

## Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and William L. Blizek

### The Arrest and Sentencing of Jesus

#### A Historical Reconstruction

Philip A. Cunningham, Boston College

#### Introduction

[1] I am delighted to have been invited to participate in this symposium. However, I must confess to a certain amount of trepidation since I have been asked to speak on the difficult topic of reconstructing the historical circumstances of Jesus' death in only forty-five minutes! This is challenging because the inconsistencies in the minimal historical evidence that we have available to us enable the construction of a number of plausible scenarios.

[2] Given these constraints, I will approach the subject using official Catholic teaching as the starting point for a consideration of our primary sources of information, the four Gospel passion narratives. By examining three scenes in the passion story and comparing what the different Gospel accounts describe, I will offer some conclusions about the historical events that lie behind them. These conclusions are fairly widely agreed upon in contemporary scripture scholarship.

[3] As one of the professors invited by the Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to read a shooting script of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, it is appropriate for me to proceed in this way. At that time, I was primarily concerned to see if the shooting script conformed to Catholic teaching on the nature of the Gospels and in particular on the proper interpretation of the passion narratives. That is how I will approach today's topic as well.

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### **Catholic Teaching on the Nature and Interpretation of the Passion Narratives**

[4] At the outset, it is crucial to draw upon the Catholic awareness that in each Gospel text there may be present material from three different periods in early church history. A 1964 instruction from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*, described these in terms of three stages of development (6-10). This schema was summarized and reiterated the following year in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (19). I stress the authoritative and binding nature of these Catholic magisterial documents because in the debate over the Gibson film too many Catholic voices are either ignorant or dismissive of this teaching.

[5] In brief, the 1964 text described the three stages of Gospel development as follows:

#### *Stage 1: The Ministry of Jesus*

Traditions that date from Jesus' words and deeds during his ministry in the late 20s and early 30s of the first century.

#### *Stage 2: The Post-Resurrectional Preaching of the Apostles*

Ideas about Jesus that arose after the Resurrection, especially consideration about his divine identity, expressed through the exalted use of earlier terms such as "Lord" and "Son of God".

#### *Stage 3: The Writing of the Gospels by the Evangelists*

The narratives about Jesus that are shaped by the situations, concerns and insights of the Gospel writers themselves.

In other words, the four canonical Gospels incorporate traditions dating from Jesus' ministry, which are understood through the experience of the Crucified One as Raised to transcendent life, and that are narrated according to the specific concerns, needs, interests, and insights of their respective authors. The Gospels achieved their final form only decades after the life and death of Jesus, resulting in four distinctive accounts.

[6] Of particular note is the fact that all the Gospels were written as the generation of eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry were dying (or being killed) and after the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. Living in the Roman Empire after the catastrophe of the Temple's demise, the evangelists shared some common interests, though with differing degrees of intensity and manifesting themselves in various ways in their writings. Some of their interests were apologetic, meaning that they were defensively explanatory, while others were polemical, meaning that they were arguments developed in debates with other groups. Among their common concerns were:

- To have the Church accepted as a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire (apologetic).
- To argue for the Church's way of being Jewish in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction by the Roman in the year 70 (polemical).
- To explain why the Temple was destroyed (polemical).
- To show that the Church's claim that the Crucified One has been raised is consistent with the Scriptures of ancient Israel (apologetic).

In the case of the passion narratives, these factors contributed to a tendency to de-emphasize Roman responsibility and to highlight the role of Jewish figures in bringing about the execution of Jesus.

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[7] Before turning to the Gospel texts, a few other points about the three stages of Gospel development should be made. First, the evangelists did not write the Gospels to give us “histories,” as we understand the term. They were written, as the Gospel of John explains, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The Gospel writers’ primary interest was in promoting faith that the one crucified had been raised to Lordship and, contrary to modern preferences, they did not see researching all the available historical facts as essential to their project. They experienced Jesus as Raised; that was all they needed.

[8] Having said this, it is also true that Stage 3 is the most important for Christian faith. It testifies to the evangelists’ inspired reflections on the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Christians believe that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit functioned in the minds and hearts of the Gospel writers, shaping their insights and individual presentations of the story and significance of Jesus. This inspiration did not include providing historical information to the evangelists, as their differences in historical details demonstrate. By discerning their distinctive perspectives, modern readers gain insight into the inspired mind of each of the Gospel writers as they encouraged faith in Jesus Christ.

[9] This all means that to ask historical questions of the Gospels is to ask something they were not really meant to provide. Asking, “what is the meaning of Jesus?” or “why is Jesus important?” are appropriate questions. However, since modern readers have a consciousness that history shapes our perceptions and expressions, and since Westerners in particular tend to collapse truth to what is empirically verifiable, we will inevitably ask historical questions of the Gospels. However, we should bear in mind that the biblical authors do not share our mental categories and horizons.

[10] In the process of asking historical questions of the Gospels, certain facts about life in Roman times should be kept in mind. Ancient societies did not make modern distinctions between religion, politics, or economics. “Religion” was imbedded with politics and economics in the concrete social forms of family and local community authority structures. For example, the Temple was the spiritual center of Judaism *and* a military fortress *and* the economic lifeblood of Jerusalem. Similarly, Jesus’ proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God was not simply a religious or spiritual message. It also had political consequences since the arrival of God’s Kingdom would mean the replacement of earthly realms, including the Roman Empire.

[11] Likewise, the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, effectively appointed Caiaphas as high priest. Pilate could remove an uncooperative priest by refusing to give him the sacred vestments worn to enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Since Caiaphas remained high priest during Pilate’s entire tenure as prefect, it seems clear that they had a good working relationship.

[12] Also of historical importance in reconstructing the circumstances of Jesus’ death is the fact that Passover in Jerusalem could be a volatile time. Thousands of Jewish pilgrims streamed to Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean world to celebrate the festival of freedom from foreign domination, but upon arriving they would see many signs of Roman supremacy. The first-century writer Flavius Josephus tells of the regular Roman practice of stationing troops to maintain public order in the Temple precincts (*Jewish Wars*, 2.12.1). The inflamed mood of the Jewish populace at Passover probably explains why Pilate was in Jerusalem, instead of at his headquarters in Caesarea Maritima, when Jesus entered the city. If, as the synoptic Gospels relate, Jesus caused a disturbance in the Temple after his arrival, this would certainly alarm both Jewish and Roman authorities: a Galilean troublemaker might be planning to start a Passover riot. Pilate would want to keep the peace. So

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would Caiaphas, who could reasonably fear that violence could lead to the destruction of the Temple, as indeed eventually occurred (see John 11:48-50).

### **Analysis by Scene**

[13] With this background, let us consider three scenes in the passion narratives: the Arrest, Jesus before the Temple Priests, and Jesus before Pilate. Although it is possible to devise a minimalist reconstruction, for instance some have suggested that Jesus and Pilate never directly encountered each other, we will follow the main lines of the passion narratives and draw cautious conclusions after comparing some of the distinct elements of the four Gospel accounts.

#### *The Arrest*

[14] The four Gospels share many common features in this scene, probably because it was an event in which the followers of Jesus were participants. Nonetheless, there are notable differences as well.

[15] In Mark's Gospel, Jesus prays three times for "this cup to pass me by," but he will do his father's will. Three times he returns to a group of his disciples and finds they cannot keep awake. When arrestors arrive, someone draws a sword and slices off an ear of someone in the arresting party. Mark is very blunt, "All of them abandoned him and fled" (14:50). In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is left utterly alone.

[16] Then follows an episode that is unique to Mark: "A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked" (14:51-52). Most commentators understand this not as a historical incident, but as related to Mark's pattern of showing that no human being realizes that Jesus is Son of God before the crucifixion. He portrays the disciples especially negatively, as their sleepiness illustrates. Many see this incident as referring to a scene at the beginning of the Gospel:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him (1:16-20).

Mark's point would seem to be that just as the disciples dropped everything when they first followed Jesus, so now when danger appears, they drop everything because they cannot get away from him quickly enough. Their faith is shallow.

[17] Mark's fuller purpose becomes clearer later in the passion narrative when Jesus dies. "Now when the centurion . . . saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15:39). This individual is the first human character in Mark's Gospel to perceive accurately Jesus' identity and this is because he discerned the love of God made manifest in Jesus' death. This for Mark is authentic faith, faith that endures even when threatened by violence and death.

[18] In Luke's account Jesus prays for the cup to pass him by only once. "When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief" (22:5). If Luke had a version of Mark as most scholars think, then he clearly has toned down the negative Marcan portrayal of the disciples.

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[19] In addition, the cutting of the ear has a characteristically Lucan feature: “Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched his ear and healed him” (22:51). In all the other Gospels, the severed ear presumably is left lying on the ground. However, as can be seen throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is conceived by the evangelist as the one who brings healing, wholeness, and reconciliation. It would be unthinkable for him to neglect to show Jesus’ healing someone of such an injury.

[20] John’s Gospel has several notable differences from the three synoptic Gospels. Roman soldiers are in the arresting party, for instance. Most importantly, there is no prayer of Jesus wishing that his imminent suffering could be avoided:

Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” . . . When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he” (18:4-7).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is in total control of every scene. He knows what is going to happen. This is because this writer stresses Jesus’ divine status. That is why when he says, “I AM,” recalling the holy name revealed to Moses in the burning bush, his arrestors all swoon in his divine presence. This would surely be a difficult scene to dramatize without making the arrestors seem clownish.

[21] Moreover, after Peter cuts off the servant’s ear, Jesus says, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (18:11). Not only is there no prayer of avoidance in John, but the image of “the cup” is here treated as something that Jesus would drink without question or hesitation: “There is no question that I am going to drink the cup the Father has given me!” This is because of the writer’s stress on Jesus as divine and in total control.

[22] Clearly, authors of passion dramas have to choose from among very different portraits of Jesus in presenting his arrest. To peer past these Stage 3 portrayals to their Stage 1 bases, the following would seem to be reasonable conclusions.

- Jesus was quietly arrested at night on the Mount of Olives. This means that his foes were concerned about his general popularity and feared taking him into custody publicly (cf. Mark 14:2).
- The composition of the arresting party is unclear, but given the good working relationship of the prefect and the high priest, this may not really matter.
- Although Jesus does not resist arrest, there was swordplay that Jesus stops.

### *Before the Temple Priests*

[23] Not surprisingly, the Gospels are not consistent in presenting this “behind closed doors” scene. In Mark and Matthew “the chief priests and whole council” convene on first night of Passover to judge Jesus’ fate. This scene has always caused difficulties for historians who wonder how it would be possible to convene a formal council on the night that Jews are eating the Passover seder (as both Mark 14:12 and Matthew 26:17 had indicated earlier, though John 19:31 has a different timetable). Luke only has a morning “assembly of the elders of the people” (22:6), while John depicts no council meeting at all at this point, but only a questioning of Jesus about his disciples and teaching by Annas (18:13; 19).

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[24] The Marcan episode of Jesus before the high priest contains this famous scene:

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! (14:61-64).

Several important points need to be made about this passage. First, the words of Jesus are a blending of Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1, strongly suggesting later Christian reflection on the identity of Jesus. This is confirmed by the question of the high priest about whether Jesus is God’s divine Son. Recalling the three stages of Gospel development, this question presupposes the resurrection experience, something that of course has not yet occurred in the Gospel narrative. Indeed, since as we have earlier seen Mark stresses that no one really understands Jesus’ identity until the crucifixion, this premature insight on the part of a character hostile to Jesus is even more peculiar. The conclusion is that Stage 3 debates between Christians and Jews about Jesus’ divine Sonship have been retrojected by Mark back into this scene that will lead to Jesus’ execution.

[25] Likewise, the “blasphemy” charge can be understood in Stage 1 and Stage 3 layers. In Stage 3, the Christian claim that Jesus is divine sounds to Jewish ears as if a second “god” is being proposed, something that of course is unacceptable. However, in Stage 1, the charge of blasphemy could be leveled against anyone arrogantly claiming to have the authority to criticize God’s anointed priests. If Jesus did indeed accuse the Temple leaders of being corrupt stewards as some parables suggest (see below), then his targets might well have viewed his remarks as blasphemous preludes to violence against them.

[26] If Christological issues color the Marcan account, it is interesting that they are absent from the Johannine version given the Fourth Gospel’s emphasis on Jesus’ divinity:

Then high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered him, “I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area where all Jews gather, and in secret I have said nothing. Why ask me? Ask those who heard me what I said to them. They know what I said.” When he had said this, one of the temple guards standing there struck Jesus and said, “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest (18:19-24).

In addition to the lack of any Council meeting at this juncture, it is noteworthy that Annas asks Jesus about his disciples and teaching. There is some plausibility to these topics in a Stage 1 context.

[27] One of the facts about Jesus’ death that should be considered is that his followers were permitted to scatter. If Jesus’ foes were motivated by a fear that a Passover riot was being plotted, they would have to determine if Jesus’ disciples had instructions to launch violence even if their master were imprisoned or killed. Perhaps this lies behind the Johannine element of Annas interrogating Jesus about his followers. The content of Jesus’ teaching would relate to this as well, especially given the lack of a Christological tone to the questioning.

[28] For a variety of reasons, a formal legal proceeding before a Sanhedrin on the first night of Passover is implausible. Whether or not there was a council meeting prior to Jesus’ arrest (as in John 11:45-53), a large debate would not be in the interests of hurried authorities who had determined that Jesus was a threat to public order on Passover. His questioning, therefore, is most likely

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restricted to the high priests and their inner circle. This questioning may have largely focused on whether the disciples posed a threat.

[29] Parenthetically, I would like to add that in none of the Gospels is Jesus subject to severe physical treatment at the hands of the priests. John describes a single slap on Jesus' face, while in the synoptics he is spat upon, blindfolded, struck on the face, and slapped (Matthew 26:67-68; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63-65). However, in the forthcoming Mel Gibson film, at least in pre-release screenings, Jesus is so severely beaten while in priestly custody that one of his eyes becomes useless and Pilate is moved to ask Caiaphas if it is his standard practice to half-kill prisoners before legal judgment has been rendered.

### *Before Pilate*

[30] Again, there are many inconsistencies among the Gospels in this scene. Among their common features are care in the portrayal of Roman justice, Jesus being asked if he is "the king of the Jews" (likely based on the eventual crime posted on Jesus' cross), and a "crowd" demanding Barabbas' release and Jesus' execution. I put "crowd" in quotation marks because no Gospel specifies the size of this group. Creators of passion dramas are therefore free to depict a group of anywhere from a dozen people up to a Cecil B. DeMille-like cast of thousands. However, the Barabbas incident has several peculiar aspects, and needs to be discussed as a distinct category.

[31] In the synoptic Gospels Pilate has a custom to release a prisoner to honor the Passover festival, whereas in John it is a Jewish custom that Pilate observes. In either case, there is little or no extra-biblical evidence for such practices in areas under Roman rule. Furthermore, is it likely that Pilate would release a murderer or an insurrectionist as he described in Mark and Luke?

[32] Questions mount when one realizes that the name Barabbas means "son of the father," an excellent soubriquet for Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, in certain texts of Matthew's Gospel, Barabbas' surname is Jesus and so Pilate asks whether he should release Jesus son of the Father or Jesus the messiah (Mt 27:17)!

[33] Clearly there are theological factors at work in this incident that date from before Stage 3, most likely from early in Stage 2, that are difficult to discern clearly. The best resolution to date of which I am aware has been offered by Raymond E. Brown and he deserves to be quoted in full:

A man with the name Barabbas was arrested after a riot that had caused some deaths in Jerusalem. Eventually he was released by Pilate when a feast brought the governor to Jerusalem to supervise public order. Presumably this took place at the same time that Jesus was crucified, or not far from it, or on another Passover. In any case, this release struck Christians as ironic: The same legal issue was involved, sedition against the authority of the emperor. Although they knew Jesus was innocent, he was found guilty by Pilate, while Barabbas was let go. The storytelling tendency to contrast the released Barabbas and the crucified Jesus by bringing them together at the same moment before Pilate's "justice" would have been enhanced if both had the same personal name, Jesus (819-20).

Given the difficulties and uncertainties associated with the Barabbas incident, it will not be assigned a high degree of historicity in this reconstruction of Jesus' death. This has implications for the portrayal of the "crowd" in general.

[34] Matthew's Gospel contains some unique phrases that have been destructive toward Jews over Christian history:

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Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed . . . So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:20, 24-25).

In interpreting this passage it is important to note that the chief priests and elders are shown to mislead the people into calling for Jesus' death. This relates to two parables presented a few chapters earlier in Matthew:

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, *while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city* (22:1-7).

There is a parallel version of the same parable in Luke 14:16-24, however the italicized words above, undoubtedly referring to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, are not present in Luke. Matthew is relating the destruction of the Temple to those who should have known better but yet declined the invitation of God's messengers and even killed them. A similar pattern can be seen in another Matthean parable:

Jesus said to the chief priests . . . But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (21:23, 38-43).

In this Matthean scene, Jesus tells the chief priests a parable about tenants working a vineyard for a landowner. Since a vineyard is a standard biblical symbol for Israel (Isaiah 5:7), it clear that the story is a pointed one about corrupt rulers of God's people. These rulers kill the landowner's son and so will lose their authority. Obviously, comparisons to God's Son Jesus being killed outside the vineyard/city are being drawn.

[35] How do these three Matthean passages interrelate? After the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70, different groups of Jews blamed one another for its demise, Matthew among them. He blames the Temple priests for leading the people of Jerusalem astray in demanding Jesus' death. They and their children, in Matthew's view, were destroyed by the Romans in 70 for this crime.

[36] Now, Matthew argues, leadership in the Jewish community is given to "another group," namely, Matthew's church which follows the Torah definitively interpreted by Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew warns his readers not to follow the leaders he considers corrupt in his day, the Pharisees. He characterizes them as blind guides who will lead the people to destruction just as the

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Temple priests did. The “blood curse” in 27:25 is thus not a Stage 1 historic event, but is part of Matthew’s Stage 3 polemic against Jewish rivals.

[37] Luke also has some unique verses when Jesus is presented to Pilate: “Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king’” (23:1-2).

[38] These three charges are only found in Luke, however they have some degree of historical plausibility in connection with Jesus. The charge of “perverting the nation” is usually understood as meaning teaching falsely. Jesus’ proclamation of God’s imminent intervention in establishing his Kingdom and/or his critique of the Temple leaders could both be deemed falsehoods by his accusers. Jesus’ riddling response to the question of paying taxes to Caesar (20:22-25) could be interpreted as meaning that God is owed everything and Caesar nothing. The charge of calling himself a king, while not attested explicitly in the New Testament, is not without basis given Jesus’ constant activities on behalf of God’s Kingdom.

[39] It is therefore unsurprising when Pilate next asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus gives a smart-alecky response, “You say so” or “You’re the one who used the word” (23:3). This is a particularly risky reply given the Roman legal norm that one is guilty until proven innocent. One would therefore expect that having been confronted with plausible accusations against a Galilean at a volatile time and hearing a disrespectful or defiant reply that Pilate would quickly decide that Jesus was a troublemaker. Instead the Lucan Pilate states, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man” (23:4) – an astonishing reversal of the flow of the narrative to that point. Luke gives no reason for Pilate’s pronouncement, but it is only the first of three such exclamations from him (23:4, 14, 22).

[40] Luke’s passion narrative stresses Jesus’ righteousness and innocence. Those are the words declared by the centurion at the foot of the cross in Luke’s Gospel (23:47) in contrast to the Marcan centurion’s pronouncement of Jesus’ divine Sonship. Jesus as the suffering righteous prophet is one of Luke’s principle Christological themes.

[41] Luke is probably also motivated by his desire to win the Church legal status in the Roman Empire. It would not do to explicitly show Jesus found guilty of sedition by a Roman prefect. As a result, Pilate and indeed all the Roman characters in his Gospel and in Acts of the Apostles are positively portrayed and Jesus’ innocence is constantly repeated.

[42] Another unique Lucan episode is Jesus being brought to Herod Antipas who is in Jerusalem for the Passover. The story ends with, “That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies” (23:12). For Luke, no one can enter the healing presence of Jesus without being affected; hence, Pilate and Antipas become friends. Likewise, one of the two criminals crucified with Jesus will repent in Luke’s account, unlike the other Gospels (23:39-43). Perhaps also related to this point is that after Jesus dies, the spectators return home beating their breasts in sorrow (23:48).

[43] As throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus remains fully in control during his encounter with Pilate. He and Pilate engage in philosophical discussions about kingship and authority. Again as throughout the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ divine identity is stressed, e.g., his kingdom is “not from this world” (18:36).

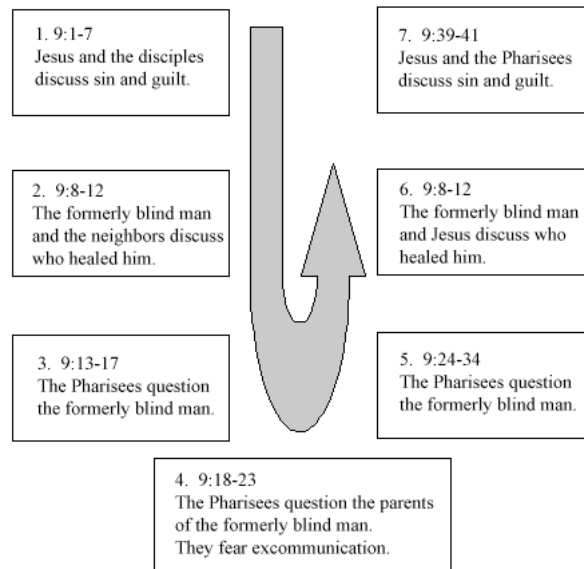
[44] John’s Gospel uses the phrase “the Jews” in a sweeping collective sense that has contributed to the Christian “deicide” charge against Jews in all times and places. Most researchers see a Stage 3

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origin for this practice. John's church community has recently been involved in a painful break with the local Jewish community (see 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). In his anger, the author refers sarcastically to "the Jews" who expelled Jewish believers in Christ, even though he feels that they have in a sense forsaken their Jewish status by doing so.

[45] A unique aspect of John's account is that Pilate shuttles inside and outside the praetorium, reflecting his inner confusion. As part of his perplexity, Pilate orders Jesus scourged in a futile effort to release him. This is the only Gospel to posit this reason for the scourging. In the synoptics, scourging is simply part of the Roman crucifixion process. The entire scene is carefully organized to form a chiasm in which episodes are inversely parallel to each other, with the scourging being the central pivot to the structure:

### The Chiasmic Structure of John 9



[46] Why should the writer make the scourging of Jesus so central to his presentation? One plausible suggestion is that it is an effort to insure that despite the Gospel's emphasis on Jesus' divinity his true humanity and the reality of his suffering will not be forgotten. In any case, it is evident that the decision to have Pilate scourge Jesus in an attempt to free him arises from structural and theological concerns and not from a preserved historical memory.

[47] Given the above considerations, the following would seem to be reasonable conclusions about the encounter of Jesus with Pilate. The role, composition, and size of the early morning "crowd" is very unclear, especially if the Barabbas episode did not occur simultaneously with the proceedings against Jesus of Nazareth. The most plausible picture of the "crowd" is a group of priests or Temple staff who escort Jesus from his questioning by the high priest to Pilate.

[48] It is impossible to discern Pilate's opinions or motives. Whether enthusiastically, apathetically, or reluctantly, Pilate commands that Jesus be executed as a seditious "king of the Jews." Jesus is scourged as part of the Roman crucifixion process.

[49] A final point should be made here. For several reasons it is significant that Jesus is killed by crucifixion. It was a Roman not a Jewish form a capital punishment at that time. Jews usually executed by stoning. Moreover, since crucifixion was a Roman method of crowd control, it seems someone wanted him publicly displayed. Otherwise, he could have been removed from the scene

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through a quiet assassination. The decision was made to make an example of Jesus in order to deter Passover violence, whether instigated by his disciples or anyone else. This would seem primarily to be a Roman calculation.

### **Summary and Implications**

[50] Pilate and Caiaphas colluded in the death of Jesus. Which of the two initiated his arrest is impossible to determine. Jesus' words and deeds on behalf of a coming "Kingdom of God" were enough to convince Pilate that Jesus should be preemptively and publicly dispensed with as a warning to the thousands of Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus' Kingdom preaching and criticisms of the priestly leadership were enough to persuade Caiaphas that this popular Galilean could incite anti-Roman agitation and so move the Romans to act against the people and destroy the Temple that he was responsible to protect. The high priest was not necessarily personally popular with the people, so he had additional reasons to move carefully in his efforts to maintain the peace.

[51] Caiaphas orchestrated Jesus' nighttime arrest out of sight of the general public. Perhaps together with a few priestly colleagues, he questioned him and determined his disciples were not a threat. Possibly at dawn, he dispatched Jesus to Pilate for execution. This outcome was likely determined in advance, but the precise content of conversations or disagreements between Pilate and Caiaphas or their subordinates are inaccessible to contemporary historians. Mark 15:25 depicts Jesus being crucified at 9 a.m., before most of Jerusalem would have even been aware of Jesus' arrest, and this is consistent with the need for haste before the Passover and/or the Sabbath.

[52] Given all of these complexities, it is obvious that authors of passion dramas face several challenges. They have to deal with the apologetic and polemical aspects of passion accounts that originated decades after the events being depicted. They also have to negotiate the multi-layered historical and theological contexts even within one specific Gospel and convert them into a dramatic medium that tends to flatten these layers down to one historical dimension. Since the Gospel narratives are fairly sparse, passion play authors also have to decide how and with what sources to supplement them.

[53] In addition, they must select from among the diverse and distinctive narrative elements in the four passion narratives. Everyone who understands the Gospels to be theologically driven narratives would, I think, agree with the Roman Catholic instruction issued by the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs that urged "the greatest caution . . . in all cases where it is a question of passages that seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light" (C, 1, d).

[54] In the past, passion plays have combined the most dramatic features from the four Gospels and in the process have intensified their polemical anti-Jewish aspects:

- A night trial of Jesus before the entire Sanhedrin, at which the high priest declares Jesus blasphemous (Matthew and Mark).
- Herod Antipas being unwilling to condemn Jesus despite the chief priests' insistence (found only in Luke).
- Pilate having Jesus scourged in a vain attempt to placate the demands of "the Jews" (found only in John).
- Pilate washing his hands of responsibility for condemning Jesus before the Jewish mob who accept guilt for his blood on themselves and their children (found only in Matthew).

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[55] On the other hand, one could easily combine scenes that reduce the risk of reinforcing the notion of Jewish collective guilt for Jesus' death. Specifically:

- Because Jesus is popular with the people at large, he is arrested clandestinely at night to avoid a riot (Mark 14:2).
- Caiaphas fears that a riot could provoke the Romans to destroy the Temple (John 11:48).
- Jesus is arrested by Temple guards and Roman soldiers (John 18:3).
- Jesus is questioned by Annas and Caiaphas and taken to Pilate (John 18:19, 24, 28).
- Pilate was known to use violence to enforce Roman rule (Luke 13:1).
- Jesus is charged with misleading the people, opposing the Roman tribute, and calling himself a king (Luke 23:3).
- The "crowd" demanding Barabbas' release is prompted by the chief priests (Mark 15:11). (Note that "crowd" is not quantified. The greater its association with the priests, the less it is a sizable portion of the Jewish populace generally.)
- Jesus was scourged as part of the Roman crucifixion procedure once Pilate ordered his execution (Mark 15:15, as against John 19:1-16).
- Jesus was executed as a seditious king (Mark 15:16 and parallels).
- "A great multitude of the people" (Luke 23:27) and "all the multitudes" (Luke 23:48) of Jews are sorrowful about Jesus' crucifixion.
- Jesus' execution was done in haste (Mark 15:25; John 19:31).

[56] Both of the above lists could equally claim to be "faithful to the New Testament." But the first one amplifies Jewish culpability for the crucifixion beyond what any single Gospel account presents. Collective guilt interpretations are obviously made more likely. It could well be, then, that a particular dramatization is true to the Gospels, but that does not necessarily mean that the diverse New Testament episodes have been selected and organized responsibly.

[57] From a Catholic perspective, again quoting from the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs: "A clear and precise hermeneutic (method of biblical interpretation) and a guiding artistic vision sensitive to historical fact and to the best biblical scholarship are obviously necessary. Just as obviously, it is not sufficient for the producers of passion dramatizations to respond to responsible criticism simply by appealing to the notion that 'it's in the Bible.' One must account for one's selections" (C, 1, c).

[58] It seems to me that in the controversy over the forthcoming Mel Gibson film too many Catholics have either displayed ignorance of or have intentionally disregarded official Catholic teaching on these matters. For myself, I take Pope John Paul II's words of penitence and commitment at the Western Wall in Jerusalem as a sacred obligation not to repeat the sins of past Christian generations in telling the story of Jesus' passion:

God of our fathers,  
you chose Abraham and his descendants  
to bring Your name to the nations:  
we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those  
who in the course of history  
have caused these children of Yours to suffer  
and asking Your forgiveness  
we wish to commit ourselves  
to genuine brotherhood  
with the people of the Covenant (Jerusalem, 26 March 2000).

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