

Why was Jesus *Crucified*, but his Followers were not?

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In 'The Madness of King Jesus', Justin Meggitt presents a rich dossier of popular, literary and medical views on madness in antiquity, and of the range of responses, from hostile to notionally therapeutic, that madness could elicit. To this he adds other ancient notices about arbitrary crucifixion (Juvenal), interrogation and execution (Josephus, Philo, Quintilian, Livy). This vast erudition then serves to construct a new interpretive context for the Gospels' traditions about Jesus' death. Meggitt urges that earlier efforts to understand Jesus' death in light of two famously contradictory facts—Jesus was put to death as an insurrectionist, but none of his followers was—have failed. By reframing the passion narratives with materials from his broader reading, he reaches a novel conclusion, namely, that '[t]he Romans executed Jesus because they thought they were disposing of a deluded lunatic' (p. 384). Indeed, the hypothesis that Pilate thought Jesus a madman, Meggitt claims, is the 'one possible solution' to the challenge of 'this famous conundrum' that is 'historically defensible, and makes sense within the first-century cultural context' (*loc. cit.*). But is it?

All efforts to make sense of Jesus' death in light of the Passion-conundrum, Meggitt's included, bear certain resemblances to each other. Some scholars emphasize priestly initiative (Wright 1996: 552; Crossan 1991: 355-60), others, the degree of collegial cooperation between Caiaphas and Pilate (Sanders 1993: 273; Meier 2001: 623), still others—namely, Meggitt and I—emphasize Pilate's initiative to the point of minimizing the involvement of the priests (Meggitt, p. 384; Fredriksen 2000: 252-55.)¹ But all scholarly reconstructions infer from Jesus'

1. Another point of resemblance, unremarked by Meggitt, is that each of us organizes our respective studies precisely around the conundrum itself (Meggitt, pp. 381, 406; Fredriksen 2000: 8-11: 'Had Rome, mistakenly or not, truly thought

Roman death that Pilate played a prime role.

Meggitt's strongest resemblance to a vast scholarly majority lies in his view of the proximate cause of this Roman death: the scene in the Temple. This means that he, too, adheres to Mark's chronology when re-imagining Jesus' mission. The majority argue (though variously) that Jesus' action somehow signaled to the priests that he saw himself in a messianic role: his crucifixion as 'king' is Pilate's riposte to such a claim. This reconstruction addresses Part 1 of our conundrum, 'Why was Jesus crucified?' From the survival of Jesus' followers—our conundrum's Part 2—these scholars infer that Pilate knew that these people posed no real threat; but they have difficulty saying *how* Pilate knew this. Here, arguments grow more vague (see, e.g., Sanders 1993: 273).

On precisely this point, by his own lights, Meggitt has the advantage. For him, the scene in the Temple leads directly to the execution because it convinces Pilate that Jesus is insane: 'From a Roman point of view, Jesus' actions in the Temple would be most easily understood as the... ravings of a particular kind of lone madman' (p. 401). The quality of Jesus' madness, in other words, communicated clearly that he had no real following, and so no broader pursuit ensued (p. 406, Meggitt's conclusion). Meggitt thus satisfies Part 2 of the conundrum with a clarity that the others had not.

Myriad features from the broader dossier are then pressed into service to re-interpret 'the details of [Jesus'] execution' as evidence in support of Pilate's 'diagnosis' of madness. Like the mad Carabas, Jesus was mocked as a king, and in any case 'kingship was often closely associated with the insane' (p. 404). People often spat on the mad, and Jesus too was spat upon (*loc. cit.*). Like the mad Jesus son of Ananias, Jesus of Nazareth too was flogged. True, scourging was part of the protocol of Roman executions, but it was also a known therapy for the insane, and a dismal part of their common experience (*loc. cit.*). Besides, even Jesus' own family and other Jewish contemporaries thought that he might be mad (the 'early tradition' preserved in Mk 3.19b-21 p. 384).

Meggitt argues with such panache, thickening his presentation with so many nice details, that it is with some surprise that the reader, stepping back, notices an oddity: though answering Part 2 of the famous conundrum, that Jesus posed any kind of political threat, more than only Jesus would have died' (p. 9). I note as well that the prefect's initial lack of response to popular acclaim for Jesus as messiah at Passover (Mk 11.10; Jn 12.13) also suggests that he knew that Jesus and his movement were in themselves harmless. As the holiday grew nearer, things obviously changed.

Meggitt seems to have abandoned all serious effort to respond to Part 1: Why was Jesus killed, quite specifically, by crucifixion?

In lieu of giving an answer, Meggitt trivializes the question. Why did Pilate crucify Jesus? Why not? The governor was known to indulge (a nod to Philo here, *ad Gaium* 302). 'Under the rule of Pilate, ending up on a cross seems to have been a reasonably easy thing to achieve'. Indeed, his decision to kill Jesus 'could have been decided on little more than a whim' (p. 380). Besides, upper-class Romans generally were quite casual about dispatching those of low social status, and by crucifixion in particular (a nod here to Juvenal, *Satires* 6.219). In short, according to Meggitt, the mode of Jesus' death tells us nothing material about the reason for his death (unless we recall that ancients sometimes associated 'madness' with 'kingship'). Pilate killed Jesus because Pilate thought him mad. It just so happened that he did so by crucifixion.

This seems to me to duck the question rather than to answer it. And the incidental details amassed in support of Meggitt's interpretation sit only loosely upon the episodes that they are enlisted to explain. When Jesus was dressed as a king, it was to mock him; when Carabas was dressed as a king, it was to mock Agrippa. When Jesus of Nazareth was flogged, he was crucified; when Jesus son of Ananias was flogged, he was released. Philo complains not about Pilate's 'crucifixion' of untried prisoners (Gk: οτραυπόσ), but about his 'murder' of them (Gk: φόνοσ). Juvenal cannot be used to assert that Romans casually crucified those socially beneath them: satire works through comic exaggeration. And Jesus' family in Mk 3.21 worry about έκτροχοίσ: a type of altered consciousness, surely (the same word is used of Abram in Gen. 15.12 LXX), but not the same thing as μωχό. Is there no satisfactory way, then, to solve the conundrum? The line that Meggitt quotes from Quintilian might have guided his efforts here.

'Whenever we crucify criminals... [we place them] where the greatest number of people can watch and be influenced by this threat; for every penalty is aimed not so much at the offense as at its exemplary value' (*Declamationes maiores* 274.13; p. 383 *infra*). To understand the crucifixion of Jesus, then, we should look to where the cross points us: not to Jesus or to the priests or to Pilate, but to the crowds in Jerusalem, gathered to celebrate Passover. It is they who greet Jesus in messianic terms, and acclaim the new *basileia* (Mk 11.9-10; Mt. 21.9; Lk. 19.38; Jn 12.13-15). It is their mounting enthusiasm in the days before the feast that requires the authorities to arrest Jesus by stealth (Mk 14.2 and *par.*; Jn 12.19). And it is they also—and they alone—who account most precisely for the specific mode of Jesus' death, they alone who comprise the 'greatest number of people' for such an 'exemplary' execution. Crucifixion is, first

of all, crowd control. Thus, even though he knows that Jesus and his immediate followers are harmless, Pilate puts Jesus on a cross as a would-be king, in order to disabuse these unruly crowds about their messiah.

But *how* did Pilate (and, for that matter, Caiaphas) know that Jesus and his group were in fact harmless? Here the all-but-universal scholarly allegiance to Mark's chronology, caused in part by an equally universal dependence upon the scene in the Temple as the trip-switch for the passion, makes answering this question much harder than it need be. The simplest way to account for Pilate's knowledge, and thus for Part 2 of our conundrum, is the way that John's Gospel suggests.

Jesus and his disciples traveled back and forth between the Galilee and Judea for years. They came to Jerusalem especially when the greatest number of people would be there, on the pilgrimage holidays. On such occasions, of course, Rome's prefect was there too. Jesus preached his message of the coming Kingdom openly, where he could find the largest audience: in the Temple precincts (Jn 2–12 passim; see too 18.20). Accordingly, both Pilate and the priests knew perfectly well that his teachings were in no practical way revolutionary. But on what turned out to be his final Passover there, Jesus evidently lost control of his audience. Their growing excitement about the imminent Kingdom as Passover approached, and their noisy conviction that Jesus himself was its special harbinger—perhaps even the messiah—led directly to his death. This is why Jesus was crucified, but his followers were not.²

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2. For the full argument, see Fredriksen 2000: 220–70; more specifically, Fredriksen forthcoming; the MS is on my web page at www.hui.edu/reliation/faculty