

# Jesus's Final Moments

## A DRAMATIC NEW ACCOUNT OF THE FATEFUL CHAIN OF EVENTS THAT LED TO THE CRUCIFIXION

**W**hat happened to Jesus during his last hours, and why did his enemies want to kill him? Here, in an interview with U.S. News, James Tabor, chair and professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte and author of *The Jesus Dynasty*, outlines a complex scenario of events before and after the Crucifixion, based on years of research and archaeological work in Israel.

### What do we know about the final week of Jesus's life?

We actually know the most about the last days. If you look at our Gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they devote about a third of their space to Jesus's final week. And they repeat one another quite a bit. But each one also includes different details. Historians have carefully gone through the Gospels and sifted them. And though we're not all agreed about what was myth and what was tradition and what was history, almost all of us would agree that he was brought before Pontius Pilate and that he was accused of some kind of sedition.

He was not a Roman citizen. He was a Jew, so he could be executed by crucifixion, which was reserved for that sort of criminal—meaning that if he were a Roman citizen or had any wealth or status, he could have bought his way out of this fate. We think he probably had divided support among the people; enough leaders were against him to bring him up before Pontius Pilate. But certainly not all the people were against him, and certainly not the crowds.

The evidence we get in all the Gospels is that he was a healer and an exorcist. He spoke for the poor and disenfranchised, for women, and for people who had less political or religious power in the society. And so that made him a popular figure.

He was not the only one the Romans killed or who was accused of sedition or causing unrest. We have records of a dozen or so other "Messianic" types who were killed similarly in this period by the Roman authorities. He preached about freedom and a new social, economic, and political order. But in an occupied country, when you start talking about "Why shouldn't slaves be equal to their masters and women be equal to men, and shouldn't the poor have as much as the wealthy?" these are revolutionary ideas. He apparently did say these kinds of things. Scholars are divided over whether he was an activist or a pacifist like Gandhi. He was probably more like Gandhi, but he was not willing to just sit still and do nothing, and he believed that God was on his side and would intervene, even with miracles.

### Jesus came to Jerusalem every year for the feast of Passover. What was different this time?

All through his life as a Jew, Jesus would have gone up to Jerusalem two or three times a year for the Jewish festivals. But the confrontation didn't come until Jesus was around 30 years old, in the year A.D. 30, when things were beginning to heat up. Herod Antipas—the local ruler under the Romans in the north, in Galilee, where Jesus was from—had had John the Baptist arrested and beheaded a year or so before. A Jewish historian named Josephus, our only first-century Jewish source, says that Herod did this because John had become so popular with the people that Herod feared he might spark a revolt. Now, in the Gospels, it says it was because John accused Herod of committing adultery by marrying Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Probably both are true. John comes across in the

"JESUS SPOKE FOR THE POOR AND DISENFRANCHISED, FOR WOMEN, AND FOR PEOPLE WHO HAD LESS POWER."

Gospels as this fiery preacher who denounces people for their sins no matter who they are.

John the Baptist is our entree into Jesus. He's preaching a message, telling people who have two coats to share with one who has none—that sort of thing. And Jesus joins his movement. Even though Jesus becomes very great later, and John is now almost forgotten, at the time of Jesus, it's completely opposite: John is the greatest, and Jesus is a follower. When John is brutally executed by the king, Jesus takes over the leadership of the movement.

We just can't underestimate the impact of John's death. The Gospels say that when Herod, who is also in Jerusalem for Passover, hears about Jesus, he thinks at first that John has been resurrected, implying that Jesus's way of preaching and his activities are similar to those of John. Like John, Jesus talks about economic redistribution of wealth, accepting the poor and the sinners and the prostitutes and women as equals. The Stoic philosophers also preached this kind of egalitarianism. But when you add the potential for a revolt, that's when it gets dangerous.

### Why did Herod ask to see Jesus?

Jesus is brought in the early morning before Pontius Pilate, who hears that he is a Galilean and sends him to Herod on the other side of the palace complex. Herod, the murderer of Jesus's teacher,

JUDGMENT.  
Pontius Pilate  
questions Jesus  
before ordering  
his crucifixion.

is not able to make him speak, though he questions him at length. So he sends him back to Pilate.

Jesus doesn't talk a lot with Pilate. It sounds like they were trying to get him to admit he was a king, so they could execute him for sedition. And I think the Crucifixion itself is the best historical argument for the charge of sedition—they were worried that he might be capable of raising a revolt.

Josephus says that the Roman-appointed rulers Herod, Herod Antipas, and Archelaus all feared that a native ruler would arise, because they themselves could not claim the lineage of David. Later, people who, like Jesus, were of the lineage of David were



**SAD GOODBYE.** Mary, Jesus's mother, gives him a last kiss.

often hunted down and arrested. But in Jesus's time, this was not normally the case unless you stuck your neck out.

**Who do scholars think was responsible for Jesus's death?**

It's proper to say the Romans killed Jesus, but it's become a very sensitive issue because of later anti-Semitism. In the Gospel of Matthew, he pictures a crowd led by the high priests yelling and screaming for his blood. Pilate says, "What has he done?" and the crowd says, "Let his blood be on our hands and on the hands of our children." It's not in the other Gospels; it's not in Q, a now lost, early text on which two of our Gospels, Matthew and Luke, are based. It's only in Matthew. He makes a kind of blanket charge against Jews in general. So the original "blood libel" charge that later gets expanded into all kinds of anti-Semitism starts with Matthew. Subsequent scholars say that the Romans arrested Jesus. So, because of that sensitivity, scholars have backed off, saying that the Jews didn't have anything to do with his death. But that's going too far.

According to all of our records, Jesus had his enemies. And the enemies of Jesus were predominantly Sadducees and some conservative Pharisees. They were the priestly groups, and they loved the status quo because it was so comfortable for them. It was an economic enterprise, running the religion of Judaism. There is evidence that some were very rich: In the Jewish quarter in Jerusalem today you can see the excavations of a lavish priestly mansion.

So here comes this Galilean upstart who can attract thousands. He stops the commerce in the Temple for an entire day, about a week before his death. Whether it is a violent move to take over or a prophetic pantomime, an echo of Jeremiah, he gets the priestly groups pretty angry by denouncing their way of life. A very credible story is that Jewish enemies of Jesus who have influence bring him to the attention of Roman authorities and that the Romans put him to death.

**Wasn't Jesus brought before Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, to be judged?**

That's the tradition, and it is in all of our sources. Caiaphas is the son-in-law of a former high priest, Annas, who had half a dozen sons who all served as high priests. It's very much a Mafia kind of priesthood. In the Gospel of John, Annas is present at the trial of Jesus, and Caiaphas is doing whatever his father-in-law tells him to do.

One reason we know the Jews were divided is that in later Talmudic passages in rabbinic writings 200 to 300 years after Jesus—written by the Pharisees who survived to create Judaism as we know it today—they curse the house of Caiaphas, saying that its members beat people with sticks and practiced extortion.

There is another side of Judaism in Jesus's day. We call it the Hillel side, because of the great Rabbi Hillel. Everything we know about him is similar to Jesus, but he's not Messianic and political. He is teaching peace and justice and talks about treating fellow human beings correctly. His ideas are liberal and enlightened. His teachings are akin to Jesus's on the ethical side: You look at human need and what the purpose of a commandment is, rather than simply putting a burden on people and condemning them when they don't live up to it.

Jesus may have had a few enemies among the Pharisees, but, by and large, it would have been the Sadducee priests who opposed him. These camps of rabbis under Hillel and Shammai—who were all part of the generation before Jesus—were the rabbis in charge when Jesus was growing up, and they denounced each other all the time.

So we put it all together, from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Talmud, the Mishnah, the Gospels: The picture we get is that the culture was divided, like today, into liberal and conservative factions. They screamed and denounced one other. I call them spitting cousins, though often, in times of stress, they

actually would kill one another. When we see this type of polemics, it needs to be put in its historical context. It says nothing about anti-Semitism, or that Christians hated Jews. And Jesus, who was himself a Jew, certainly didn't hate other Jews or condemn Jews as a whole. You cannot take Matthew or any other Gospel as straight history. That's a big mistake.

**What do you think happened after the Crucifixion?**

I have to approach all of this as a historian. What I would offer is the following scenario: Jesus is taken down hastily from the cross, because the Passover is that evening, and Jewish law forbids burying the body on Passover, but also says it has to be buried within 24 to 48 hours. There's no time that afternoon for a proper burial, and so he is put hastily in an unfinished tomb near the cross, which is then sealed with a rock. Let's call this a temporary emergency burial of convenience. Then, at the earliest possible moment after Passover has ended the next day, those in charge of the burial—Joseph of Arimathea, assisted by Nicodemus and maybe members of Jesus's family—take his body and rebury it permanently, according to the rites of Jewish burial, in a second tomb.

What happens next, we don't know because the theology and faith get mixed up with the history. But we do have in our earliest accounts in the Gospel of Mark that the women closest to Jesus—his mother, his sister, and his companion, Mary Magdalene—go to the first tomb, the temporary one, very early in the morning, and they find it empty. Was an empty tomb part of the historical narrative? If you interview 10 scholars, you will get five saying yes and five saying no. I'm of the half that says that there is probably a kernel of historical experience here—because Jesus's body was removed for permanent reburial.

What I don't think was happening was that there were people going around and saying, "I saw him," as a revived flesh-and-blood corpse. That comes later. The reason I say that is because there are no Resurrection appearances in Q or in Mark. If they were so well known and so widespread, how could Mark write a Gospel and not put them in? If you read the Gospels in chronological order, Mark has no appearances, Matthew has one to the disciples and one to Mary Magdalene, Luke has several, and John has the most, and these get more and more "physical," so that finally Jesus even eats with his disciples. What's happening is that you get this embellishment of legend and a magnification of the theology.

I think we have to picture a Christianity in which his followers are saying that Jesus's spirit lives on and that the movement has survived, and perhaps there are some psychic "sighting" experiences. I would give credit to James, Jesus's own brother and Mary's son, who takes over the leadership of the movement. In some traditions, he looks like Jesus. Some even call him "the twin." But people were

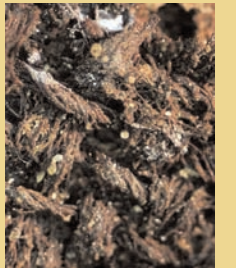
putting hope in the message, not the person, and they found ways to believe.

I think people probably did have sightings of Jesus after his death and that they felt a presence, but we can't sort all these out. Even Mary Magdalene felt that she had encountered him.

Resurrection is a Jewish idea. Jews have always said that God, who knows all people, will somehow raise the dead. But Jews have been maybe wiser than Christians, in that they leave the details to their God. Their concept of it does not necessitate a revived corpse walking around but rather the survival of the person in another state or realm. —Amy D. Bernstein

**IS TURIN'S SHROUD A FAKE?**

**S**uddenly, there is a new wrinkle in the age-old debate about whether the Shroud of Turin, the Roman Catholic Church's most revered holy relic, actually dates back to the time of Jesus. In December 2009, archaeologists revealed that a shroud discovered in Jerusalem in 2000 was made in the first half of the first century A.D.—and is the only one known to have survived from that era. "In all of the approximately 1,000 tombs from the first century A.D. which have been excavated around Jerusalem, not one fragment of a shroud had been found" before this one, says Shimon Gibson, the excavation director who was among those who witnessed the find during a dig at a cemetery for Jerusalem's elite and priestly classes. The shroud has been definitively dated using radiocarbon techniques, and it has a two-way weave that is far less complicated than the type of weaving used for the Turin shroud, which experts say did not come into practice until a later period.



**LEPER'S THREADS.** The weave, up close

Archaeologists noticed a plaster-sealed tomb looted by grave robbers and found the shroud, which had been left behind as worthless. What the thieves didn't know was how precious this shroud was to historical research. High humidity levels in Jerusalem tombs have destroyed most textiles that managed to survive ritual Jewish burial practices from the first century. Those decreed that the bones of a dead person be collected at the end of a year and deposited in an ossuary, or bone box, and the shroud discarded.

In this particular case, however, the body was left undisturbed. The reason? DNA tests on samples recovered from the dead man's bones showed that he suffered from tuberculosis and leprosy, so, to avoid contamination, his tomb was permanently sealed after his burial.

In a bit of historical irony, the leper's tomb was next to that of Annas, the Jewish high priest who, with his son-in-law, Caiaphas, was present at the trial of Jesus and most likely was among those who pushed for his execution. —Amy D. Bernstein