

# Comment

That Jesus of Nazareth was *executed* remains one of the most incontestable facts about him. It is also one of the most difficult facts to incorporate into any coherent exposition of his permanent significance. Traditionally, at least, it has proved much easier to dwell on his *death*, or on his *crucifixion*. In Christology, for instance, the fact of his execution, if it is ever noticed at all, rapidly disappears into theoretical reflections on the soteriological dimension of his *death*. “Christ died for our sins”: that has apparently already become the standard formulation within twenty years of the event (1 Cor 15:3). The doctrine of the Atonement completely overshadows any consideration of the brute facts surrounding the fate which Jesus met. The theological principle that his death was the sacrifice which reconciled mankind with God broke clear of its moorings in the historical circumstances in which it occurred, and has never ceased to attract the most theoretically powerful minds in the Christian tradition, starting with St Paul. Again, on the traditional view, the significance of the fact that it was by *crucifixion* that he died, if it is ever mentioned, is quickly absorbed into devotional meditation on the cruelty and degradation – he “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2): once again, the idea may be found at a very early stage. But the fact remains that he did not just *die* – he was *executed*, and *crucifixion* was significantly the method. That he was “crucified under Pontius Pilate” no doubt records the date, whether the year 33 or not; it surely also tells whose authority it was under which the execution was carried out. That punishment, at least at that time and in that place, was reserved for rebels against the Roman State. The victim was impaled, naked, outside the city, near a public highway, and left to die, to deter others. Jesus was executed as an enemy of the State.

He was not executed without *trial*. The details are hard to reconstruct, at least if we want to harmonize the various gospel accounts or to reconcile them with our knowledge of Jewish and Roman law. He *was* tried. According to Philo of Alexandria, writing at the time, Pontius Pilate often had men executed without any trial at all. That means, then, that, however mendacious the witnesses and however arbitrary the judiciary, there was a semblance of evidence for Jesus to be plausibly enough condemned. It may be hard to believe that Pilate negotiated with the Temple hierarchy in the way that the gospels describe. Finally, anyhow, he conceded that their charge had some basis: “We found this man perverting our nation and forbidding people to give tribute to the Emperor and

calling himself an anointed king” (Luke 23:2). They were afraid that reprisals might be taken against the Temple, and that the people’s liberty to worship the true God in their own way might be withdrawn: “the Romans will come and take from us both the place and the people” (John 11: 48). But that, in turn, means that the activities of the Prophet Jesus from Nazareth of the Galilee (Matthew 21:11) at least appeared to constitute a ‘destabilizing’ factor in what was in any case an extremely fragile political arrangement.

Reviewed in the light of Easter, of course, the activities of Jesus, as the gospels describe them, are hard to regard as any kind of threat to law and order, either Roman or Jewish – for instance: “Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the throng wondered, when they saw the dumb speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel” (Matthew 15: 30 - 31). That this man was finally executed as an enemy of the State cannot but seem an appalling miscarriage of justice. The only reasonable explanation must appear to be that the Romans were cynically manipulated by the hierarchy of the Temple in order to protect their own interests. That has traditionally been the Christian explanation. The gospels themselves, however, portray the chief priests in a rather better light.

They had their reasons. The gospels portray them unsympathetically, but, on the whole, the Temple hierarchy appears as a group with a case against Jesus which, according to their lights, they were in conscience bound to bring. In other words, the activities of Jesus did in fact have effects which devout and learned priests took to be politically and socially disruptive. His religion could be presented as being likely to cause anarchy. Whatever the details of the charges against him, his claim to be “anointed” could evidently seem civilly “perverting”. His message seemed a threat to the continuing religious liberty of the Jewish people as they put up with the occupation of the Holy Land by the Romans. Even in the light of Easter, Caiaphas may have spoken more profoundly than Cephas usually did – “He prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11: 51 - 52). Perhaps the lights Easter casts on the prophetic activities of Jesus reveals their true character only when we are first able to see them as Caiaphas did. The love of God that Jesus embodied in fact seemed to have dangerous political implications. Were Caiaphas and Pilate wrong?