caiaphas answered, "We have no king but Caesar."⁴⁰

So Pilate delivered Yeshuah to the soldiers to be crucified. And they took Yeshuah, and led him away. (John 19:13-16)

When Judas heard that Yeshuah was condemned, he repented and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. "I have sinned because I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us?" they said. Judas cast down the pieces of silver in the Temple, and went out and hung himself.

The chief priests took the silver pieces. "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood." So they conferred, and used the silver to buy the potter's field, to bury strangers in. That field has been called, The Field of Blood, to this day. (Matthew 27:3-8)

rebellion, Pilate is far more likely to have behaved as described in this reconstruction than in the Gospel accounts.

³⁷ No one seriously doubts who had the ultimate authority here: **Only** Pilate could order a crucifixion. Note also that both Pilate and Caiaphas were recalled by Rome in 37 C.E., not long after the execution itself. I noted that Chilton's chronology dates, three years later (40 C.E.) "the adaptation of Peter's Gospel by James, the brother of Jesus in Jerusalem." [see Chilton, *Timeline*, p xv.]

³⁸ Rivkin, p 73 "And what is striking is that the Gospels confirm that no institution of **Judaism** had anything to do with the trial and crucifixion of Jesus." [My emphasis.]

³⁹ Again, I've retained the dialogue but changed the speakers, based on Pilate's track record of deception. This plausible scenario explains the otherwise inexplicable. Crucifixion was anathema to practicing Jews, the symbol of utter domination. Jesus was an immensely popular figure among the Jewish population. A mob scene full of Jews demanding his crucifixion is really implausible. And recall that, according to Josephus, Pilate had used the provocateur technique to good effect earlier when his disguised soldiers had clubbed members of a protest crowd to death.

⁴⁰ At this point, only the truly suicidal would have answered otherwise!

As the soldiers led Yeshuah away to be crucified, they removed the purple robe and restored Yeshuah's own cloak. As they came out onto the road, they took a man of Cyrene, named Simon and forced him to bear Yeshuah's cross. And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, "place of a skull", they gave Yeshuah vinegar to drink, mingled with gall. But when Yeshuah tasted it, he refused to drink. (Matthew 27:31-34)

They crucified him, two others with him, on each side one, Yeshuah in the middle.

Pilate composed a sign, and put it on the cross. It was --

"YESHUAH OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS."

Many of the Jews then read this "lesson", for the place where Yeshuah was crucified was close to the city, and the sign was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. (John 19:18-21)

Caiaphas said to Pilate, "Not, 'The King of the Jews; 'but that 'he pretended to be King of the Jews."⁴¹

"What I have written, I have written," Pilate answered.

When the Roman soldiers had crucified Yeshuah, they took his garments, separating four parts, to every soldier a share. But the robe was seamless, woven from the top throughout. They agreed, "Let's not rip it, but cast lots for it." These things the soldiers did. (John 19:22-24)

Two thieves were crucified with Yeshuah: one on his right hand, and another on the left. And those who passed by, reviled him, shaking their heads, and mocking him:

"You who would destroy the Temple..., save yourself."

"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

The chief priests the scribes and elders mocked him too:

"He saved others; but he cannot save himself."

"If he is King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him."

"He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him."

The thieves also who were crucified with him, also mocked him.

⁴¹ Caiaphas either misses or actually resists Pilate's savage irony, here. Recall, that even the Vichy-like appointed Jewish temple leaders undoubtedly retained some religious integrity. They well knew that Jesus/Yeshua made no claim to be the leader of an armed insurrection. Moreover, Jesus' doctrinal differences with the temple authorities (even the minor vandalism) were well within the range of the ongoing debate. Note that Yeshua's putative cousin, John/Yochanan, had been executed by Herod Antipas, the Vichy-like regent, not by the religious authorities. In general, the religious establishment respected Yochanan, as did many of them his successor in the movement, Yeshua.

From the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land to the ninth hour. About the ninth hour Yeshuah cried with a loud voice:

“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?”⁴² [“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”]

Some who heard that, said:

“This man calls for Elijah.” (Matthew 27:38-46)

By the cross of Yeshuah, stood Miriam (Mary) his mother,⁴³ and his mother’s sister, Miriam the wife of Cleophas, and Miriam of Magdala. When Yeshuah saw his mother, and the favored talmid standing by, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son!” Then said he to the talmid, “Behold your mother!”

And from that hour that talmid took her to his own home. After this, Yeshuah said, “I thirst.” Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. (John 19:25-29)

And when Yeshuah had cried with a loud voice, he said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” And he expired.

When the centurion saw what was had happened, he said, “Certainly this was a son of god.”

And all the people that came together to that sight, seeing the things which were done, beat their breasts, and returned. And all Yeshuah’s acquaintances, and the women that followed him from Galilee, all stood far off seeing these things. (Mark 23:46-49)⁴⁴

It was the law that the bodies of Jews should not remain unburied on the Sabbath. The devout Jews therefore petitioned Pilate that their legs might be broken, so that they would die quickly and that they might be taken away and properly buried. So the soldiers were sent, and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who was crucified with Yeshuah. But when they came to Yeshuah, they saw that he was dead

⁴² This is one of the very few Aramaic phrases preserved in the Gospel accounts, yet, along with Hebrew, it was the language routinely used by Yeshua. His phrase comes straight out of the Davidic Psalm 22. Most of the Hebrew Scriptures have preserved written Aramaic versions. One might reasonably expect to find an Aramaic or Hebrew Gospel text. Is it really plausible that the story of Yeshuah’s life and teachings somehow existed only as an oral tradition for the first forty years? I suspect that any versions written before the destruction of the temple (including ones in Hebrew or Aramaic) were suppressed, or carefully redacted before the Greek versions were used. Terrible “PR” for the Romans to have tortured and killed the Son of God.

⁴³ A Catholic priest tells the following recent story. After a sermon, a parishioner approached, looking troubled. “Are you saying Jesus’ mother was Jewish? Where does it say that?”

⁴⁴ Cahill, p 108 “The psychology of crucifixion had a profound political purpose. This was the end that awaited every enemy of the absolute Roman state; the opposite of the peaceful death that all good men hoped for, an end in which one’s dignity and pride were torn away, then the shreds of one’s identity in life, and finally the last semblance of one’s humanity, till one died in the comic gargyle of the moment.”

already. One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and blood and water came out. They did not break his legs. (John 19:31-37)

There was a devout Jew named Joseph, a counselor, a good man, and just, one of the members of the Sanhedrin who opposed Rome. He had not consented to the arguments of Caiaphas, nor the deeds of those who would give in to Pilate. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, a Pharisee. Joseph went to Pilate, and begged for custody of the body of Yeshuah (Mark 23:50-52) so he might take it away. Pilate gave him leave and Joseph did take custody the body of Yeshuah. (John 19:38)⁴⁵

Joseph took Yeshuah's body down, and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulcher that was cut in stone, in which no man had before laid. On that same day the body was prepared as the Sabbath drew on. The women also, who came with him from Galilee, followed after, and saw the sepulcher, and how Yeshuah's body was laid. (Mark 23:53-55)

Nicodemus also came (he'd earlier had come to Yeshuah by night) and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Yeshuah, and wound it in linen cloths, with the spices, as was required for the burial of a Jew. The sepulcher was in a garden... (John 19:39-42)

The first day of the week Miriam of Magdala arrived early at the grave site. It was still dark. She saw the stone had been taken away from the sepulcher. So she ran, and found Kepha, who was with the other talmid whom Yeshuah favored, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we don't know where they have laid him." (John 19:39-20:2)

Kepha and the other talmid came to the sepulcher. They ran together. The other talmid outran Kepha. Arriving first, he stooped down, and could see the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go inside. (John 20:3-5) Kepha followed him, going into the sepulcher, where he also saw the linen cloths, and the napkin that was about Yeshuah's head, not lying with the linen cloths, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then that other talmid entered, and he confirmed that Yeshuah was gone. (John 20:6-9)

⁴⁵ Rivkin, p 73 "What we do find is that Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the *boulé* – not the sanhedrin- seeks to give Jesus a Jewish burial (Mark 15:43 cf. Luke 23:50); that the nasi Gamaliel urges the sanhedrin to let Kepha and his associates go free (Acts 5:34 ff.); that Paul disrupts a Sanhedrin when the Pharisees support his belief in resurrection (Acts 23:610); and that Jesus is seen risen from the dead, as the core teaching of the Scribes-Pharisees allowed." Here, among other things, Rivkin notes the problems inherent in attributing Yeshua's execution to a decision made by a religious body, pointing out the secular nature of the Sanhedrin, as opposed to the *boulé*. I suspect that the Sanhedrin in this instance was hastily convened, but that Joseph was present and participated in the deliberations by opposing the execution (he might well also have been a member of the *boulé*). The surviving Gospel accounts, muddled though they are, support the notion that the Sanhedrin refused to approve execution because it was unjustified on the evidence and contrary to Jewish religious law.

Then the two men went away again to their own homes, leaving Miriam standing outside at the sepulcher weeping. As she wept, she stooped down to look into the sepulcher. In the gloom, she saw two men, like angels dressed in white, sitting, one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Yeshuah had lain.

One said to her, “Madam, why are you crying?”

“Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.” And after she had said that, she turned about. A man had been standing near her in the darkness. Miriam could not see who it was.

The man said to her, “Why are you crying? Who are you seeking?” She, thinking at first he was the gardener, said, “Sir, if you have carried him someplace, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” (John 20:10-15)

“**Miriam.**” It was Yeshuah who spoke.

“Rabbi!” she said....

FINAL NOTES

Maybe Something Will Turn Up

I began the Passion reconstruction project years ago intending to use as light a touch as possible. My first task was to organize the Gospel accounts that related to the Passion narrative in a logical sequence, including those passages that were mutually coherent and most consistent with my historical theory. I had already entertained the notion that Pilate’s hand washing was an appropriation of the priestly purification rite. Then I discovered the Peter fragment...All errors are mine.

We can only hope that someday, in an ancient jar, somewhere in the Middle East or possibly preserved in a shipwreck, something really interesting will yet turn up...

Introduction to Appendix II Eleven Favorite Books

No one will read all the books about our subject. These are my 11 favorite books, the ones I've read and reread, mining them for their embedded universal insights:

To capture the historical sweep of Judaism and its sister, Christianity, and the strong Celtic influence on the latter, I recommend three miniature masterpieces of concise and engaging scholarship. By Thomas Cahill:

- “The Gift of the Jews: How a tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels”
- “How the Irish Saved Civilization”
- “Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus

To understand the moral depth of the Jewish God-man dialogue, I found two books by Martin Buber to be essential:

- “The Eclipse of God”
- “I Thou”

To grasp the deeper moral context of Christianity, I read and reread two works of C. L. Lewis:

- “The Abolition of Man”
- “The Screwtape Letters”

To understand how all this develops in the mind of a devout scientist-cleric, a man of who has been compared to C. S. Lewis “if he were reincarnated as a physicist.” I recommend these among the many books by the Rev. Dr. John Polkinghorne:

- “The Faith of a Physicist”
- “Faith, Science, and Understanding”

To see Jesus life through the lens of first century Palestinian Jewish life, a must read is:

- “Rabbi Jesus” by Bruce Chilton

To be caught by surprise, to see Jesus as a funny Jewish kid, as the irritating Son of God who constantly perplexed and amazed his childhood friend, Levi, (AKA Biff), you must read the irreverent, touching comic masterpiece:

- “Lamb, the Gospel of Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal”, by Christopher Moore
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The author served as the chief Public Defender for the County of Alameda, CA, headquartered in Oakland for 10 years, following a long career as an Assistant Public Defender. Then Mr. Gaskill left his “life of crime” to devote more time to writing.

Learn more about Jay B Gaskill, attorney, analyst and author, at this link -
< <http://jaygaskill.com/WhoIsJayBGaskill.pdf> >