



NBC Dateline and Jesus

Scholars explore history behind famous story

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• The last days of Jesus

Dateline seeks out some of the world's most respected scholars—believers and non-believers—to find out what they think happened almost 2,000 years ago. NBC's Stone Phillips reports.

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Dateline special report: The last days of Jesus

Scholars explore history behind famous story

By Stone Phillips

NBC News

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For 5,000 years, the city of Jerusalem has stood witness to the rise and fall of civilizations, the birth of great religions and the death of a man who

changed the world: Jesus of Nazareth. Gospel accounts of his crucifixion are the inspiration for Mel Gibson's new film, "The Passion of the Christ." Scheduled for release on Feb. 26, the film has already sparked enormous controversy for how it portrays Jesus' death.

For some there is no controversy, the gospels are literal truth. For others, what happened isn't so clear. So, we decided to seek out some of the world's most respected scholars—believers and non-believers—to find out what they think happened almost 2,000 years ago. We're not exploring the mysteries of faith, but the mysteries of history, to piece together the last days and moments of Jesus' life.



Piecing together what happened that week is a task that has puzzled scholars for centuries. The evidence is scarce, with different and sometimes contradictory books of the Christian gospel and a few lines penned by ancient historians. So what forces triggered Jesus' death? Who was ultimately responsible? Our search begins five days before the crucifixion, on a Sunday in about the year 30, when the gospels say Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover.

Paula Fredriksen, Aurelio Professor of Scripture, Boston University:

"One of the lovely things about the gospel stories of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem for his last Passover is the tradition of the triumphal entry. Jesus is danced into the city by pilgrims that are singing about the coming kingdom of God."

It's impossible to know how many pilgrims turned out that day—but when Jesus entered the city, the gospels say he received a hero's welcome—a kind of ancient ticker-tape parade:

Craig A. Evans, Payzant Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Acadia Divinity College: "I see people lining the roadway leading into

Jerusalem. They're waving the branches, showing that they believe in Jesus. He is smarter than the scribes. And he's the greatest. And so, they're all excited."

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Craig Evans is Payzant Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Acadia Divinity College, Nova Scotia, Canada. He is the author or editor of more than 30 books on the New Testament and its Jewish backgrounds. Evans has a specialty in the Dead Sea Scrolls. He believes the scrolls shore up the viewpoint that the Bible is accurate, because they show there is continuity between the Bible of today and the Bible of Jesus' time. Over the past decade, Evans has been an outspoken critic of the Jesus Seminar, a group of Jesus scholars who have questioned the historical reliability of the Gospels. In 1996, Evans and other scholars published a collection of essays, *Jesus Under Fire*, an attempt to debunk many of the Seminar's conclusions. Evans is a practicing Baptist.

Jesus was a Jewish preacher from a small town in rural Galilee, an area some say was known for its political activism. And for at least a year, the gospels say, he'd been traveling the countryside, reaching out to the common people, including the outcasts, the unpopular and downtrodden of his time.

Evans: "He had this power and this charisma about him that had never been seen or experienced before."

Stone Phillips: "How big was his following?"

Evans: "Well, we don't know for sure. Certainly hundreds at any given time in his ministry and public activities. He was a phenomenon."

Scholars believe that crowds were drawn by reports of miraculous healings—and that many came to see him as the long-promised savior who would usher in something called the Kingdom of God.

Evans: "They think he's the Lord's savior for the Jewish people. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, and by that he meant the powerful presence of and rule of God."

Today, most Christians tend to think of that kingdom as a kind of spiritual or heavenly realm, but scholars say that that a 1st Century Jew like Jesus may have had something far more worldly in mind.

Evans: "He's talking about power and privilege, recognition, authority. And he's suggesting a major shake-up in the society of his time. And I think he meant by that, there would be big changes in Israel, and eventually big changes throughout the world."

Phillips: "How provocative was that message?"

Evans: "Well, very provocative."

Marcus Borg, Hundere Professor of Religion, Oregon State University:

"There were other kingdoms. There was the Kingdom of Herod, the Kingdom of Caesar. Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom of God is what life on earth would be like if God were king, and those other guys weren't."

Phillips: "So there's a political dimension to what he's talking about."

Borg: "Very much so."

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Marcus J. Borg holds the Hundere Chair in Religion and Culture in the Philosophy Department at Oregon State University. Nationally and internationally known in both academic and church circles as a biblical and Jesus scholar, he is the author of 12 books, including *Jesus: A New Vision* (1987) and the best-seller *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994). Described by The New York Times as "a leading figure in his generation of Jesus scholars," he has appeared on the Today Show, Newshour, Primetime, and NPR. His doctor's degree is from Oxford University.

For those who gathered to hear Jesus speak that week it would have been a message of hope, a promise of liberation from sickness, poverty and oppression. But scholars agree that not everyone who heard Jesus preach would have been pleased about the changes he pledged or the devotion he inspired. And as Jesus entered Jerusalem along this valley in the east, another man was arriving from the west. His name was Pontius Pilate.

At the time, the Jewish people were living under the yoke of the Roman Empire, a vast imperial territory that stretched from what is now Scotland to Saudi Arabia. Pilate was the Roman prefect, or governor, appointed to collect taxes and maintain order in the remote outpost of Judea.

Borg: "His job depended upon his keeping peace in that province. So any kind of popular movement that seemed to threaten the peacefulness and stability of Judea would've been seen by Pilate as a threat."

Pilate was a career military man and member of the Roman aristocracy. On most days he resided at his seaside retreat in the town of Caesarea. But on special occasions like Passover he made the 40-mile march to Jerusalem to

keep an eye on the crowds who would flock to worship and offer sacrifices at the Temple.

Fredriksen: "Pilate had to leave one of the loveliest seaside resorts in the eastern Mediterranean and go to a madhouse house of somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 extra people, and stay there for about two-and-a-half weeks while everybody came, did their stuff in the Temple, and then left."

Phillips: "What kind of mood would Pilate have been in on an occasion like this?"

Fredriksen: "My guess would be that Pilate was in a bad mood before he even got to town. I would be."

And scholars trying to piece together what happened that week say that Pilate's mood was sure to get even worse when word came back that a Jewish preacher was in the city stirring up crowds with promises about any Kingdom of God.

John Dominic Crossan, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, DePaul University: "The Kingdom of God is picking the one term that will make the Romans listen. They considered themselves the Kingdom of God. Theirs was the power and the glory, 25 legions or so, too. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, he is saying as clearly as is possible in the 1st Century, 'In your face, Caesar.'"

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John Dominic Crossan is retired Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, DePaul University, Chicago. He has written 20 books on the historical Jesus in the last 30 years, four of which have become national religious bestsellers: *The Historical Jesus* (1991), *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994), *Who Killed Jesus* (1995), and *The Birth of Christianity* (1998). After 20 years in a Roman Catholic religious order, Crossan left to teach and get married. He vaulted to public attention as the co-chair of the Jesus Seminar, a group that has tried to prove the truthfulness of parts of the Bible. This collection of academics votes with beads (red for "yes," pink for "probably reliable," gray for "possible but unreliable," and black for "improbable") on whether Jesus said or did something.

Phillips: "Was Jesus meek and mild, as we view him through the scripture?"

Crossan: "Not at all. To speak of the Kingdom of God, and to speak of what God wants for the world, is not meek and mild. If he wanted to be meek and mild, he'd have stayed home and kept his mouth shut."

Phillips: "Was this a direct challenge to Roman authority?"

Crossan: "It was the most direct challenge possible. That is an attack, that is a frontal attack."

And on that weekend, Pilate wouldn't have been the only one keeping tabs on the preacher from Galilee... Inside the Temple, scholars believe that another powerful man would have been keeping watch, as well.

Evans: "I am sure Caiaphas heard the day Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. And Caiaphas had the most to lose."

Joseph Caiaphas was the high priest of the Jewish Temple, an aristocrat appointed by Rome who presided over everything from religious laws to some criminal trials. He was the most powerful man in Jerusalem and scholars agree the person whom Pilate would have held responsible if anything went wrong that Passover.

Evans: "He's been the high priest for years. He's planning on being the high priest for many more years to come. And if he can't control what is happening in Jerusalem, then there's a good chance the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, is going to remove him from office. So he has a lot to be worried about."

And scholars say anyone entering the city with the kind of fanfare Jesus attracted was sure to capture Caiaphas' attention.

Evans: "So he sends out his emissaries to ask questions, to do reconnaissance, and also to find out what kind of following does he have? What am I dealing with here?"

By Monday, all three men—Jesus, Pilate and Caiaphas—would have been in the city. And as Jesus made his way to the Temple in the heart of Jerusalem, the countdown to his death four days later had begun.

After Jesus arrived in Jerusalem that Passover, the gospels say he made his way to the Temple, a grand, sprawling compound that was the political heart of the city and the most sacred place in the Jewish world.

Phillips: "And this would have been bustling with people?"

Evans: "Bustling with people, activity. People preparing for the Passover. Purchasing lambs, getting ready for the Passover sacrifice. There would be excitement in the air."

Fredriksen: "It's a holiday, which means that there is mostly unstructured time. People don't have laptops. They can't be doing their work while they're on vacation. They're just there. So, there's a concentrated effort to keep sanitation, food, water, crowd circulation, everything, as quiet as possible."

Phillips: "It's New Year's Eve in Times Square?"

Fredriksen: "It's New Year's Eve in Times Square for two and a half weeks without modern sanitation."

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Paula Fredriksen is William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture at Boston University. She is author of *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (1999), a historical study of the last twelve hours of Jesus' life, as well as *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (1988). While many New Testament scholars are theologians, ministers, or priests, Paula Fredriksen is none of the above. As an expert in both Judaism and early Christianity, Fredriksen thinks that the Gospels are not history, but were essentially advertisements for various competing Jewish sects in the first century. Fredriksen has come under fire from evangelical Christians who, she believes, see history as an enemy of piety. Fredriksen has described herself as an Italian, pre-Vatican II Catholic, convert to Orthodox Judaism.

There would have been excitement in the air, but tension as well. The festival commemorated the Jews liberation from slavery in Egypt, and now the people were subjects of another imperial power, Rome. And so as the festival began, it is believed that hundreds of Pontius Pilate's troops marched into the city to work on crowd control.

Crossan: "Anything could cause a riot. Anything could cause a revolution. People were crowded together. A stampede, a riot would be very dangerous."

Joseph Caiaphas, the Temple's High Priest, would have also had good reason to be on alert. A Passover riot in Jerusalem 30 years earlier had left as many as 3,000 Jews dead in a Roman slaughter.

Fredriksen: If any kind of turmoil breaks out internally in the country, the high priest loses his job and the prefect loses his job. But the high priest has an added incentive to keep things peaceful that the Roman prefect doesn't. The people he's trying to keep peaceful are his own people."

With so much at stake, some scholars have suggested that the men may have struck an informal agreement about how to handle anything—or anyone—that caused trouble during Passover.

Crossan: "I would say that Passover was zero toleration time for anything that could disturb the peace. You could imagine standing orders: 'Anyone moves, crucify him as a warning.'"

Piecing together precisely what Jesus did that week is, of course, impossible. First Century historians wrote only a few lines about Jesus. The Gospels of Mark, Luke, Matthew and John, which are read and regarded as sacred by millions, tell us more, but when scholars try to use the books historically, problems emerge. The writers sometimes disagree, and the earliest gospel was written at least 30 years after Jesus' death by believers trying to spread the news about their new religion, Christianity.

Crossan: It's not that anyone is telling a lie. They are writing gospel. If you read a gospel as giving you straight history you are denying what it claims to be, namely good news. And if we were to confront them and say, well, that's not history, they say, 'I never said I was writing history. That's your problem. I'm writing gospel.'

Some of the scholars we spoke with, like Bishop Tom Wright and Craig Evans, see the gospels as credible—if incomplete—snapshots of history. Others, like Dominic Crossan and Paula Fredricksen, view the gospel accounts more skeptically. What are Jesus scholars to do? Well, they take the gospels and compare them to each other, and other things they know about, like archeology, customs, and law of the day—and they guess.

Bishop Nicholas Thomas Wright, Bishop of Durham: "For us as historians, the question is how plausible is this? Can we rely on these sources? Does the story make sense? Now, I believe the story does make sense."

That brings us back to Passover, where as Roman soldiers and temple police stood guard, the gospels say Jesus entered the Temple and began to preach. And from the start, it was not the kind of lesson that a Roman prefect or a Temple priest would be eager to hear.

Evans: "Jesus is in and out of the Temple precincts daily, teaching. And his teaching became increasingly threatening and provocative as he began to observe things that I think he didn't like."

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Nicholas Thomas Wright is the Bishop of Durham, England. He is the author of over thirty books, including *Jesus and the Victory of God* and *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, as well as the "Everyone" series of guides to the New Testament. He is one of the most important voices within orthodox evangelical Christian thought, known for his conservative views and traditional approach to the Bible. He takes the Gospel writers largely at their word but bolsters their accounts with historical and sociological evidence. He has said that "authentic Christianity has nothing to fear from history."

The gospels say that Jesus criticized the way the ruling priests were handling the Temple and the Jewish pilgrims who went there to worship. Such criticism was not unusual in that day and it may have touched a nerve with many of Jesus' followers.

Evans: "He joined in with a wider criticism of the ruling priests as insensitive to the needs of the poor, as negligent in their duties, living like aristocrats."

Phillips: "He's an anti-elitist?"

Evans: "Oh sure he is."

Phillips: "And his message was?"

Evans: "Well, there is going to be change. And you either cooperate with the change and benefit from it, or you stand in the way and get trampled."

On Sunday or Monday, three of the gospels say Jesus came to the outer court of the Temple, where stalls would have been bustling with merchants. Some would have been exchanging the pilgrims' money into Temple coins, others would be selling the pigeons and lambs that were part of the Passover sacrifice. And it was here, the gospels say, that Jesus did something that was sure to draw attention. He stormed into the court, overturned the tables, and cast the vendors out.

Wright: "We can imagine the coins scattering and bouncing all down the little cobbles in this very hilly, stony, small city of Jerusalem. We can imagine all sorts of animal noises and birds fluttering and general mayhem and chaos. And in the middle of it, Jesus saying, this is all completely inappropriate."

No other historical records corroborate the incident at the Temple, and one book of the gospel places it years earlier, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Whenever it happened, it was an act of protest. But against what?

Crossan: "What he does is what somebody might do during the Vietnam War if they went into a draft office and poured, say, blood on the files. It doesn't stop the war. It doesn't destroy the Pentagon. It doesn't even destroy the draft office. It's a symbolic gesture. So Jesus symbolically says, 'the Temple is going to be destroyed by God, because you're not practicing justice.'"

As Tuesday and Wednesday passed, the gospels say that Jesus' threats became even more explicit. As crowds flocked to hear him preach, he predicted that the stones of the Temple would be destroyed. For the Jewish leaders, those would have been provocative words, and for a Roman like Pilate, against the law.

Evans: "If you make a threat against a Temple in the Roman Empire, that is a serious offense. That's like today making a death threat, or making a terrorist threat of some sort. You're subject to immediate arrest."

For Caiaphas, the high priest, the threat would have been even more direct.

Evans: "And they want to shut him up. Like a contagion, it may spread. And pretty soon there could be a riot or a revolt."

Fredriksen: "This is guesswork, But I'm trying to make sense of the facts we have. Caiaphas wants to minimize Jewish bloodshed. It's his job. Pilate wants things running as smoothly as possible."

But three of the gospels say that Jesus was so popular that the priests were afraid to arrest him by day. So on Wednesday, two days before the crucifixion, as Jesus continued to preach, some scholars believe a decision was made to bring him in.

Fredriksen: "In my movie, Caiaphas knows how Pilate works. He's not terrifically successful at managing crowds. I think Caiaphas can tell that Pilate's getting agitated. And Caiaphas says, 'If we can help you get this guy, fast, will you call off your goons and not do a general action?' And Pilate says, 'You got 15 minutes.'"

On Thursday, the night before the crucifixion, three of the gospels say that Jesus shared a Last Supper with his disciples, then went to an olive grove on the outskirts of Jerusalem to pray. It is described as an evening of torment, where Jesus foresaw his own death.

Wright: "He seems to have gone through some kind of deep, personal, spiritual agony, which is still very moving when we read about it, because it reads as a deeply human story. And he's wrestling with vocation. He's staying there because he believes that he has been called to stay there and then to be picked up by the authorities and ultimately to die."

The only sources for what happened that night are the gospels but after the outbursts at the Temple, Jesus would have had good reason to believe he was in danger. He'd seen it happen before. When his mentor John the Baptist caused a stir in Galilee, where Jesus grew up, he'd been seized and executed.

Fredriksen: "Popular prophets tended to make ruling authorities nervous because a lot of sound government requires good crowd control. If I were in Jesus' line of work, John's execution would have made me nervous, too."

Crossan: "It wouldn't take prophetic knowledge or divine foreknowledge or anything. He would know exactly that what he was doing was dangerous. He knows it can happen to him."

Especially at Passover, when both Pilate and Caiaphas would have been eager to quash any hint of rebellion. On Thursday night, as Jesus was praying somewhere in this olive grove across the valley from the Temple, a posse of temple guards or perhaps Roman soldiers—the gospels offer different accounts—surrounded Jesus. And in what would become known as the greatest act of betrayal in history, a disciple named Judas approached and gave him a kiss.

Evans: “And then the arresting people know, ‘Oh, this is Jesus; this is our man’; and they grab him. And that was very important because these men who were sent to arrest Jesus, for all we know, had never seen him before. That’s what the betrayal is all about and that’s what made it so significant.”

Some scholars have questioned whether Judas was a real figure, or a kind of dramatic fictional device. He isn’t mentioned in any source outside the Bible, so scholars say it’s impossible to know for sure.

Crossan: “It’s a powerful story and I think it’s a powerful piece of fiction. It’s also possible. It’s possible that Judas was a real character. It’s one of the ones that you almost end up agnostic on. How can you decide that?”

After the ambush, the gospels say that Judas and the other disciples fled, and that Jesus was brought before a gathering of Jewish authorities to stand trial. Today, 20 centuries later, what did or didn’t happen in the hours that followed continues to generate passionate debate. Sorting out what happened in that trial and another one that followed, is enormously difficult.

In the books of Matthew and Mark, Jesus was tried by Caiaphas and a prestigious council of priests and elders, called the Sanhedrin. Witnesses were interrogated and a verdict rendered. But many scholars say that scenario is unlikely, that despite his popularity, a rural preacher like Jesus would not have rated such a high-level proceeding, especially not in the dead of night during a major religious festival like Passover.

Fredriksen: “Given that it’s Passover, it’s a lot like the Supreme Court meeting twice between nightfall and morning of Christmas.”

Phillips: “So that kind of trial seems highly unlikely to you, historically?”

Fredriksen: “It’s impossible as it’s depicted in the gospels historically. And it’s also inconsistent in the gospel traditions.”

So what did happen? A number of scholars have suggested a scaled down proceeding, a kind of preliminary hearing before Caiaphas.

Evans: “I think what happened was that Jesus was taken into custody and there was a hearing. His interrogators want to settle among themselves how

they want to proceed with Jesus. Do they want to hand him over to the Romans and if so, with what recommendation? Perhaps Jesus needs a good beating and be sent out of town. Perhaps he needs to be jailed for a while until Passover has ended. There are lots of options.”

But the gospels say that Caiaphas, who had to protect both his people and his job from any Roman crackdown, was looking for evidence that would convince Pilate to order an execution.

Crossan: “Caiaphas is what from some people’s point of view would be called a collaborator. His job is to collaborate with the Roman authority. I don’t find any reason to demonize him. That’s what he has to do. If he doesn’t he’ll be fired and somebody else will take his place.”

Evans: “I suspect that there were some in the Jewish Council who thought, ‘Hey, why are we ganging up on a fellow Jew? He’s from Galilee. Maybe he has some ideas we don’t agree with, but why are we persecuting him? You have to convince us, Caiaphas, that this man is a threat.’”

Phillips: “And how does he do that?”

Evans: “Finally he asks Jesus point blank, ‘Are you the messiah and the son of God?’ and Jesus says, ‘yes.’ That’s bad enough. If Jesus had just said yes, that probably would have done him in. But he goes on to say, ‘You will see the son of man,’ and he’s referring to himself that way, ‘seated at the right hand of power,’ meaning sitting on God’s throne next to God, ‘coming on judgment on you,’ if I may paraphrase. And when he said that, Jesus put his head in the noose.”

But even that version of events has skeptics. The book of John doesn't feature a Jewish trial, which leaves some scholars wondering whether it happened at all..

Fredriksen: “They arrest Jesus. He’s stopped very briefly for a very brief conversation before the father-in-law of the high priest, who asks him about his message and his followers. That’s it. No trial.”

Whether there was a trial, a brief conversation, or something in between, the gospels and nearly all scholars agree as dawn broke, Jesus was handed over to Pontius Pilate, the highest authority in the land, and the man whose decision would ultimately seal Jesus’ fate.

It was now Friday, the day of the crucifixion. For Jesus, it had been a long night of interrogation and imprisonment, and as dawn broke the gospels say that he was bound, led through the streets of Jerusalem and brought before Pontius Pilate.

Wright: "We're talking about Jesus looking pretty bedraggled and cutting a fairly sorry figure in amongst a Roman guard and then Pilate addressing him as very much I am the great Roman. I am the representative of the almighty Caesar and you are simply a little worm that has been brought before me."

Passover was always a tense week for the Roman prefect, and now Pilate had been called upon to pass judgment on a popular preacher whose teachings threatened to disrupt the festival.

Fredriksen: "He could put Jesus in prison over the weekend. He could have Jesus murdered any way he wants. He's the Roman prefect. He can do anything."

Wright: "Pilate has sent plenty of people to their deaths before and he will do it again. This is not a problem for him."

But first there were charges to consider:

Evans: "From a Jewish point of view, the crime is threatening the Temple and the Temple establishment. From the Roman point of view, that's serious enough. But when you add to that Jesus' authority for making these threats, namely he's the Lord's anointed, and that's where we get the word messiah, that means he's claiming to be the king of the Jews. well, that's a capital offense."

Like Caiaphas, Pilate would have been eager to crush any hint of rebellion, and the gospels report that he interrogated Jesus, asking if he was "King of the Jews." In some gospels Jesus answers evasively, in others, he is silent. And all four accounts say that Pilate began to harbor doubts about Jesus' guilt.

What happened next is one of the most dramatic and debated scenes of the Bible. According to the gospels, Pilate led the preacher to a courtyard, presented him to the people, and made an offer: They could free Jesus, or another man imprisoned that week named Barabbas. The man chosen by the crowd would live, the other would die.

Wright: "And so we get into this should it be Jesus of Nazareth or should it be Barabbas. And the chief priests, according to the story, persuade the crowd to yell for Barabbas."

And so, the gospels say Pilate set Barabbas free and condemned Jesus, but not before pausing to do something that would become etched in the popular imagination:

Wright: "He gets water and a bowl and washes his hands as a way of saying, 'I'm quit of this, this was your doing, you've put me on the spot and

I'm only a civil servant just doing my job.' It is the kind of snide—a bit cheap thing to do, that a second rate governor like Pilate might well have done."

Throughout the scene, Pilate appears weak and the crowd, out for blood. But Pilate washes his hands in just one of the gospel accounts, which is just one reason that many scholars question whether it really happened that way.

Fredriksen: "The whole scene even if you look at it within the woof and weave of the gospel stories is incoherent. Jesus is popular enough to have been celebrated by pilgrims and danced into the city. He was so popular that he had to be arrested by ambush. That was the only way they could risk getting him without causing popular uproar. And yet by morning, there's a hostile crowd screaming for his death. Where does this hostile crowd come from? Did it really exist?... It doesn't square. If this were a script for a "Law & Order" episode, you'd say, 'Wait a minute, this is inconsistent.' And that's where you have to sort through."

And something else about the scene that doesn't square for some scholars is the notion that Pilate would be swayed by the whims of any crowd. Ancient historians describe him as an unyielding tyrant known for cruelty, thievery and executions with out trial.

Crossan: "He would not give in to a crowd. Pilate had his own way of crowd control, which is known as slaughter. He is not the Pilate of the gospels, the meek or the just person who is just trying to be a good governor but that crowd won't let him go so he finally gives in. That is absolutely unhistorical."

Fredriksen: "What's important about being a prefect is that you demonstrate your unquestionable authority and power. The last thing he would have done is have some kind of open court with people saying, is this okay?"

Phillips: "Would Pilate have done it to please the priests?"

Fredriksen: "Pilate is appointed by the Emperor. He doesn't have to worry about pleasing the priests."

Even if Pilate did not wash his hands that morning, the gospels and most scholars agree that in the end he sentenced Jesus to die by crucifixion. An event that would forever alter the course of history had begun.

As Pilate sentenced Jesus to death, the gospels say that Roman soldiers beat and scourged him, a brutal form of torture where the skin is whipped with leather straps studded with nails and bone.

Evans: "It was designed to weaken the person, to cause the person to bleed, to put the person in terrible agony."

It may sound like a barbaric and rare form of punishment, but scholars say that scourging and crucifixion were tools of terror wielded on tens of thousands of people all across the Roman Empire. The aim was to bring about not only suffering, but humiliation, to send a message.

Crossan: "It's a warning. it's like hanging up a poster: 'If you act like this person does, you will die this public, horrible death.'"

Evans: "That was terrifying and horrifying in the Roman world. And that's very clear in the sources. It's Rome's way of saying this is something you don't even want to think about."

In three of the gospels Roman soldiers mock Jesus as "King of the Jews," and sarcastically cloak him in a robe and crown of thorns.

Wright: "I imagine this crowded street with pilgrims everywhere and people looking out of the houses and shops and so on. And soldiers brutally saying get out of the way, we're off to do this. And people would know what this meant. They're taking him off and they're going to kill him."

In paintings of the crucifixion, Jesus usually bears his own cross, but archeologists say it's more likely that he carried only its horizontal beam. Anything more would have been too heavy, especially for a man who had been beaten and scourged.

Wright: "He would have lost a lot of blood. He would be just really tired. So according to the records, he stumbles a couple of times. And they grab somebody from the crowd who's just passing by, a pilgrim to carry the cross beam for Jesus."

Today, Christians come to a street in Jerusalem, to trace the steps that many pilgrims believe Jesus walked as he carried that hundred pound beam through the steep, winding streets of the city. There is some debate on the path, but scholars are united on one thing: that every step of the journey would be agony. And it would soon become much worse...

Around 9 a.m., the gospels say that Jesus arrived at Golgotha, or place of the skull. Drawing on what is known about other crucifixions, archeologists believe that Roman soldiers stripped Jesus, probably nailed his feet and wrists—not palms—with iron spikes, and then left him there to die.

Wright: "What we have to imagine is a human being, a living, breathing human being being strung up not very high up and just left there, open to the elements. Open to birds, open to vermin, open to rats, open to dogs."

According to one gospel, Jesus' mother, Mary, and his disciple, Mary Magdalene, stood at the foot of the cross, watching the horror unfold. It is believed that with each passing minute, Jesus' breath became more labored

as the weight of his body slowly crushed his lungs. After six hours, Jesus most likely succumbed to extreme shock or suffocation.

Jesus' death on the cross, and the belief that he was resurrected three days later, gave birth to a religion that has raised and toppled nations, and transformed lives. Today the world's Christian population is some two billion strong, and many flock to worship beneath the symbol of what happened that day in Jerusalem.

But the accounts of Jesus' final days have spawned darker sentiments as well. Over the centuries the gospel images of Caiaphas, Pilate, and the crowd crying out for crucifixion have fueled a notion in some quarters that the Jewish people were responsible for Jesus' death. It's a perception that has triggered anti-Semitic persecution and violence for almost 2,000 years.

Crossan: "It troubles me as a Christian to hear Christians say things like, 'Oh, the Jewish people are Christ-killers,' or something like that. That's outrageous. It's very wrong. It's bad theology. It's bad history. Most Jewish people didn't even know who Jesus was and never even heard about it, and would have been horrified at what happened to him in Jerusalem... If everything in the New Testament was literally correct, there is no reason whatsoever to blame anyone beyond the people who were right there. And to go into centuries of anti-Semitism, but not to go into centuries of anti-Italianism, as it were, makes no sense whatsoever."

Where did this notion come from? Largely, scholars say, from the gospels themselves. If you read the four books in the order in which they were most likely written, Jewish culpability appears to increase with each revision. Take for example the scene with Pilate and that crowd:

Crossan: "You can watch the crowd not only expand but metastasize before your eyes, from Mark where it starts as a crowd, to Matthew where it goes from a crowd to crowds to all the people in ten verses, and then on to John where it becomes 'the Jews.'"

Those revisions, most scholars agree, were not overt acts of anti-Semitism. Three of the authors were almost certainly Jewish themselves. Instead, scholars see them as a byproduct of the times. The gospels were written decades after the crucifixion, when the earliest Christians were trying to break away from Judaism and shield their budding religion from the watchful eye of Rome.

Borg: "How do you avoid the implication that you are an anti-Roman religious movement? What you do is you say the Roman governor actually found Jesus innocent."

In 1965, the Vatican issued a decree absolving the Jewish people of blame in Jesus' death. So in the end, what does it all mean? Who was responsible?

Phillips: "What's the bottom line for you? How do you answer the question, who killed Jesus?"

Evans: "The Romans killed Jesus. But the Romans killed Jesus in consultation with the Jewish authorities. And it's a very small number. And it needs to be understood that the Jewish authorities were not acting as a mouthpiece for the Jewish people as a whole."

Crossan: "There is absolutely no question in my mind but that Pilate, under the Roman Empire, was responsible for Jesus' death. There is no question about that."

Fredriksen: "What I do in my historian's imagination is I stand next to the cross, and I look outward as Jesus would have been, and what Pilate would have known that Jesus was looking at, which is the crowd of pilgrims in Jerusalem. The message of the crucifixion is directed at the pilgrims. He's telling the pilgrim crowd that is so enthused about Jesus, 'You're wrong; he's not the messiah.'"

In the end, Jesus scholars are united in the belief that crucifixion was a Roman, not Jewish, form of execution. And two ancient sources outside of the Bible confirm it was Pontius Pilate who was ordered Jesus' death. In the year 93 the historian Josephus wrote of Jesus: "Those who had come to love him did not give up their affection for him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared."

That was written 60 years after the crucifixion. Twenty centuries later, in the hearts of Christian believers, the pieces of this story come together with a power that transcends history—the suffering, the sacrifice, the symbol of grace.

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• **The last days of Jesus: Personal Reflections**

By Stone Phillips

NBC News

Updated: 7:56 p.m. ET Feb. 20, 2004

It is hard to imagine an uninteresting or uneventful visit to Jerusalem. And sure enough, while taping there for our report, *The Last Days of Jesus*, our Dateline production team witnessed something of a meteorological miracle. It snowed! To see Gethsemane, Via Dolorosa, and the Ecce Homo Basilica blanketed in white was a rare sight, indeed. And yes, the possibility of divine intervention did cross my mind when the blizzard resulted in a much-needed day off from our shooting schedule!

This was my second visit to Jerusalem. In August 1982, I spent a few days decompressing there after five weeks of war coverage as a correspondent in West Beirut. Back then, the war in Lebanon was the hot topic in Jerusalem. Today, it's the wall. The massive security divider being erected across much of the West Bank seems to be on everyone's minds.

Of course, the controversy that led us to Jerusalem is not made of concrete, but of celluloid. Interestingly, Mel Gibson's new film, "The Passion of the



Christ," has not generated quite as much buzz in Israel as it has in the U.S. Perhaps that's because the film does not yet have a release date there. Still, people we spoke with in Jerusalem expressed interest in the movie and in our documentary.

In introducing *The Last Days of Jesus*, I tell viewers that we are not exploring the mysteries of faith, but rather the mysteries of history. We sought out some of the world's most respected scholars—believers and non-believers—to find out what they think happened in Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago. As a philosophy and religious studies major, I grappled with some of these mysteries in college. As a person of faith, I continue to grapple with them today. And as a journalist, I found working on this report to be a profound and thought-provoking experience. I hope those of you who watch it find value in it.

Our Dateline production team, led by the immensely talented Liz Cole, labored for months to make *The Last Days of Jesus* a balanced and visually beautiful hour.

The subject matter is challenging to say the least. Which brings me to one final note. A few years ago I was visiting with one of my former philosophy professors. Our conversation turned to history and religion, and I asked him how he thought journalists should measure the truth of a spiritual claim. I

was sure that, for once, the student had stumped the professor with a difficult question. But without skipping a beat, he answered, "Spiritual truth is measured by the lasting, positive impact it has on people's lives." Wise words.

• **Reflections on Some of the Views of Crossan and Fredriksen**
By Craig A. Evans, Acadia Divinity College

There are a few statements by Dom Crossan and Paula Fredriksen that I wish especially to challenge:

- Judas Iscariot a fiction? With respect to the story of Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus to the ruling priests, Crossan says, "It's a powerful story and I think it's a powerful piece of fiction." Admittedly, one can almost never be absolutely certain of what someone did or did not do in antiquity. But is it really plausible that early Christians *made up* a story about Judas Iscariot *betraying Jesus*, a story that all four Gospel writers pass on? I find it difficult to imagine what could be gained by such a fiction. Would any early Christian think the story of Jesus is enhanced by having him betrayed by one of his own disciples? One of the Twelve? Remember, it is probable that the "Twelve" symbolized the restoration of the whole nation of Israel, that is, all twelve tribes. That one of these key leaders could betray Jesus would have created acute embarrassment for early Christianity. For example, one might wonder at Jesus' lack of discernment in appointing and trusting Judas. One might also wonder if perhaps Judas' betrayal was an indication that Jesus and his message and mission were not in the end credible (at least in Judas' opinion). No, the story of Judas' betrayal is best explained as something that happened and was so well known (to Jesus' sympathizers and to his enemies), that it could not be suppressed.
- No Jewish hearing? Fredriksen does not think Jesus appeared before the ruling priests, whether in reference to an informal hearing or to a more formal trial. She says, "It's impossible as it's depicted in the gospels historically." Crossan holds a similar view. I am not sure what makes it impossible. In the past, some have made this assertion by pointing out the number of mishnaic violations the Jewish hearing of the Gospels committed. This, of course, is anachronistic. No one knows how many, if any, of the mishnaic rules for trials were in force in the early first century. (The Mishnah was edited and published in the early third century C.E.) But more to the point is what Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian and apologist tells us. He describes some of the ruling priests as behaving in criminal ways: paying and accepting bribes, theft, oppression, and even violence. From what Josephus says, there is nothing in the Gospels' accounts that is inconsistent with this picture. And finally, we should keep in mind what happened to the Jewish peasant prophet, named Jesus ben Ananias, who in 62 C.E. began to proclaim the doom of the city and the temple (Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.300-305). Josephus tells us that the "first men" (that is, the ruling priests, as we

know from other passages in his writings) threatened this man, beat him, and presented him to the Roman governor with demands that he be put to death. (Does this juridical process sound familiar?) The governor scourged the man and then released him as harmless. No, there is nothing historically impossible about the Gospels' versions of the hearing before the ruling priests and members of the Council. Far from it; what the Gospels tell us is consistent with what we know from other, mostly Jewish, sources.

- Pilate never swayed by a crowd? Crossan says, "He would not give in to a crowd. Pilate had his own way of crowd control, which is known as slaughter. He is not the Pilate of the gospels, the meek or the just person who is just trying to be a good governor but that crowd won't let him go so he finally gives in. That is absolutely unhistorical." Fredriksen is skeptical, too, saying, "The whole scene . . . is incoherent. Jesus is popular enough to have been celebrated by pilgrims and danced into the city. He was so popular that he had to be arrested by ambush. That was the only way they could risk getting him without causing popular uproar. And yet by morning, there's a hostile crowd screaming for his death. Where does this hostile crowd come from? Did it really exist?... It doesn't square."

I am surprised and disappointed that Dom and Paula take this position. We know of at least one major event in Pilate's tenure as governor where he does just this: He backs down in the face of a protesting crowd. Pilate threatens them, but they expose their throats, saying they would rather die than see their holy city defiled. Pilate had intended to transfer some Roman standards to Jerusalem. But their images were offensive to Jewish sensitivities and probably were in violation of the commandment not to make graven images (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.55-59). As to the question of the crowds, why should we assume that the crowd who celebrated Jesus' entrance on Palm Sunday is the same crowd that on Friday called for the release of Barabbas and the death of Jesus? Sunday's crowd was made up of enthusiastic supporters, many probably Galilean pilgrims. Friday's crowd was made up of partisans calling for the release of Barabbas and of ruling priests and their supporters demanding the death of Jesus, the blasphemer who dared threaten the temple establishment. There is no incoherence here.

All three of these negative assertions not only fly in the face of the first-century testimony of the Gospels, but they fly in the face of known parallel examples. Moreover, it is very difficult to understand why the Gospel writers would wish to invent this kind of material. If there had been no betrayal by one of the Twelve, then why invent one? The story of the betrayal does not make Jesus look good and it certainly does not make the disciples look good. The story of Judas does nothing to advance the Christian message. Likewise, if there had been no Jewish hearing, in which the ruling priests condemned Jesus, then why on earth make up such a story? How does this story help Christians convince Jewish and proselytes in the synagogue that Jesus might well be God's Messiah? Surely hearing a story about Jesus condemned,

instead of defended, by the high priest and his colleagues would do nothing to encourage a Jew to believe in Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

Crossan and others seem to underestimate the importance of the Jewish context of early Christianity, referring, instead, to the Roman context. Consequently, they try to explain everything in the Gospels from the point of view of trying to side with Rome over against the Jewish people. But what is forgotten in this imaginative scenario is the fact that the synagogue was the home of the vast majority of Christians in the first several decades. Many Christians, especially those who were ethnically Jewish, were trying to remain in the synagogue (which is why the Birkhat ha-Minim [the cursing of the heretics] was added to the twelfth benediction of the Amidah—to drive out the Christians). The last thing these Christians would want to do would be the invention of stories portraying Jewish condemnation of Jesus as a blasphemer. This simply makes no sense.

Finally, the portrait of Pilate as brutal and very ready, almost eager, to slaughter his Jewish subjects (as in Crossan, who comments, "Pilate had his own way of crowd control, which is known as slaughter"), is a wild exaggeration, largely based on an uncritical reading of Josephus and Philo, both of whom vilify Pilate for their respective political ends. This is not the place to go into this topic, except to say that when the whole of Pilate's tenure in office is taken into account, when the bias of Josephus and Philo is taken into account, and when Pilate is compared to the other Roman governors of the first century, he is not nearly so bloodthirsty as some modern biblical scholars are quick to assume. At his core, Pilate was an ambitious politician, and as a politician he was guided not by principle, but by expedient. If he was going to crucify the popular Galilean preacher and healer, then there had better be a good reason and he had better see to it others would be blamed if something went wrong. Fredriksen also asserts: "Pilate is appointed by the Emperor. He doesn't have to worry about pleasing the priests." Again, this simplistic and misleading. Pilate most certainly did have to worry about maintaining rapport with the ruling priests. His violent quashing of a priestly movement in Samaria, which intended to restore the Samaritan temple, resulted in his removal from office at the end of 36 CE or beginning of 37 CE.

The Pilate of the Gospels is very much the Pilate of the sources outside the Gospels, when they are assessed critically.

- **Jesus the Healer**

By Rob Stafford

NBC News

Air date: Feb. 27, 2004 [not yet posted]

- **My Views on the Matter**

by Craig A. Evans, Acadia Divinity College

The interviews and the narrative of the "Jesus the Healer" Dateline segment have not yet been posted on NBC Dateline's web sit. But for those who are interested, here is a summary of my views on Jesus as healer.

Taken as a whole, the evidence strongly suggests that Jesus healed people, did it often, and did it well. There are three compelling reasons for coming to this conclusion:

First, all sources that refer to Jesus, acknowledge his ability to heal. We see this in sources that are sympathetic to him (such as the New Testament Gospels). We see this in sources that are hostile to him (such as the comments by some Jewish authorities and later by Celsus, a gentile critic of Christianity). We also see it in sources that take no position (such as in Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, or Mara bar Serapion, the second-century Syrian). Sympathetic sources attribute Jesus' power to God's help. Hostile sources attribute Jesus' power to the devil or to black magic. The important point is that whatever position people take, they all agree that he performed wonders.

Second, Jesus drew large crowds. Many think this was because Jesus was an effective healer. Had Jesus not been effective (say, sporadic at best), then why the large crowds? Why were people so eager to touch him, to pull at his clothing? Why was it necessary for Jesus to seek out privacy, or teach from a boat, putting water between himself and the crowd? The best answer to these questions is that Jesus was known as a healer and so drew large crowds.

Third, several of Jesus' miracles spark controversy. Jesus is criticized for healing on the Sabbath. He is criticized for declaring a man's sins forgiven. He heals a gentile woman and the servant of a Roman centurion. If the healing stories are fictions, then why invent stories that would create difficulty for the early Christian movement? Christians were accused of breaking the Sabbath, so why have Jesus heal on the Sabbath? Christians were accused of ignoring the Jewish temple and priesthood, so why have Jesus usurp the priestly (and divine) prerogative of declaring sins forgiven? Most Jews believed that the Messiah's blessings would be for them, so why have Messiah Jesus extend healing blessings to Gentiles? The nature of the healing stories in the Gospels suggests that they are accurate, historical reminiscences of the kinds of things Jesus did, even though some of them were highly controversial. Finally, why on earth would Christians make up stories of Jesus being accused by religious leaders (who were generally respected) of being in league with the devil? And if Jesus healed no one, then why would this accusation have been made in the first place?

It is my impression that most of the healing stories found in the Gospels were narrated because they conveyed something unusual or important. Most healings are mentioned in general summaries: "They brought the sick to

Jesus and he healed them.” The individual stories that are narrated reveal special features, such as Jesus’ ability and authority to heal on the Sabbath (i.e., What better day to liberate someone?), to declare sins forgiven, and even to extend messianic blessings to those many Jews thought would never receive them.

In my judgment, the healing stories in the Gospels smack of historical realism and of authentic reminiscence, not later fiction and imagination.

• **What’s a Dateline Interview Like?**
by Craig A. Evans, Acadia Divinity College

I have been interviewed for programs for the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, the BBC, the John Ankerberg Show, and Faith and Reason, an interfaith discussion program. My experience in every case has been pleasant and the programs, from my point of view, on the whole have been well made. However, my experience with NBC Dateline has by far been the best. I am very impressed with the diligence and teamwork. There is an honest commitment to get the facts straight and to be fair and balanced. I emphasize this because there are many who think the major news networks are biased (usually to the left) and either ignore or belittle religion. Whether there is any truth to this thinking is not my concern here, but I do wish to emphasize that I encountered no such bias working with Stone Phillips and his very capable team or with Rob Stafford and his team. They are to be commended and their work appreciated.

Here are a few basic points the public might find interesting:

• **Not everything said in the interview appears in the program.** I have received several emails since the airing of “The Last Days of Jesus.” Some of the emails ask why I or others on the program did not say anything about how Jesus understood his death. Well, as a matter of fact I was asked several questions pertaining to this point, and I had a lot to say. But as it turned out, this material was not used. My interview ran about one hour and 45 minutes; yet only 10 minutes or so appeared in the program. I am sure this was true for the other participants.

• **Not every question was asked that I hoped would be asked.** Viewers need to know that the host and his team shape and guide the interviews. It is true that they do solicit a great deal of input from the interviewees, but in the end, it is their program and their agenda. They want us to speak to their questions.

• **Where did most of the interviews take place?** The interviews were taped in the impressive Library Room of the House of the Redeemer, 7 95th Street, New York, a lovely Florentine-style four storey home built by the late Edith Fabbri (nee Vanderbilt). Mrs. Fabbri donated the building to the Episcopal Church, where it has served various religious functions since

1949. Film makers have shot a variety of scenes in the Library Room and in other rooms of this landmark building.