

# Fact Sheet: Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus

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Some problematic quotes from recent Catholic secondary school religion textbooks (Italics spotlight some troublesome features)

Jesus driving out the money-changers demonstrated *his authority over Israel's religious practices* and ... it also spoke to his *challenging the old and corrupt sacrificial system, abolishing all sacrifice* but the one he was about to make.

From the beginning, *the religious leaders* watched his every move with suspicion. They did not like his popularity and his criticism of *their rigid view of the law*. Instead of being open and changing *their narrow-minded attitudes*, they gradually built a wall of opposition ... [that] was the ... *cause of Jesus' death*.

Some powerful leaders did not believe that *Jesus was the Son of God*. They plotted against him.

The following actions and teachings of Jesus led certain Pharisees, supporters of Herod Antipas, and some scribes and priests to see Jesus *as a threat to Israel's institutions*. These included *his exorcisms; implicitly claiming to be the Savior God* by forgiving sin; *healing on the Sabbath*, even claiming to be Lord of it; *unique interpretations of the Law* "as one who taught with authority;" *disregard of cleanliness and purity laws; associations with sinners and tax-collectors; teaching that God is bounteously merciful* toward all repentant sinners ... In short, some of the religious authorities thought Jesus was a false prophet *who claimed to be God*. Thus, out of ignorance and *the "hardness" of their unbelief, many members of the Sanhedrin* accused Jesus of blasphemy, a crime under Jewish law punishable by stoning to death.

## What's the problem?

These quotations perpetuate a widespread meme: "JESUS CLAIMED TO BE GOD. THAT WAS A BLASPHEMOUS CAPITAL OFFENSE ACCORDING TO JEWISH LAW. SO JEWISH LEADERS MANIPULATED THE INDIFFERENT ROMANS TO KILL HIM." The meme is not only highly questionable historically, but it is often accompanied, as above, with caricatures of Judaism. It thus contributes to antisemitism. In terms of Catholic teaching, this scenario is based on a misconception of the nature of the Gospel Passion Narratives. It also undermines the magisterial admonition that "neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion."<sup>1</sup>

## What is Catholic teaching about the nature of the Gospels and their Passion Narratives?

The Gospels are theologically-driven narratives shaped by the situations, perspectives, and motives of the later evangelists. Their work involved "selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of [the authors'] churches, and preserving the form of proclamation."<sup>2</sup> Thus, "the passion narratives do not offer eyewitness accounts or a modern transcript of historical events."<sup>3</sup> Misunderstanding the nature of the Gospels is most perilous with the Gospel of John, which often speaks collectively of "the Jews," and can readily lead the unwary reader to the "Christ-killer" libel rejected by the church. A failure to read the passion narratives critically is akin to a fundamentalist approach, which "does not take into account the development of the Gospel tradition, but naively confuses the final stage of this tradition (what the evangelists have written) with the initial (the words and deeds of the historical Jesus)."<sup>4</sup> Relatedly, the above quotations spread false ideas about the Jewish tradition, wrongly set Jesus in opposition to it (and it to him), and so bolster the dangerous notion that "Jesus was killed at the instigation of the Jews," as a recent editorial in a national Christian magazine put it.

## Why is it important that the Passion Narratives (PNs) are not historical transcripts?

1. The four PNs are inconsistent about major details, raising such questions as: After his arrest, was Jesus formally tried by the Sanhedrin or only questioned by Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest? Was he flogged before or after Pilate sentenced him to death? Was Jesus crucified on the first day of Passover or on the preceding day of preparation? Modern writers often blend different PN details in ways that heighten the culpability of Jewish figures beyond any single Gospel text.<sup>5</sup>
2. The PNs often reflect "conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community ... long after the time of Jesus,"<sup>6</sup> chiefly conflicts over post-resurrectional faith in Jesus as God's divine Son, equal to God. The evangelists "retrojected" such later debates into their PNs, as when the high priest cries "blasphemy" after asking Jesus about his divine Sonship. This verdict is just as false as the other charges against Jesus.

## What important historical and exegetical facts should be kept in mind?

1. At least twice as many Jews lived in the Diaspora than in their ancestral homeland. Therefore, most Jews had never heard of Jesus at the time of his execution.
2. Passover, the feast of freedom from foreign domination, was always a time of high tension in Jerusalem, which was under direct Roman occupation.
3. Roman troops crucified tens of thousands of Jews in the land of Israel to terrorize them into submission. That Jesus was killed by crucifixion and not “disappeared” signals a Roman calculation to make a public example of him at the volatile Passover season. To Rome, Jesus’ Kingdom of God preaching made him one more popular Jewish agitator to be dispatched.
4. The Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, appointed the high priest of the Temple by controlling the vestments needed to perform his priestly duties. Thus, the high priest had to be on good terms with Pilate.
5. Rome removed Pilate from power for brutality after he massacred hundreds of Samaritans. Gospel efforts to portray him sympathetically—which increase from the earliest Gospel (Mark) to the latest (John), while also progressively vilifying “the Jews (a frequent phrase in John)—are aspects of “the development of the Gospel tradition” that Vatican texts discuss (fn. 2).
6. Jesus never abrogates Torah; his interpretations of it fit well within contemporary Jewish positions.
7. The “Barabbas” scene has major historical problems. There is no evidence of a custom of Passover clemency. The choice to free either “Jesus, king of the Jews” or “Jesus, son of the Father” (Mt 27:17), the meaning of the name “Bar-abbas,” smacks of the evangelists’ theological interests.
8. The Jewish tradition is permeated by gratitude for God’s mercy and love, especially for the gift of the Torah to Israel. Observing the Torah’s commands (as variously interpreted) is how Jews, including Jesus, show their love for God with whom they live in covenant. In the time of Jesus there were many creative ideas being debated as to how to live holy lives. This is not “legalism,” a frequent Christian caricature of Jewish devotion to the Torah.

MISREPRESENTATIONS	CORRECTIONS
citing the Gospel passion narratives in a simplistic, uncritical manner	be aware of the apologetic and polemical forces that helped shape the Gospel passion narratives
ascribing it to “the Jews” or the vague term “religious leaders” (NB: Pharisees barely appear in the PNs)	ascribe it to Roman officials and coopted priestly subordinates such as Caiaphas, the high priest
claiming that Jesus violated “Jewish Law” or opposed Jewish “legalism”	say that Jesus took part in typical Jewish discussions on how best to interpret the Torah’s commands
describing a formal Sanhedrin “trial”	describe a questioning by Caiaphas and priestly allies
retrojecting disputes from the evangelists’ era onto the time of Jesus by anachronistically discussing “blasphemy” as Jesus claiming equality with God	limit “blasphemy” (if mentioned at all) to Jesus striking some as arrogant or presumptuous by acting as if he were a prophet speaking for God
portraying Pilate as seeking to free Jesus or crowds of ordinary Jews as demanding Jesus’ death	discuss that Caiaphas was appointed by Pilate, that Pilate was eventually removed for cruelty, and that Jesus was popular with many Jews of his time
attributing it to alleged Jewish “religious” motives	link Jesus’ death with the sometimes-violent Passover season, his preaching about the imminent Kingdom, and his “kingly” entrance into Jerusalem

<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, [Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions](#), October 28, 1965, §4.

<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, [Dei Verbum: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation](#), November 18, 1965, §19. See also Pontifical Biblical Commission, [“Sancta Mater Ecclesia,”](#) April 21, 1964, §§VIII-X.

<sup>3</sup> Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, USCCB, [God’s Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching](#), September 18, 1998, §23.

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, [“The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,”](#) April 23, 1993, I,F.

<sup>5</sup> Bishops’ Committee For Ecumenical And Interreligious Affairs, USCCB, [“Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion,”](#) March 1, 1988, §C,1.

<sup>6</sup> Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, [“Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,”](#) June 24, 1985, §21A.