

Jesus, His Trial, and the Peoples of the Ancient World

Union of Saints

During the life, ministry, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus, people from many different communities were part of the world around Him. The main groups included Jews, Galileans, Samaritans, Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians and Arameans, Phoenicians, Arabs, Persians or Parthians, Idumeans, Nabataeans, and people from North Africa and Ethiopia. These groups had different cultures, languages, religions, and political relationships with one another.

What Was Jesus' Crime?

Jesus was not accused of exactly the same thing by the Jewish religious leadership and by the Roman government.

Before the Jewish leadership, Jesus was accused of **blasphemy**. His statements about His identity, His authority, and His relationship with God were understood by some of the religious leaders as religious offenses.

When Jesus was brought before **Pontius Pilate**, the Roman governor, the accusation was presented in political terms. Jesus was associated with the title "**King of the Jews.**" A claim to kingship could be viewed as a challenge to Roman authority.

The Gospel accounts portray Pilate as reluctant to condemn Jesus. In Luke, Pilate says that he finds no basis for a death sentence. Nevertheless, Pilate eventually authorizes the crucifixion.

Jesus' execution was carried out by the **Romans**, using crucifixion, a Roman method of execution.

The Sanhedrin

The **Sanhedrin** was a Jewish governing and judicial council in Jerusalem. It included religious and community leaders such as chief priests, elders, and scribes.

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was brought before Jewish leaders after His arrest. Some leaders considered His teachings and claims to be serious religious offenses and sought His death.

However, the Sanhedrin should not be confused with all Jewish people. The Gospel accounts themselves show that Jewish people responded to Jesus in different ways.

Joseph of Arimathea

Joseph of Arimathea was Jewish and was associated with the council. He was also described as someone who was waiting for the kingdom of God.

Luke specifically says that Joseph **did not consent to the council's decision and action**. After Jesus' death, Joseph went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

His story is an important reminder that there were Jewish people, including someone connected with the council, who did not agree with what happened to Jesus.

The Romans

Rome controlled Judea during Jesus' lifetime. **Pontius Pilate** was the Roman governor responsible for the region, and Roman soldiers carried out the crucifixion.

Pilate questioned Jesus and, according to the Gospel accounts, did not initially find sufficient grounds for execution. Nevertheless, he eventually gave the order for Jesus to be crucified.

A **Roman centurion** was present at the crucifixion. After Jesus died, Mark records the centurion saying:

"Truly this man was the Son of God."

Luke gives the centurion's response as:

"Certainly this man was innocent."

Thus, one Roman soldier is portrayed as recognizing Jesus' innocence or extraordinary identity.

Pilate's Wife

Matthew also describes **Pilate's wife** sending him a warning concerning Jesus. She told him to have nothing to do with Jesus, whom she described as a just man, because she had suffered in a dream concerning Him.

The Gospel does not provide much information about her, but she was part of Pilate's household and therefore connected to the Roman governing establishment.

The Greeks

The Gospel of John records that **Greeks came to Jerusalem during Passover and wanted to see Jesus**.

They approached Philip and said:

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

Philip told Andrew, and they brought the request to Jesus.

This is significant because these people were not presented as Jewish followers from Galilee or Judea. They were Greeks who were interested in Jesus and sought Him out.

Greek language and culture were also widespread throughout the eastern Mediterranean during this period.

The Egyptians

Egypt was an important part of Jesus' early life.

According to Matthew, after Jesus was born, **Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt** because King Herod wanted to kill the child. They remained there until Herod died and then returned to the land of Israel.

The Gospel accounts do not identify an Egyptian person who publicly defended Jesus during His trial in the same way that Joseph of Arimathea or the Roman centurion are described.

Egypt later became one of the major centers of early Christianity, especially **Alexandria**.

The Child Herod Wanted to Kill

The child was **Jesus**.

According to Matthew, visitors from the East came to Jerusalem looking for the newborn "**King of the Jews**." King Herod the Great became frightened by the possibility that another king could threaten his position.

Joseph was warned in a dream and fled with Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Matthew then describes Herod ordering the killing of young boys in and around Bethlehem. Jesus survived because His family had already fled.

The Samaritans

The **Samaritans** were a distinct population living in the region of Samaria. There were longstanding religious and social tensions between Samaritans and Jews.

Jesus nevertheless interacted with Samaritans.

One of the best-known examples is the **Samaritan woman at the well** in John 4. Jesus spoke with her even though there were strong social and religious divisions between the communities.

Jesus also told the **Parable of the Good Samaritan**, presenting a Samaritan as the person who acted compassionately toward an injured man.

The Galileans

Jesus grew up in **Galilee**, and many of His disciples were Galileans.

Galilee was part of the Jewish world but had its own regional character. Jesus' ministry took place extensively in Galilee before He traveled to Jerusalem.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John, among others, were associated with Galilee.

Syrians and Arameans

The region around Judea and Galilee was connected with **Syria**, and **Aramaic** was one of the major languages spoken in the area.

Jesus and many people around Him would have lived in a multilingual environment in which Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek were all important.

Phoenicians and Canaanites

The Gospel accounts also describe Jesus encountering a woman associated with the region of **Tyre and Sidon**, an area historically connected with the Phoenicians.

Matthew calls her a **Canaanite woman**, while Mark describes her as a **Syrophenician woman**.

She approached Jesus asking Him to help her daughter. The story is significant because she was a non-Jewish woman who expressed faith in Jesus.

Arabs and Nabataeans

Arab peoples lived throughout the regions surrounding Judea. One of the major kingdoms in the area was the **Nabataean Kingdom**, centered around Petra.

The Nabataeans were involved in trade and had political relationships with surrounding kingdoms and Rome.

Herod Antipas and other rulers of the Herodian period also had political relationships with neighboring territories and peoples.

Idumeans

Herod the Great, the ruler who sought the infant Jesus, came from an **Idumean** background.

The Idumeans were descended from the ancient Edomites and had become incorporated into the Jewish world. Herod ruled Judea under Roman authority and was a major political figure during Jesus' childhood.

Therefore, the story of Jesus' birth involved not only Jewish and Roman politics but also the Idumean Herodian dynasty.

Persians and Parthians

Matthew describes **Magi from the East** visiting Jesus after His birth.

The text does not explicitly identify their nationality. They are traditionally associated with Persia or the broader eastern world, but it is safer to say that they came “**from the East.**”

They followed a star and came looking for the newborn King of the Jews.

North Africans

One particularly important person was **Simon of Cyrene**.

Cyrene was a city in North Africa. According to the Gospels, Roman soldiers compelled Simon to carry Jesus’ cross.

This means that a man from North Africa was physically involved in the events immediately surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion.

Ethiopians

The Book of Acts later describes an **Ethiopian official** who encountered the Christian message while traveling from Jerusalem.

Philip, one of the early followers of Jesus, explained the Scriptures to him. The Ethiopian then became a follower of Jesus and was baptized.

This occurs after Jesus’ resurrection and shows the Christian movement spreading beyond the Jewish world into Africa.

Jesus’ Final Prayer

During the crucifixion, Luke records Jesus praying:

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

This prayer is central to the Christian understanding of Jesus’ response to His execution. Rather than calling for revenge against those involved, Jesus asked the Father to forgive them.

The Larger Picture

The people surrounding Jesus came from many different backgrounds. There were Jewish religious leaders who opposed Him, Jewish followers who believed in Him, a Jewish council member who did not consent to the council’s decision, Roman officials and soldiers, Greeks who wanted to see Him, people from North Africa, and communities from Syria, Samaria, Egypt, Arabia, and other surrounding regions.

The story should therefore not be reduced to one entire nationality or ethnic group being responsible for Jesus' death. The Gospel accounts describe **individual people and particular authorities making different decisions**.

The central sequence is:

Jesus is born → Herod fears the newborn King → Jesus and His family flee to Egypt → Jesus grows up in Galilee → Jesus teaches throughout the region → Greeks and other outsiders seek Him → Jesus enters Jerusalem → He is arrested → Jewish leadership questions Him → Jesus is brought before Pilate → Pilate authorizes the Roman crucifixion → a Roman centurion recognizes something extraordinary about Jesus → Joseph of Arimathea receives His body → Jesus' followers proclaim His resurrection.

The story crosses cultural and political boundaries. Jews, Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Samaritans, Syrians, Arabs, North Africans, and others all appear within the larger world surrounding Jesus and the beginning of Christianity.