

FACT SHEET: JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DEATH OF JESUS

The crucifixion of Jesus remains a neuralgic topic. A historically incorrect and biblically uninformed scenario regularly appears in textbooks and popular essays: Jesus claimed to be God—allegedly a blasphemous capital offense in Jewish Law—and so “Jewish leaders” manipulated the Romans to kill him. Such schemas are contrary to Catholic teaching on the nature of the Gospel Passion Narratives (PNs) and often include caricatures of Judaism that set Jesus and Judaism (and therefore Christianity and Judaism) into fundamental opposition to each other. This image runs the risk of encouraging congregations to think of Jews as essentially “other,” the bedrock of antisemitism.

MISREPRESENTATIONS (Quotes are from current Catholic textbooks. Italics added.)	CORRECTIONS
<p>MISREPRESENTATION 1: Generalizing the views of certain Jewish views about Jesus to all “the Jews,” even though most Jews lived outside the land of Israel and would never have heard of him. Relatedly, ascribing the crucifixion to unspecified leaders: <i>“the religious leaders watched his every move with suspicion ... they gradually built a wall of opposition ... [that] was the ... cause of Jesus’ death.”</i></p>	<p>To avoid presenting “Judaism” as opposed to Jesus, be careful to specify those who criticized or feared him. Foremost was the Temple high priestly leadership who reasonably feared the Romans could destroy the Temple, as indeed eventually happened. It was the priests who held more political influence in Jerusalem—under Roman supervision—not the scholarly Pharisees whose teachings resembled Jesus’ at many points.</p>
<p>MISREPRESENTATION 2: Caricaturing the Judaism of Jesus’ time: “[The religious leaders] did not like his popularity and his criticism of <i>their rigid view of the law</i>. Instead of being open and changing <i>their narrow-minded attitudes</i>.”</p>	<p>The Jewish tradition is filled with gratitude for God’s mercy and love, especially for the gift of the Torah. Jews, including Jesus, observe its commands (interpreted variously) out of love for God with whom they covenant. In Jesus’ time 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. Jesus simply participated in typical discussions on how Jews should best interpret the Torah’s commands.</p>
<p>MISREPRESENTATION 3: Overlooking crucial historical facts about the execution of Jesus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passover, the feast of freedom from foreign domination, was always a time of high tension in Jerusalem, which was under direct Roman occupation. • Roman troops crucified tens of thousands of Jews in the land of Israel to terrorize them into submission. That Jesus was killed by crucifixion along with two “insurgents” signals a Roman calculation to make public examples of them at the volatile Passover season. To Rome, Jesus’ preaching about God’s Kingdom made him one more popular Jewish agitator to be dispatched. • The Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, appointed Caiaphas, 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. Rome eventually removed Pilate from power for brutality after he massacred hundreds of Samaritans. • In short, the execution of Jesus was fully in Rome’s interest, abetted by the coopted high priest.

<p>MISREPRESENTATION 4: Explaining the crucifixion by invoking later Christian beliefs about Jesus: “Some powerful leaders did not believe that <i>Jesus was the Son of God</i>. They plotted against him.” “... [S]ome of the religious authorities thought Jesus was a false prophet <i>who claimed to be God</i>.” Thus, out of ignorance and <i>the “hardness” of their unbelief, many members of the Sanhedrin</i> accused Jesus of blasphemy, a crime under Jewish law punishable by stoning to death.</p>	<p>Prescinding from the historical problem of a formal Sanhedrin “trial” on the day before or on Passover, this “religious” (hence, “Jewish”) motive for killing Jesus is anachronistic. Since “the passion narratives do not offer eyewitness accounts or a modern transcript of historical events,” they often reflect “conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community ... long after the time of Jesus.” These later conflicts stemmed from 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.</p>
<p>MISREPRESENTATION 5: Portraying Pilate as seeking to free Jesus or crowds of ordinary Jews as demanding Jesus’ death</p>	<p>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.</p>

MISREPRESENTATION 1 NOTES:

- “Judaism in the first century, especially, incorporated an extraordinarily rich and diverse set of groups and movements. Some sought a certain accommodation with Hellenic/Roman culture in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel. ... Some argued for armed rebellion against Rome (Zealots), others for peaceful but firm resistance to cultural oppression (some Pharisees) and a few, such as the Temple priesthood and its party (Sadducees) acted in the eyes of the people as collaborators with Rome” (Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, USCCB, [“Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion,”](#) March 1, 1988, §B,2.
- “Jesus shares, with the majority of Palestinian Jews of that time, some pharisaic doctrines: the resurrection of the body; forms of piety, like aims-giving, prayer, fasting (Mt. 6:1-18) and the liturgical practice of addressing God as Father; the priority of the commandment to love God and our neighbor (Mk. 12:28-34). ... [He] use[d] methods of reading and interpreting Scripture and of teaching his disciples which were common to the Pharisees of their time. ... It is noteworthy too that the Pharisees are not mentioned in accounts of the Passion” (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, §III, 17-19.

MISREPRESENTATION 2 NOTES:

- “The Torah is the instruction for a successful life in right relationship with God. Whoever observes the Torah has life in its fullness (cf. Pirque Avot II, 7). By observing the Torah the Jew receives a share in communion with God” (¹ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, [“‘The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable’ \(Rom 11:29\),”](#) December 14, 2015, §24.

MISREPRESENTATION 4 NOTES:

- 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.
- CRRJ, “Notes,” §21A. See also Second Vatican Council, [Dei Verbum: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation](#), November 18, 1965, §19; Pontifical Biblical Commission, [“Sancta Mater Ecclesia,”](#) April 21, 1964, §§VIII-X; and Pontifical Biblical Commission, [“The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,”](#) April 23, 1993, I,F.

MISREPRESENTATION 5 NOTES:

- 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.