
Who Killed Christ?

by: Ronald L. Dart

When the Pope viewed Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of Jesus the Christ," he is said to have remarked, "It is as it was." And that is the avowed object of the movie, to tell the story of the suffering of Jesus as it was.

Few things I have read, underline this like an article in the February 15th, 2004 Newsweek. Jon Meacham in his article titled, "Who killed Jesus?" asked this, "Does the death, the execution of Jesus, lie at the feet of the Jewish people?" No. It does not but making that simple denial does not tell the whole story.

Can The Bible Be A Problematic Source?

According to Meacham, the Bible can be a problematic source. Quoting him, he says, "That underlines the problem with Mel Gibson's movie, it is based, not on historical accounts, but on the Bible itself." Meacham continues, "Scripture is not always a faithful record of historical events, the Bible is the product of human authors who were writing in particular times and places with particular points to make and visions to advance. When the Gospel authors implicated, the Jews in Jesus' passion, they did not mean all Jewish people then alive, much less those yet unborn. The writers had a very specific group in mind, the Temple elite, who believed that Jesus might provoke Pilate."

The Gospels Are Historical

Now I really don't disagree with the latter part of what Meacham had to say here, it is true that the people who wrote the Gospels were not attempting to indict the Jewish race. I would not go so far as he goes to say, that they are not historical. The truth is, they are as historical as any archaeological monument you can find out in the desert. For some strange reason people want to believe things engraved in stone are more historical than things written on parchment or papyrus, but the fact of the matter is, we have four important historical artifacts about the events surrounding Jesus' death. They are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Did The Roman Empire Kill Jesus?

Later Meacham will say, "Gibson set out to stick to the Gospels but has made virtually no nod to the critical analysis or context. As an artist, of course, he has right to make any movie he wants, and many audiences will find the story vivid, and familiar. The film Gibson has made, however

is reviving an ancient and divisive argument, who really killed Jesus? As a matter of history, the Roman Empire did." End of quotation.

Now is that the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Was it merely that the Roman empire killed Jesus? We will talk about that in just a moment.

Continuing to quote, "To take the film's account of the passion literally will give most audiences a misleading picture of what probably happened in those epical hours so long ago. The Jewish priests and their followers are the villains, demanding the death of Jesus again and again. Pilate is a malleable governor forced into handing down the death sentence."

Well, we will have to make up our own minds about whether Pilate is pictured as a malleable governor in handing down the death sentence, but in fact there were villains in the biblical account and you have to consider this biblical account as a historical artifact even if you want to argue with it.

Continuing to quote, "In fact, in the age of Roman domination only Rome crucified. The crime was sedition not blasphemy, a civil crime, not a religious one. The two men who were killed along with Jesus are identified in some translations as thieves, but the word can also mean, insurgents, supporting the idea that crucifixion was a political weapon, used to send a message to those still living, beware of revolution or riot, or Rome will do this to you too. The two earliest and most reliable extra biblical references to Jesus, those of the historians Josephus and Tacitus say that, "Jesus was executed by Pilate."

Well, so does the Bible.

Pontius Pilate

Continuing to quote, "The Roman Prefect was Pilate, political superior, and he controlled when the Jewish priests could wear their vestments and thus conduct Jewish rights in the temple."

Well 'political superior' is one way of putting it. He was an occupying military power, is another.

Continuing to quote, "Pilate was not the humane figure Gibson depicts, according to Philo of Alexandria, the Prefect was, quote "inflexible, stubborn and of cruel disposition" end quote, and known to execute troublemakers without trial."

Now none of this needs to conflict with the biblical account, even tyrants have some sense of right and wrong. It is clear from the account that Pilate did not see Jesus as a problem apart from the priests. It was not the Romans who arrested Jesus and accused Him.

The Gospels Are Valid Historical Artifacts

Maybe we should take a look at the record. I consider the four Gospel accounts to be valid historical artifacts. They are as important as any inscription in stone would be and they have to be dealt with.

Now personally, I consider them the inspired word of God. The fellow writing this article hasn't come to that point yet. How do you present the Gospels to someone who hasn't seen them as inspired Scripture? Well they are four separate documents. They are testimony. They are affidavits. They are depositions and they are independent of one another. Scholars are now about as close to agreement as scholars ever become that these are all first century documents.

You see some of the problem arises because some people think that the documents, we call Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were actually developed by the church and not written by those gentlemen at all. Scholarship has pretty well put that to bed.

Motive, Means and Opportunity

Now you are the jury and you have to read the testimony and must decide what to believe. When you look at a crime and you try to judge guilt or innocence, there are three major themes you're going to follow. They are motive, means, and opportunity.

Motive

Who had a motive for the killing of Jesus?

Let's bring John into the witness box and ask him. His testimony is found in John chapter 5 verse 13. Jesus has healed a poor man. The man He healed didn't even know who Jesus was. Jesus comes along and says, "Take up your bed (mat) and walk." The man picks up his bed and walks so excited that he doesn't realize that Jesus left.

It says in verse 13, "And he that was healed did not know who healed him for Jesus had slipped away from the crowd. {14} Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Look, you are made whole, sin no more, lest a worst thing come unto you." {15} The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, who had made him whole."

Okay, why is this a problem? Well it is a problem because of what Jesus did on the Sabbath day.

The account continues, in verse 16, "Therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the Sabbath day."

The reason given was religious but plainly these men wanted Jesus dead, but the fact of the matter is, their reasons for wanting Him dead, weren't because He healed a man and it wasn't even because he healed the man on the Sabbath day, as we're going to see.

Now how many times have you seen courtroom dramas that present as evidence, statements made by the defendant that he wanted the victim dead. It's admissible, in other words, if you brought three witnesses up here and all of them heard this fellow say, "I'll kill you. I want to get rid of you. I want to see you dead." If they say this, this goes to motive.

Who were these people who wanted Jesus dead? Were they Romans? Well, hardly. Were they the Jewish people? Of course not, but they were Jews.

Meacham acknowledges in his article, that "The Temple elite wanted Jesus dead." I call them, the Jewish religious establishment. You can take your choice. There is one truth that you will have to agree with me on, they weren't Romans.

Was their plot known? Were people aware of this so they could testify to it?

John's testimony continues in John seven verse 25, "Then said some of them of Jerusalem about Jesus, "Isn't this He whom they seek to kill? {26} But, he speaks boldly, and they say nothing to him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is the very Christ?"

Look at this testimony. They understood what they were dealing with here. They knew these people wanted Jesus dead.

John continues with his testimony, chapter 11 verse 47, "Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees in a council, and said, "What are we going to do about Jesus? He is doing many miracles."

Okay, who is this? Who are these people who are worried about Jesus? It is the chief priests. It is the Pharisees. What is it that they are really concerned about?

Continuing in John 11 verse 47, "Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees in a counsel and said, "What are we going to do? This man is doing many miracles. {48} If we let him alone, all men will believe on him and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.""

You want a motive? Now we have one, and the motive is political. Their concern over Jesus' healing of some poor guy on the Sabbath day, was nothing more than a cover-up for their own concern about their power and their position. We are not talking about the Jewish people, we are talking only about the religious establishment of the time.

"One of them," {49} "named Caiaphas, who was the high priest that same year, said, "You know nothing at all, {50} Nor consider that it's expedient for us that one man should die for the people and the whole nation perish not." {51} He spoke this not of himself, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation, {52} but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. {53} Then from that day forth, they took counsel together to put him to death."

Who had a motive for the death of Jesus? Well, Meacham said it, "The high priest and the Temple elite." And I ask, "Are there any Romans in this picture?" Answer: No! So we have established motive.

Opportunity

What about opportunity? Let's call Matthew to the stand. Matthew chapter 26, verse three. He says, "Then assembled the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, to the palace of the high priest, named Caiaphas, {4} And they consulted that they might take Jesus

Christ subtly, and kill him. {5} But they said, "Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people."

So now we're not talking about whether we are going to kill Him or not, now they are looking for the opportunity. They don't want to do it on the feast day, they have to find a better time to do it.

So, we have a conspiracy of the religious establishment to find an opportunity to kill Jesus. Now this is the separate testimony of Mark and Matthew. Are there any Romans involved in this conspiracy? No. We have no testimony to that effect.

Judas Iscariot

Now further on the subject of opportunity. Matthew 26, verse 14, "Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests, {15} And said to them, "What will you give me, if I will deliver him to you?" And they covenanted with him for 30 pieces of silver. {16} And from that time forward. He sought opportunity to betray Him."

So, who cut the deal? The priests. Who did they cut the deal with? Judas, one of Jesus' disciples. Was there ever any Romans involved in this at all? No, not one.

Matthew picks up the story a little later in verse 47 with Jesus and his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane and Jesus is speaking to His disciples, "And while he spoke, Judas, one of the twelve, came, with a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. {48} Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, "Whoever I kiss, that's him, arrest him and hold him fast." {49} He came to Jesus and said, "Hail, master, and kissed him." {50} And Jesus said, "Friend, why have you come?" Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took him."

Okay, let's not be misunderstood here. This is not an indictment of the Jewish people, but it is an indictment of the Temple elite, the religious establishment. So far, neither Pilate, nor any Roman was involved in this conspiracy to kill Jesus.

Jesus' Trial

Matthew then turns to the question of Jesus' trial. You'll find this in Matthew 26 and verse 57, "They that laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. {58} Peter followed a long way off. {59} The chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; {60} But found none: though several false witnesses came, but they could not find any as a reliable witness. At the last came two false witnesses, {61} And said, This fellow said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and build it in three days.""

Boy, that is not much, is it? In fact, Jesus did say something not very far different from that. The problem was that with everybody they brought in there, they had simply not been able to establish any kind of guilt.

I Adjure You By The Living God

Continuing in Matthew 26 verse 62 Caiaphas, "The high priest arose and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to say anything? What is it that these people are saying against you? {63} Jesus sat there and said absolutely nothing. The high priest answered and said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you be the Christ, the Son of God.""

Now what the high priest here was doing was invoking the law of God which required that once someone was adjured to tell the truth, they had to do so, because if they didn't, there was a penalty of perjury that was attached to it.

"And the high priest asked, "Tell us, are you the Christ, the Son of God?" {64} "Jesus said, "You said, nevertheless hereafter, you shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven." {65} And the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy, what further need have we of witnesses? Behold, now you have heard his blasphemy." {66} "What do you think?" They answered and said, "He is guilty of death." {67} So they spit in his face, and buffeted him, and others smote him with the palms of their hands, {68} Saying, "Prophecy to us Christ, who smote you?"

Question, where was Jesus tried and convicted on the charge of blasphemy, whether it was true or not? Before Pilate, or before the high priest? Before the Romans or before the Temple elite? Well, that's clear isn't it?

Means

So, we have established who had the motive. We have established who created the opportunity. The problem now is the means. For some reason the leaders did not want to stone Jesus, which was the usual penalty for blasphemy. I'm not sure if they knew why they didn't want to stone Jesus.

Continuing in Matthew 27 verse 1, "When the morning was come, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. {2} And when they had bound him, they led him away, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor."

Why? Why did they take this step? Why didn't they stone Him? Sure, it is not lawful for them under Roman law to put people to death, but nevertheless that didn't stop them from killing Stephen with stoning when they said he blasphemed (Acts 6:8-15). So, what's going on here?

Why did the Jews involve Pontius Pilate in this question?

They took Jesus to Pilate, and Pilate listened to all the charges and accusations, and verse 11, Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "Yes, it is as you say." {12} And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing."

And Pilate was absolutely astounded. He couldn't imagine why Jesus wouldn't reply.

Barabbas or Jesus

When the crowd had gathered, Matthew tells us in verse 17, "Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?" {18} For he knew that out of envy they had handed Jesus over to him."

Now this is fascinating, and not in the least bit surprising. Pilate may have been a cruel tyrant, but he wasn't stupid. He knew precisely what was going on, when the chief priests and the Temple elite brought Jesus before him. It did not take a rocket scientist to figure this out. He knew it was pure envy. And I think he thought that maybe if he went out to the crowd, the crowd would overrule the leaders and give him an excuse to let Jesus go. Because Pilate, cruel man though he was, wouldn't have minded in the least throwing this in the face of the Jewish leaders. About that time his wife came in and said, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man. I've suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

Verse 20, "But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed." Pilate when he saw that he was getting nowhere, and that an uproar was ensuing, took water and washed his hands in front of crowd and said, {24} "I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility." {25} Then all the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children." {26} He had Barabbas released, and had Jesus scourged, and handed Him over to be crucified."

Now of course this line, "Let his blood be on us and our children" is one that Mel Gibson removed from the movie because it is so inflammatory, but it is in the record, even though Matthew is the only one who recorded it.

Jon Meacham wrote, "Pilate was not the humane figure Gibson depicts." He said, "He was known to execute troublemakers even without a trial."

Frankly I see nothing in the historical record that conflicts in any material way with the story of Pilate found in the Gospels. Pilate knew that the Jews had delivered up Jesus for envy. He tried to let Jesus go, but politically, he could not.

Turning to John 19 let's see what he had to say about this. Verse 7, "The Jews answered Pilate, "We have a law and by our law Jesus ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God." {8} When Pilate heard that saying, he was more afraid, {9} And he went into the judgment hall, and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. {10} Pilate said, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" {11} Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore, he who delivered me unto you has the greater sin." {12} From then on, Pilate tried to release Jesus, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar."

Wow, what a thing to say.

"Pilate brought Jesus out," {14} "And He said to the Jews, "Behold your King." {15} But they cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him" and Pilate said, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king, but Caesar.""

We Have No King, But Caesar

What a devastating thing for them to say. They said, "We have no King, but Caesar." I guess they had forgotten a pivotal point in their history, when they demanded a king from God, and He said, "They have not rejected you Samuel, they have rejected me that I should not rule over them" (1 Samuel 8:7).

The rejection of God as their King is a steady thing in the history of Israel, as they keep turning to other rulers.

Continuing in John 19 verse 16, "Then Pilate delivered Jesus to be crucified. And they took Jesus and led him away."

Now when you see the movie, you can judge for yourself, by all accounts the problem is not with the movie, it is with the Bible, but the Bible does not place the blame on any group of people or any race of people.

John says in chapter 12 verse 31, ""Now is the judgment of this world. Now shall the prince of this world be cast out. {32} And I, if I the lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." {33} This he said, signifying what death He should die."

Why Jesus Was Not Stoned

The Jews were not allowed to stone Jesus for at least two reasons. One, it was not the death God intended. Two, the guilt was not to be laid on the Jews alone. Who then is responsible?

Who Killed Jesus?

When Jon Meacham in his article about the movie asked the question, "Who really killed Jesus? He answered, "As a matter of history, the Roman empire did." He was only half right. It is true, that Pilate gave the judgment, and the Roman soldiers drove the nails in Jesus' hands and feet and erected his cross between heaven and earth and a Roman soldier stuck a spear into Jesus' side.

Okay, we know all that, but who delivered Him? Who accused him? Who condemned him to death in the story? The truth is, the question of who's to blame for the death of Jesus, was answered a long time ago in the Hebrew Scriptures in Isaiah chapter 53 verse three. "He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, we hid as it were our faces from him, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. {4} Surely, he has borne our pain, and carried our sickness. Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted."

I guess we thought that God did all this to him completely apart from us, but the prophet replies, {5} "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement

of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed. {6} All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The question is as clear as crystal. It wasn't the Jewish people. It wasn't the Roman empire. It was God who laid upon Jesus the sins of all mankind and then required Him to die (John 3:16).

Who Killed Jesus? We did through the sins that we have committed.

As John the Baptist said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What are your thoughts about Meacham's statement about the Bible?
2. Do you consider the Gospels as very historically accurate?
3. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's point that scholars are pretty much in agreement that the Gospels are first century documents, and this point is one thing we can use when talking to someone who doesn't believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God?
4. What other ways can someone explain the authenticity of the Gospels to non-believers?
5. Who do you think had more motive to kill Jesus?
6. Do you agree that the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' time wanted to kill Jesus for political reasons?
7. Why do you think the priests didn't want to stone Jesus for blasphemy?
8. Have you ever seen Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Jesus Christ*?
9. If you have what are your thoughts about it?
10. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's answer to "Who killed Jesus?"

