

# Scholar doubts trial held before Jesus' execution

## Second of two stories

Dr. Michael Cook, a Jewish scholar, said in a Mobile lecture he has "grave doubts" that Jesus ever went to trial before he was executed.

Cook, associate professor of intertestamental and early Christian literatures at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, made the statement to a gathering of Christians and Jews during a community lecture at the local Jewish Community Center.

The rabbi expressed his view that even if Jesus was tried by a Jewish court, it was a rubber stamp for Roman authorities. At the time of Jesus' death in the year 29 or 30, Palestine, the homeland of Jesus and the Jewish people, was occupied by Rome.

Cook said that "most Christian scholars readily acknowledge the Gospels are basically theological documents. Their authors were not primarily historians but theologians whose concern was not so much to preserve accurate historical details of Jesus' life but rather to proclaim the good news that Jesus was indeed the messiah."

He said, "While a number of Jesus' genuine teachings have, of course, been preserved in these Gospels, many scholars, and by scholars I usually mean Christian scholars, have been persuaded that the details of his trial in the sanhedrin (Jewish court) are basically legendary."

The rabbi said, "Almost all Christian New Testament scholars grant the Gospels, in their completed form, date from a period of 40 to 70 years after Jesus died, and none of the authors of the four Gospels, so many Christian scholars today acknowledge, ever knew Jesus personally or witnessed what occurred at his presumed trial."

Said the speaker, "In the oldest of the Gospels, in its account of Jesus' last days, Christian scholars have found telltale clues that the story of Jesus' trial in a Jewish sanhedrin has been inserted into an earlier text."

"Apparently the original narrative of Jesus' death did not include any account of his alleged trial in the Jewish sanhedrin at all. The story of his trial by the Jews which we have in the Gospels today has been introduced into one of Mark's sources for reasons which we can only speculate."

Cook noted that after the city of Rome was burned in the year 64, the Roman emperor Nero persecuted Christians, blaming them for the fire. Two years later, in 66, the Jews in Palestine rebelled against Roman rule, thus also facing Roman persecution.

At that time, Christianity "was popularly identified and confused with Judaism," which gave root to the Christian religion.

Christians in Rome began to fear "that Rome's inevitable vengeance against Jewish subversives in Palestine would now spill over and signal renewed persecution of Christians in Rome ... unless the church could somehow show Rome that Christians were utterly distinct from Jews."

Cook expressed the view that the Gospel of Mark was written in the city of Rome "partially with the aim of protecting Christians from persecution in Rome.... The Gospel according to Mark told the story of Jesus in such a way that Roman readers and listeners would realize how innocent Christianity was of any charge of political subversion."

In the speaker's view, "It was imperative that the Gospel writers show Jesus and his followers to have been adjudged innocent by Pontius Pilate (the Roman governor in Palestine) and instead condemned by a Jewish court."

Also, according to Cook, at the time of the writing of the Gospel of Mark, the Christians had rejected many of the laws and practices of Judaism, acknowledged as Christianity's mother religion, and thus the Christians were "badgered" by Jewish leaders because of this "allegedly hypocritical behavior."

Said Cook, "If the Jewish leaders continually hounded the church in the decades after Jesus died, Christians could naturally have assumed that the Jews must have hounded and persecuted Jesus personally in the days when he himself had lived, even though this was not necessarily historically true."

Thus, said Cook, "to assist Christians in handling the harassment by Jewish religious authorities ... it was imperative for the Gospels to portray the Jews as having been the enemies of Jesus himself, to demonstrate as well how Jesus' response to their attacks ... provoked the Jews, not the Romans, to be the ones who disposed of him."

What actually took place in Jesus' last days, "regrettably we cannot know, and anyone who maintains that we can know, in my judgment, really cannot prove it," said Cook.

He continued, "We do have three major clues, but these are only clues, and actually there are not enough clues to put the puzzle together."

First clue: "The image of Pontius Pilate in the Gospels is radically different from the image of him advanced by three other sources — the Roman historian Tacitus, the Jewish historian Josephus and the Jewish philosopher Philo."

"These latter three sources all agree that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was a ruthless ruler, notorious for the severity and hard-heartedness with which he enforced law and order and imposed his will. It appears he executed many Jewish figures even without trial...."

"The portrayal of Pilate in the Gospels as a saintly man, affirming Jesus' innocence and anxious to release him, in my judgment and in the judgment of many scholars, is hardly credible."

Second clue: "The Gospels tell us that Caiaphas, the political leader of the Jewish people, was Jesus' chief enemy and that he personally headed the sanhedrin which condemned Jesus to execution. As such, according to the Gospels, he was diametrically opposed to Pontius Pilate...."

"Both Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas had the longest tenures in office of anyone who held their offices.... This seems to indicate for those scholars willing to infer it, as I myself am, that the high priest and the Roman governor got along very well and they were compatible, that most likely they did not differ on major policy because, as Josephus indicates, the Roman governor or procurator could dispose of the high priest rather readily if there was a difference in policy. In my judgment, it makes much more sense to assume that Pilate and Caiaphas were on the same side.... The Gospel accounts, therefore, are somewhat inaccurate when they make Caiaphas the only one in favor of the execution of Jesus. It seems to me Pilate was involved as well."

Third clue: "Jesus' prediction of the coming of the kingdom of God must have sounded to many Roman ears like political subversion."

"Since the accusation against Jesus, as noted on the cross was 'King of the Jews,' it seems likely that Jesus was perceived by Rome as ... a political threat and routinely arrested by the priests, Pilate's henchmen. Jesus was crucified along with others similarly perceived as threats to Roman power."