

Madman or God?

'Who are you?' the high priest demanded,
and Jesus' answer led him to the cross

To any respectable and devout Jew, that mid-morning exhibition in the late spring of the year 3791 on the Jewish calendar—a date believed by the devout to be three thousand, seven hundred and ninety-one years after the creation of the world—would have been at once predictable, astonishing and outrageous. Predictable because it seemed likely these people were planning some new show to capture attention, astonishing because they rather specialized in the bizarre, and outrageous because everything they did was outrageous.

So now, there they were, these men, three dozen or more, mostly in their twenties, streaming from that house into the street, babbling like lunatics, and yelling out something about “the Coming of the Holy Spirit.” They were drunk, obviously. A drunken debauch, and it was not even yet noon. Was this any way to celebrate Pentecost, the Jewish feast that welcomed the first harvest?

For the participants in that unusual event, all of whom were Jews, and for those who followed them for the next twenty centuries, it would mark the birth of the Christian church, the institutional embodiment of the world’s numerically greatest religion. But for those sincere and God-fearing Jews who looked on

from without at the time, it would have occasioned only dismay and disgust. They would no doubt be asking: What will it be next?

What indeed! What had it been already? The leader of these people, the man Jesus, of Nazareth, the one the authorities called “The Blasphemer,” had been dead for six Sabbaths. Crucified, a hideous fate, after he was found guilty of blasphemy, of calling himself by the unmentionable name of God. Such a death was unfortunate, but necessary and deserved. Moreover, or so the authorities fondly thought, it would put an end to what was plainly a one-man movement.

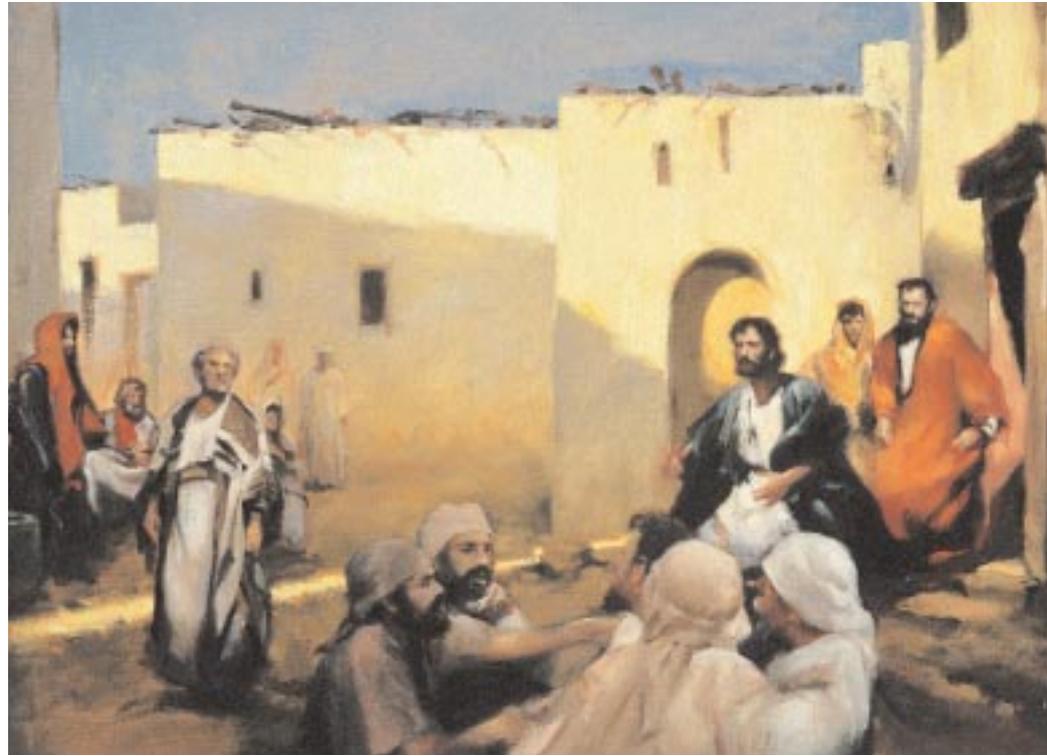
Unhappily, they were wrong. His followers, now dancing around the street and babbling about “the Holy Spirit,” somehow became persuaded he had returned from the dead. “Risen” was the word they used. Indeed, they insisted upon it, telling others they had repeatedly seen and talked to him and convincing them to join their celebration. So rather than quietly fade as had been hoped, the movement was now more alive than ever, and what had previously been an irritant was now becoming a first-class problem.

A problem for several reasons. The Romans, under whose imperial yoke Jewry had been suffering for more than a hundred years, viewed all novel Jewish religious movements as implicitly seditious, and they put them down with a ferocity that could see thousands perish horribly, including the innocent. Worse still, the man Jesus and his movement came from Galilee, a hotbed of anti-Roman insurrection and intrigue, a province whose southern limits lay about sixty-five miles north of Jerusalem. Then too, the Blasphemer himself had repeatedly compromised the Law. And as every good Jew knew, the whole mission of the Jewish people, their very unity and integrity, consisted of and depended on the preservation of the Law. To compromise the Law was to challenge in particular the Pharisees, the party which saw the observance of the Law as the central responsibility of the Jewish people. Finally, the man was plainly anti-Temple as well. He said the imperishable building itself, indeed the whole ecclesiastical structure that supported it and fulfilled the ritual animal sacrifice it had been consecrated to perform, was doomed. That made him equally offensive to

the high priests whose job was operating and preserving the Temple, and their party, the Sadducees.

So he was stopped, convicted of blasphemy in a Jewish trial and at the request of the Jewish leaders crucified by the Romans—God knows, the most ghastly death human ingenuity had ever contrived. Cruel, yes. But what was the alternative? Another religious movement, another insurrection, more hundreds slaughtered by the dreaded Twelfth Legion, the “Syrian Legion,” as they called it, two of whose cohorts were stationed in Jerusalem. Both were under the orders of the Jew-hating Roman governor, Pilate. So as Caiaphas, the high priest, said at the time: “Better one man should suffer than the whole people.” Harsh, certainly. But could you argue with his reasoning?

So the body was entombed, a huge boulder rolled against the entrance, and a guard posted by the Temple police. Toward dawn two days later, something happened. That seems conclusive enough. But what? The guard fled, the stone was moved, and the body disappeared. How this occurred, the authorities simply did not adequately explain. Clearly, they said, his followers must have bribed the guard, somehow rolled away the great stone and stolen the corpse. The obvious solution—to produce the man’s body and have done with this nonsense—failed.



Passersby logically assume that the disciples, pouring out of the house from which a puzzling din is issuing, are nothing more than early-morning drunkards. But then each pilgrim to Jerusalem recognizes that this band of babblers is actually speaking in the language of his homeland. Peter excitedly calls out: “Let me explain this to you, listen carefully to what I say.” People do listen, and three thousand are reported to join the fellowship of Jesus’ disciples.

HEINRICH OGN

In first-century Judea, a round millstone-like rock was often rolled into place to seal a grave. Jesus' tomb was probably similar to this one, traditionally known as "Herod's Tomb" for Herod the Great. Archaeologists consider this more probably the burial site, not of Herod, but of his wife Mariamne. Herod himself was probably entombed in the Herodium (southeast of Bethlehem), one of the many fortresses and palaces he built throughout Judea.



The fact is, search though they certainly did, they couldn't find it.

So what could they do? Some no doubt suggested the Temple officials find another body, any body, and claim it was his. But then would they crucify it first? Where, how, and under what circumstances would you do the crucifying? And suppose the ruse were discovered! Better to just stay with the truth, some said. But then, what was the truth? No one knew—unless of course you were prepared to accept the preposterous fantasies of Jesus' followers. Such, for officialdom, was the imponderable problem the case posed.

But was this not in character? As they saw it, imponderables such as this had attended everything about the man since his initial appearance in Galilee some three years before.

His origins, like the origins of everything else in Galilee, were obscure. His widowed mother, now resident in Jerusalem with one of his faithful, told stories of curious manifestations in the heavens at the time of his birth, of angels appearing, of astrologers from the East, probably Zoroastrians, bringing gifts to the child. All patently ludicrous to those who had done away with him.

In any event, it had been disclosed during his trial that this man Jesus was not, in fact, Galilean-born. His mother, a direct descendant of King David, incidentally, and her husband had traveled south to Judea, specifically to the town of Bethlehem, six miles south of Jerusalem, to conform to one of the census schemes devised by Quirinius, governor of Syria at the time, who had jurisdiction over Judea.¹ You can't properly govern without assessing taxes, the Romans knew. To create a reliable tax roll, everyone had to be named, recorded, and

1. The precise year of Jesus Christ's birth, like the birth date of many great figures in the ancient world, is not known, and is confused by an apparent incompatibility between Matthew's account in the First Gospel and Luke's in the Third. Matthew has Jesus born before the death of Herod the Great, which occurred in 4 B.C. Luke ties the birth date to a census made in connection with a taxation scheme devised by Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, a Roman general and bureaucrat much mentioned by Roman historians, who became governor of Syria between A.D. 6 and 7. This, of course, would have Jesus born about a dozen years later. Some biblical historians hold that Luke erred. They say there had been earlier taxation censuses before Quirinius's, and Luke tied the birth to the wrong one. Other biblical historians see Luke as referring to an earlier census, when Quirinius was an administrator in the Middle East ca. 10–7 B.C.

counted. And the most efficient means of assuring accuracy, the Romans decided, was to require everyone to go back to the town of his birth.

This brought Jesus' heavily pregnant mother and her husband to Bethlehem, impossibly overcrowded because of the census. There, in the only space available, an animal stall behind a hotel, the child was born. Eight days later he was circumcised in the Temple at Jerusalem and given the name Joshua, or Jesus.²

The name, though historic, was not distinguishing. There could easily have been a dozen or more Jesuses in every Judean village. However, the venue of his birth had definite theological implications. Jesus' adherents claimed him as the Messiah, the promised Savior of Israel. According to one widely held theory, the Messiah must be born in Bethlehem, of one of David's descendants. In addition, as a child in the Temple, so the story went, two ancients, both of them revered as prophets, had recognized the child as the future "Anointed One," which is what "messiah" means.

2. The names Joshua and Jesus are in fact the same name. The Jewish version would be spelled in the English alphabet as Jehoshua; the Greek equivalent would be Iesous.

Pilate's Fate

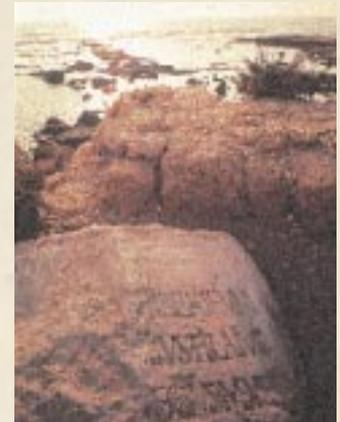
Some say he killed himself, some that he became Christian

Probably the most-mentioned Roman name in modern history is neither Julius Caesar nor Augustus, but rather that of a relatively minor Roman provincial governor called Pontius Pilate. The assertion that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate is recited in hundreds of languages all over the world in Christian creeds.

Nearly two millennia have passed since the death of this otherwise unremarkable bureaucrat, and little is known of his life except the details provided in the Gospels. The Jewish historian Josephus reports that Pilate ordered construction of an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem, and that the Jews were outraged—either because he used sacred funds for the project, or because he ran the aqueduct through a cemetery, making the water ceremonially undrinkable.

Josephus and the historian Philo both describe one or more incidents in which Pilate ordered images of the emperor Tiberius erected in Jerusalem. When the Jews vigorously protested, Pilate backed down. After his dramatic appearance in the New Testament, he slips into obscurity again.

For reasons that are unclear, Pilate was suspended from office in A.D. 37. Tradition holds that he committed suicide in 39. According to some early Christian writers, he killed himself in remorse over his part in the Crucifixion. Others say he recognized Jesus' divinity and became a believer himself. Over the centuries, that line of thought brought Pilate quite an honor: In the Ethiopian and Coptic churches, he is venerated as a saint. ■



Critics who were dubious about the historicity of Pontius Pilate were silenced by the twentieth-century discovery of a partially effaced stone inscription in seaside Caesarea. "... NTIUS PILATUS . . . ECTUS IUDAE . . ." it reads, identifying him as prefect of Judea. After the original was removed to a museum, this replica was placed at the discovery site near the ancient amphitheater of the city.

How preposterous, many genuinely pious Jews would respond. Was Israel's Messiah to be born in a stall and die on a Roman cross—a death as universally recognized for its shame as it was for its excruciating pain? The concept of the coming Messiah, the real Messiah, was the only sure hope of the Jewish people, they would say. For nearly ten centuries they had struggled to survive and preserve the Law and the sacrificial rituals in the Temple with which God had entrusted them. And survive they had, as a recurrently battered and beleaguered buffer state between the superpowers of East and West.

Once, more than a thousand years ago, under King David and his son Solomon, they had become something of a superpower themselves, but this hegemony was brief, and throughout most of those centuries they had suffered recurrent invasion, siege, slaughter, captivity, deportation into slavery, cultural genocide, every conceivable mode of human misery. Once even the Temple itself had been destroyed and most of the people dragged away captive.³ But God had soon seen to it that their captors were themselves overthrown, the people returned to their homeland, and their Temple restored.

Though the Messiah was merely a vision, a promise, the scholarly unanimously perceived this as a promise of the Scriptures. Every devout Jew believed implicitly in that promise. Messiah would come as the Scriptures foretold. He would be a conquering avenger who would right all wrongs, establish justice, and destroy forever the oppressor, whoever Israel's oppressor might be at the time.

There was, it is true, another very different view of the Messiah, implicit in some of the prophets. Isaiah in particular had foreseen the Anointed One not as a conqueror but as a suffering servant “despised for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities” and “numbered with the transgressors.” Yet, said Isaiah, with every lash stroke upon him, “we are healed. . . . For the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” All this was linked to the words of the suffering figure portrayed in the

3. Two temples were to stand atop the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The original was built by Solomon about 960 B.C., and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The second was built in 515 B.C., and vastly expanded by Herod the Great in the first century before Christ.



Underneath the main Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Greek Orthodox monks (right) clean the Grotto chapel, honored for centuries as the cave in which Jesus was born. At the left a Palestinian Christian venerates the spot (marked by a silver star) believed to be the actual spot where he lay.

Twenty-Second Psalm, who cries: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”—words this Jesus would repeat from the cross. However, this doleful view of the prospective Messiah was for obvious reasons not very popular, and it was discounted by the more optimistic as reflecting merely the continued suffering of the Jewish people as a whole.

The current oppressor was imperial Rome. Its general, Pompey, had conquered Jerusalem more than a hundred years before. He spared the Temple, but defiantly strode into its “Holy of Holies,” that sacred space that only the high priest could enter, then sneered that he had found in there nothing whatever. After that, Rome had lumped Judea, Galilee and a dozen other neighboring peoples

in with Syria to the north, under a prefect appointed by the emperor. Sometimes the chosen

method of government for Judea was a Roman proconsul or governor who usually reported to the prefect at Antioch. At other times, Rome would install a client king, preferably a Jew, to provide a veneer of Jewish independence. Such a king had been Herod the Great, who took power fifty-nine years after the Roman conquest, and who was regarded by many as a sort of fake Jew. He was in fact an Idumean, from Judea's neighboring people to the south whom the Jews, in a moment of ascendancy a century earlier, had coerced into Judaism. Herod, succeeding his father, a sycophant of Rome, had parlayed this modest opportunity skillfully, and had made himself Rome's indispensable and reliable cat's-paw over much of the Middle East.

He ruled with fierce consistency, bringing peace to the area for the whole forty-one years of his reign by ruthlessly exterminating the slightest manifestations of anti-Roman nationalism. At the same time, he tried to ingratiate himself with the Jews by creating architectural wonders whose scale and grandeur would astonish archaeologists twenty centuries later.

He built for himself numerous palaces, four of them within thirty miles of Jerusalem. Nothing could equal these for lavish summer luxury. But by far the

greatest and most magnificent of his palaces, named to honor his patron, the emperor Augustus, and his great general Marcus Agrippa, stood on the western edge of Jerusalem's Upper City. Its two vast reception halls enabled Herod to entertain hundreds of guests, while its opulent bedrooms and colonnaded courtyards, gardens and fountains brought renown even in faraway Rome. Peering from above it all were its three stout towers, 110 to 140 feet high, named for his brother Phasaël, his friend Hippicus, and his beloved Mariamne, the wife he adored but whom he was forced through palace intrigue into executing, leaving him in a grief from which he would never recover.⁴

In Jerusalem also, he rebuilt and strengthened the city's walls, and erected a Roman amphitheater, something many Jews did not appreciate, since it smacked of Hellenism, the hated culture of the Greeks which, since its insinuation into Palestine with Alexander the Great three hundred years before, the Jews had persistently though hopelessly resisted. At Caesarea, fifty miles northwest of Jerusalem, Herod had pushed breakwaters out from the Mediterranean beaches to create and enclose a superb harbor, its entrance adorned with six spectacular monuments. Beside the

Nothing could equal Herod's palaces for lavish summer luxury. Their opulent bedrooms, colonnaded courtyards, gardens and fountains brought renown even in Rome.

harbor he built a model Roman city, with its amphitheater and hippodrome, its underground sewer system and its crafted streets meeting at precise right angles.

Finally he erected—as possible refuges for himself in case of insurrection, it was said—a system of desert fortresses, chief among them Machaerus east of the Dead Sea, Hyrcania west of it, and most impregnable of all, Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea from a mountaintop so precipitous and treacherous that few conquerors would be determined enough to scale it in sufficient strength to take the fortress itself. But most prized by the Jews was his reconstruction of the Temple at Jerusalem into a building of such awesome scale that it seemed to be as physically permanent as the spiritual strength it represented.

There was, it is true, at least one connective between Jesus and Herod. The former was born in or about the year that the latter died. In the tradition of Jesus' followers there was another link. Herod, once made aware that the celestial occurrences which ostensibly attended the child's birth, had set off rumors that Jesus was the expected Messiah, had reacted characteristically and butchered every infant in the vicinity.

4. Mariamne's mother, Alexandra, was an irrepressible conspirator in the court of Herod the Great, according to Josephus. At one point she tried secretly to lure the Roman general Marc Antony into Mariamne's bed, though her daughter was Herod's wife. Herod finally pretended to acquiesce in another of Alexandra's ambitions, to have her son made high priest. He made the appointment, then had the son drowned in one of his swimming pools. Mother and daughter grieved so wildly that Herod feared for his own life and concluded he had to put both to death. Thereafter he was stricken with depression, with visions of his beloved Mariamne awakening him in the night.

Harsh perhaps, but then, which was worse? The liquidation of a few score infants, or yet another “religious” movement, which would rapidly become yet another Jewish independence crusade, occasioning yet another crackdown by Rome, resulting in yet another slaughter of thousands? Where possible, you nipped such weeds in the bud. That was Rome's way, and under Herod the policy had one indisputable thing going for it. For the most part, it worked. It preserved peace.

In this instance, however, it didn't quite work. In some way warned of what was coming—by an angel, in the view of his followers—Jesus' parents took the child south through the Negev Desert into Egypt, returning later to take up residence at the town of Nazareth in Galilee.

Thereafter, and for the next twenty-seven or so years, little was heard of him. Far more was heard and known of his cousin John. Here was a prophet in the true ascetic tradition. A wild fellow who lived off the land in the semi-desert country east of Jerusalem, he would emerge and preach on the banks of the Jordan River. Great crowds would come from the countryside, even from Jerusalem itself, to hear him.

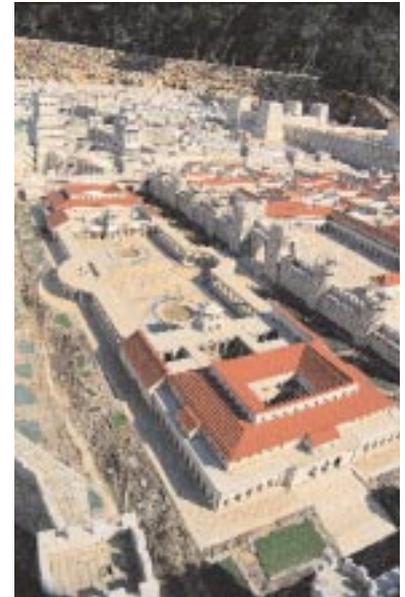
John's message was straight to the point. People—and by this he meant all the Jewish people—were living sinfully. God was enduring this, but God wouldn't do so much longer. The day of the Messiah was at hand, John said, and a great and terrible judgment was about to occur. Many believed him. What could they do? they asked. For this, he had two answers: repent and be baptized. Hundreds answered his call and were baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. Even the current Herod Antipas, son of the old tyrant and serving as tetrarch of Galilee, was said to have been strongly influenced by John.

One day this Jesus came from Nazareth and was himself baptized by John. There were reports of seemingly divine manifestations—of rumblings in the skies taken to be the voice of God, calling attention to this baptism. In any event, from that point on things began to change radically—for both Jesus and John.

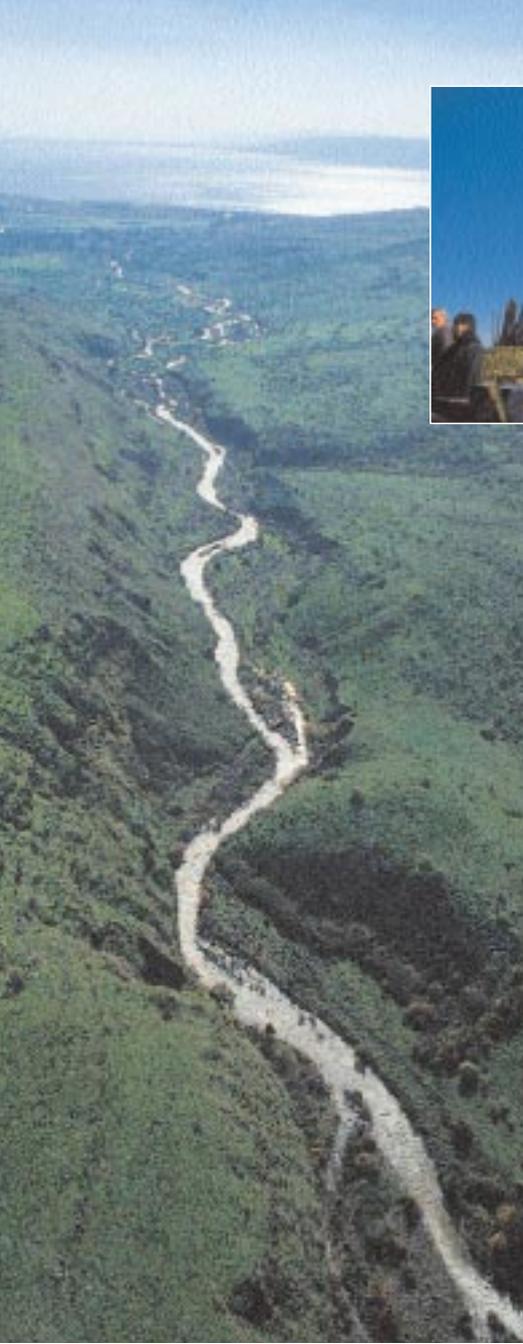
Soon after, Jesus appeared as a visiting rabbi in the synagogue at his hometown of Nazareth. There he read a passage from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Isaiah 61:1–2a RSV).

Then, rolling up the scroll, he said: “This day is that scripture fulfilled in your ears.” And he sat down while the congregation looked on astonished.



Herod's magnificent palace, located west of the Temple precincts, comprised two mirrored wings surrounding a spacious courtyard. To the north (upper left in the photo) was the citadel with its great towers. All that remain of the palace and its precincts are the enormous foundation blocks of one of these towers, the Phasaël, named after the king's brother. This model, built on the grounds of the Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem, is a reconstruction designed by Prof. M. Avi-Yonah.



The upper Jordan (left) courses from Mount Hermon and winds its way south toward Lake Tiberias, the biblical Sea of Galilee. One of the points on the river claimed to be the scene of Jesus' baptism is Qasr el Yahud (top), five miles east of Jericho and the same distance upstream from the Dead Sea. Here, faithful of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, bearing the icon of Christ's baptism, observe the Feast of Jordan in January. A cross towers over the baptismal site at Qasr el Yahud (above). A Christian pilgrim (opposite page, left), like millions of others, funnels the waters of the Jordan into a bottle to take home.

The Jordan

River of history, river of God

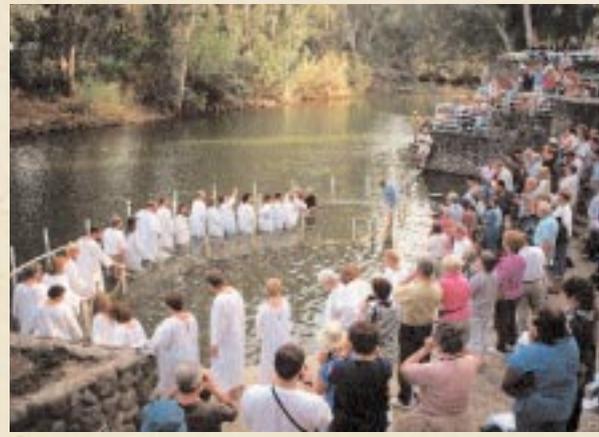
The Jordan River, a stream storied in the roots of Judaism and Christianity, spans the one hundred direct miles between Mount Hermon, on the Syria-Lebanon-Israel border and the Dead Sea, but its serpentine twists and turns give it a riverbed distance of some 225 miles. About halfway down its course it widens to create Lake Tiberias, the biblical Sea of Galilee, in whose bordering villages the ministry of Jesus unfolded.

It is not always a gentle river, sometimes crashing down through steep rapids as it descends 689 feet from its source in northeast Israel's Lake Huleh to Lake Tiberias, and another 610 feet from the lake to the Dead Sea. Much of this happens at some of the lowest elevations on earth. At Lake Tiberias the Jordan is 695 feet below sea level, at the Dead Sea 1,315 feet below.

In a farewell address to the Israelites, Moses, whom God forbade to cross the river himself, promised, "Hear, O Israel, thou art to pass over Jordan this day" (Deut. 9:1). His successor, Joshua, was said to have led the Israelites dry-shod across the Jordan near Jericho into the Promised Land (Josh. 3:14-17). The prophet Elijah walked across the river with his anointed successor, Elisha, then ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11). Elisha healed Naaman, the Syrian general, by commanding him to wash in the Jordan (2 Kings 5:10).

John the Baptist, of course, brings the Jordan into the Christian story. It is he who baptizes Jesus at the outset of his ministry. Two sites where John conducted his baptisms are observed, one near Jericho called in Arabic al-Maghtas, the other near the point where the Jordan leaves Lake Tiberias. Here, Christians over the centuries have come to be rebaptized.

The river itself is little more than a stream, ninety to one hundred feet wide, three to ten feet deep. The name Jordan (in Arabic al-Urdunn, in Hebrew Iha-Yarden) means "flowing downward" or "the descending." And descend it does, not only geographically but also through history, a phenomenon of nature focusing the attention of man on realities that lie beyond nature. ■



About ten miles downstream from Lake Tiberias is the second site on the Jordan claimed as the place where John baptized Jesus. Special facilities have been provided for the droves of visitors such as these American pilgrims (top and above), clad in white robes, who have lined up for baptism, often rebaptism, in the hallowed waters of the River Jordan.

He was proclaiming himself the Messiah. Now this was not all that unusual. There had been at least three claimant messiahs thirty-some years earlier after the death of Herod the Great, all of whom had led uprisings that were suppressed with fire and sword. But from his beginning in Nazareth, this Jesus was fundamentally different. Like his cousin, he shunned the political. Unlike his cousin, he did not choose to dwell in the desert. He lived with his followers and seemed to enjoy the company of people, sometimes a very disreputable company. The incident in Nazareth began a three-year ministry that aroused hundreds, possibly several thousand, usually to support him, occasionally to oppose or abandon him. His ministry had ended six weeks earlier on a cross outside Jerusalem. So, anyway, the authorities hoped.

The explanation for his success was not mysterious. The man had shocking powers. At first, the authorities very much questioned the recurring reports of the miraculous. But the evidence for these strange events was so overwhelming that by continually challenging their authenticity, officialdom began casting doubt upon its own credibility.

The most common among the miracles were the healing of diseases. Lepers were “cleansed,” paralytics were cured, fevers assumed to be fatal disappeared, a woman’s unstanchable “issue of blood” (probably caused by what would come to be known as fibroids) vanished, chronic edema went away, the deaf acquired hearing, a withered hand was made whole. On at least four occasions the blind recovered their sight. It went on and on. There were three

instances—one at Nain about eighteen miles southwest of the Galilean Sea (which the Romans called Lake Tiberias), one somewhere on the west shore of the lake and one at the village of Bethany on the very outskirts of Jerusalem—in which people who were presumed dead were restored to life. In two instances they were children. The Bethany case understandably alarmed the Temple officials. With many more exhibitions like this, they knew, his movement would become irresistible.

There were also repeated stories of exorcism. Mute people were made to speak, a demon-possessed little girl was suddenly rendered tranquilly sane; so was a young boy. One demoniac was cured in the middle of a synagogue service.

In addition, he seemed to exert some uncanny control over the natural elements. There were stories, understandably significant to commercial fishermen, in which he told them to put their nets down at a given spot and they promptly dragged in a huge haul of fish. In at least one instance, he commanded a bad storm to stop and it instantly ceased. In another, he actually walked over the water. He cursed a tree and it immediately withered and died; he somehow fed an enormous crowd of people out of a couple of baskets of bread and fish; and at a wedding reception in Cana, ten miles west of Lake Tiberias, where they ran out of wine and the hostess was no doubt frantic, he obliged by converting several vases of water into (they say) an extremely good vintage.

To those who opposed him, therefore, it became inescapable that this man’s power, if it were not from God (a possibility they viewed as absurd), must have



The fertile valleys and plains of Galilee were welltrodden by Jesus and his disciples during his brief ministry. The regions just west and north of the Sea of Galilee and the great pass of the Horns of Hittim (center) would have been especially familiar territory.

diabolical origins. The authorities logically concluded his miracles to be black magic and the man himself the agent of the devil. On this, both the high priestly party of the Sadducees and the party of the Pharisees agreed, though they agreed on little else.

And yet even they knew that the miracles, or magic, or whatever it was, could not alone account for his astonishing influence over the most improbable people. It was undeniable that he had been a beneficial influence in some ways. One of his followers, for instance, a man named Zaccheus, was a former tax collector. That is, he was one of those loathsome of the loathsome, a little quisling servant of the Romans who collected Caesar's taxes for him, overcharging and keeping whatever extra he could rake off for himself. It was a vicious system. But this Zaccheus suddenly up and gave half his goods to the poor and repaid the victims of his unfair assessments. With another tax collector, a certain Levi, whom they called Matthew, it was the same story.

Who's to blame? The Jews or the Romans?

It was neither, said Dorothy Sayers, but just ordinary people behaving as we ordinarily do, and Plato foresaw it all

Who was to blame for killing Jesus Christ? Down through the centuries that question was destined to arise, often with persecution and bloodshed. Was it the Jews? Was it the Romans? Was it both of them?

Christian theology has never, in fact, attributed the Crucifixion to either one. Rather it places the blame on what it calls in Latin *peccata mundi*, "the sins of the world." And, oddly, the first man to explain the Christian answer to the question did so about four hundred years before Christ.

It was the Greek philosopher Plato who, in his foundational work on human government, *The Republic*, posed a hypothetical question. Suppose, he said, that a perfectly just man came into the world. He must not merely seem just, but be just.

However, it's important that he not be viewed as just. If he were, he would be honored and rewarded, "and then we shall not know whether he is just for the sake of justice, or for the sake of honors and rewards.

"Therefore let him be clothed in justice only, and have no other covering. . . . Let him be the best of men, and let him be thought the worst. Then he will have been put to the proof, and we shall see whether he will be affected by the fear of infamy. And let him continue thus to the hour of his death, being just and seeming unjust."

Plato asked what the fate of such a man would be, and he answered his own question: "He will be scourged, racked, bound. He will have his eyes burned

out. And at last, after suffering every kind of evil, he will be impaled."

In short, Plato already saw the inevitable fate of perfection in our imperfect world. Whether a perfectly just man met that fate in Athens in the fifth century B.C., or in Jerusalem in the first century A.D., or in New York City in the twenty-first century A.D., the outcome was foreordained: torture and death. That is, Plato placed the blame on human nature.

A twentieth-century Christian dramatist, the English classicist and detective story writer Dorothy L. Sayers, makes the same point. In the introduction to *The Man Born to Be King*, her series of radio plays on the life of Christ, she writes:

"The Christian affirmation is that a number of quite common-place human beings, in an obscure province of the Roman Empire, killed and murdered God Almighty—quite casually, almost as a matter of routine, and certainly with no notion that they were doing anything out of the way.

"Their motives, on the whole, were defensible, and in some respects praiseworthy. There was some malice, some weakness, and no doubt some wresting of the law—but no more than we are accustomed to find in human affairs.

"By no jugglings of fate, by no unforeseeable coincidence, by no supernatural machinations, but by that destiny which is character, and by the unimaginative following of their ordinary standards of behavior, they

There were loose women, like the notorious Mary, who hailed from that cesspool of sin on the west shore of Lake Tiberias, Magdala, so foul that it even appalled the Romans. Mary, however, had totally reformed, so it was said, through his influence upon her. There had been highly placed people as well—like Nicodemus, and Joseph who came from Arimathea (a town whose location is lost to history), both of them respected members of the Sanhedrin.

But most of his followers were simple people—commercial fishermen, like this Simon whom he called "The Rock," to whom he was said to have bequeathed the leadership of his cult. The rest were mostly the sons of shepherds, or they were small businessmen and the like from the villages of Galilee, a prosperous enough region, however known, peopled not only by radical Jews seething for an insurrection, but also by the whole polyglot multiracial mix that first the Greeks and then the Romans had permitted to settle there. Religiously it was a backwater, a swamp,

were led, with a ghastly inevitability, to the commission of the crime of crimes.

"We, looking back, know what they were doing; the whole point and poignancy of the tragedy is lost unless we realize that they did not. . . . We are so much accustomed to seeing the whole story from a post-Resurrection, and indeed from a post-Nicene point of view, that we are apt, without realizing it, to attribute to all the New Testament characters the same theological awareness that we have ourselves.

"We judge their behavior as if all of them—disciples, Pharisees, Romans, and men in the street—had known with whom they were dealing, and what the meaning of all the events actually was. But they did not know it. The disciples had only the foggiest inkling of it, and nobody else came anywhere near grasping what it was all about.

"If the chief priests and the Roman governor had been aware they were engaged in crucifying God—if Herod the Great had ordered his famous massacre of the children at Bethlehem with the express purpose of doing away with God—then they would have been quite exceptionally wicked people.

"And indeed, we like to think that they were. It gives us a reassuring sensation that it can't happen here. . . .

"Unhappily, if we think about it at all, we must think otherwise. God was executed by people painfully like us, in a society very similar to our own—in the over-ripeness of the most splendid and sophisticated empire the world has ever seen. In a nation famous for its religious genius, and under a government renowned for its efficiency, he was executed by a corrupt church, a timid politician, and a fickle proletariat led by professional agitators. His executioners made vulgar jokes about him, called him filthy names, taunted him, smacked him in the face, flogged him with the lash, and hanged Him on the common gallows—a bloody, dusty, sweaty and sordid business.

"Show people that and they are shocked. So they should be. If that does not shock them, nothing can." ■



For British author and playwright Dorothy Sayers, Jesus died at the hands of people with no more malice than others in history, whose motives were defensible and even sometimes praiseworthy.

with every manner of heresy thriving—the very sort of place, senior Temple people concluded, that a man like this could gain a following.

But he was clever, oh so clever. His knowledge of the Law was overwhelming, and he had an uncanny ability to see through it and beyond it. This made him a holy terror in debate. Again and again they would try to corner him. Always it was a disaster, because he could run circles around the best professional disputants. “Who shall be greatest in your kingdom?” they asked him. It was a trap and he knew it. If he said the best man was he who best obeyed the Law, the Pharisees would back him but the Sadducees would boil over. If he said it was the man who most faithfully fulfilled the sacrifices required by Moses, the Pharisees would run him down. If he said it was he himself, they’d all pile on him. Instead, he took up a little child and held it high above his head. Whoever

Spotting the trap in the tax question, Jesus gave an ingenious answer. ‘Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar,’ he said, ‘and give to God what belongs to God.’

receives the Word of God with the honesty, integrity and simplicity of a child, he said, will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. They were all floored, and the women swarmed around him asking him to bless their children.

Then there was the case of the tax money. Should free Jews be paying taxes to Caesar, he was asked—a point that had been debated ever since the Romans arrived. Again, he saw the trap. If he said yes, he’d be called a traitor to Jewry and a coward. If he said no, the Romans could arrest him for sedition. “Show me the tribute money,” he declared, and they passed him a coin. “Whose head’s on it?” he demanded. “Caesar’s!” they all shouted. “Then give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give God what belongs to God.” It’s an ingenious answer. For what is it that belongs to God? We do, of course. What he was pointing out is that God doesn’t want our money, our time, our thought. He wants us! Every part of us. It was a complete answer, and it left them speechless.

All this, his critics would admit, must be placed on the man’s plus side. But then there was his negative side. His followers could be accused of showing a certain contempt for respectable ecclesiastical office. They were impatient, that is, with hypocrisy hiding under the guise of established authority, and they had no use at all for those who abused such power.

A case that clearly exemplifies this had occurred right in Jerusalem. A certain man, blind from birth, who for years had begged for alms with others on the Temple steps, apparently pleaded with this Jesus for his eyesight. Now this was the Sabbath, and the proper response would have been for Jesus to attend to the man the following day. Instead, he put some mud on the man’s eyes and told him to wash it off. When the man did so, he found he could see. So, anyway, the story went. Now since this beggar was well known, and since such a work of healing would represent a clear Sabbath violation, the case very

soon came to the attention of the local synagogue, whose council summoned the formerly blind man to appear.

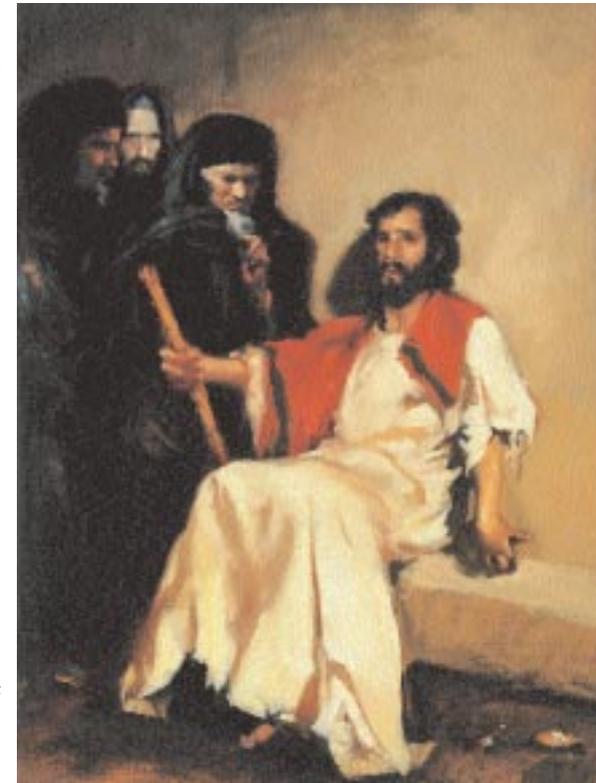
The ensuing conduct of this man was simply outrageous. His parents were called and refused to testify on his behalf. Then, as he was questioned, he began to point out the inconsistencies in the thinking of the council itself. Did the devil cure the sick? he demanded. Had ever a man born blind been cured before? Did God answer the prayers of bad men? Why was the council so interested in Jesus? Were its members thinking of becoming his disciples themselves? That kind of thing. In the end they shunned the man, expelled him from the synagogue, which of course cut him off from the whole community. He doubtless joined with Jesus’ other followers.

Meanwhile, the same criticism of abusive authority finally put an end to Jesus’ cousin John. After Herod Antipas’s brother died, Herod married his brother’s widow, Herodias. Since that represented a violation of the Law, John denounced him for it, and was arrested and imprisoned in the Machaerus. Herodias, by a cunning trick, forced Herod to execute him. Herod was much upset by this, because he admired John. But, like Jesus, John had simply gone too far.

Jesus, however, went a great deal farther than that. The most glaring and absolutely unspeakable element in his whole work and ministry lay in his theology. His pronouncements about his own identity rendered him absolutely unacceptable, a lunatic, a monster, or worse, perhaps the devil himself in human form.

The fact is, he consistently talked and acted—and it smacks of blasphemy to even repeat this—as though he were God himself. Not a servant of God. Not a prophet of God. Not even a mirror of God. But literally, the “Son of God.” God, as it were, in the person of a man, like the disgusting fables of the Romans and Greeks whose so-called gods walked the earth as humans in disguise.

Fresh from the pool of Siloam and reveling in the wonder of his newfound sight, the “man born blind” is more blind still to the fierce interrogation of the Pharisees gathered around him. Why did they want to hear the story of his healing again? he asks them. Were they thinking of becoming Jesus’ disciples too? This brings upon him a torrent of abuse. “You were steeped in sin at birth,” they say. “How dare you lecture us!”



HARRINGTON

The whole tradition of Jewry, the whole mission of the people, was to deny the very possibility of such an abomination. God is one, and God is other. Between God and the natural world there can exist no direct connection, only the connection of creator to creature, artist to painting, author to story. The one is fundamentally distinct from the other.

Yet this assertion of divinity, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, ran through almost everything Jesus taught and said. “Your sins,” he repeatedly told those whom he cured, “are forgiven.” An obvious blasphemy. If one man cheats another, the victim can forgive the cheater. But then along comes this fellow who wasn’t there when the offense took place and who had nothing whatever to do with it, and announces that he forgives the offender. It’s as though he himself were the party chiefly offended.

Does he not know that only God can forgive sins? What does he think the whole ritual of the Temple is about? The animal is sacrificed, as God directed, to

No prophet ever spoke as he did. Not the Greeks, not even Buddha. ‘I am the Way. I am the Truth. I am the Life,’ Jesus said. What sane person could talk like this?

atone for the sins of the individual and of the people as a whole. He apparently substitutes himself for the whole Temple process.

“Why,” he is asked, “do your followers not fast?” Fasting, denying one’s appetites to honor God, has always been a requirement under the Law. “The wedding guests,” he replies, “do not fast when the bridegroom is with them.” Pardon? Fasting is decreed by the Law. Only God, who gave the Law, could suspend the Law. The implication is indisputable. He’s saying he’s God.

He looked out on Jerusalem. How often, he observed, have I sent you prophets. So, he implies, it has been he who all along has been sending the prophets! Later came a repulsive invitation to some sort of cannibalism. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood,” he proclaimed, “has eternal life.” What on earth could that mean? Small wonder that sensible people vowed to have nothing more to do with him after that sort of proclamation.

No prophet ever spoke as he spoke. Nor did even the great teachers of the Greeks, nor the prophet they call Buddha. They all said, “This is the way you should live. This is the Truth about God. This is the life you should lead.” This man said, “I am the Way. I am the Truth. I am the Life.” What sane person could talk like this?

And then came his outrageous pronouncement within the precinct of the Temple itself. “Before Abraham was,” he announces, “I AM.” It’s the very name of God, the name the mere mention of which calls for the death penalty, and he applied it to himself. But he always cleverly relies on the element of shock. By the time his hearers recovered from this ghastly assertion and quite properly took up stones to rid themselves of him, he had slipped through the crowd and gone.

From what his intimate followers say, it got worse. “Show us God and we shall be satisfied,” said one of them, and the man replied: “Have I been with you all this time, and you don’t know who I am? The man who has seen me has seen God!” Totally deranged, obviously. Utterly possessed. Servant of Satan. But fortunately, these assertions had by now become so commonplace that the high priest Caiaphas was able to use them to put a swift end to the problem. Or so he thought.

Arresting Jesus wasn’t simple. He had by now a huge following in the countryside, and hundreds of his followers had come to Jerusalem for Passover. If he had been arrested publicly a riot was almost certain. And the high priests emphatically did not want that. Forty years before, a riot that broke out at Passover had led to a further outbreak at Pentecost fifty days later, during which the Romans rounded up two thousand people and skewered them to crosses all over the city. Caiaphas didn’t want something like that on his conscience. The man had to be arrested, tried, convicted and put down before most people knew what was going on.

Jesus’ followers were uncommonly loyal. Except, that is, for one, a fellow named Iscariot who, as the high priests doubtless saw it, had finally perceived the essential fraudulence of this Nazarene and was willing to tell them where he could be quietly arrested without trouble—in the Gethsemane Garden up on the Mount of Olives, where he and his lieutenants would be spending the night.

The arrest came off with only a minor altercation—predictably caused by the designated favorite Simon who, as so often happens with such people, subsequently denied even knowing this Jesus (Some Rock!). But the trial that followed went badly. To convict the accused, under the Jewish system, at least two witnesses had to agree. No two could be found who did.

That’s when Caiaphas played his trump card. Knowing the man’s bizarre theology, he first put the prisoner under oath—a questionable expedient, since he proposed to convict the witness out of his own mouth, but there were precedents for it. He then simply asked the man who he was. Jesus replied, as Caiaphas had plainly foreseen, with the name of God, and he quietly added that he would return as judge of the world. Now this must be either a staggering truth or a patently obvious blasphemy. Since to Caiaphas the former was ridiculous, he assumed the latter, declared it blasphemy, ritually ripped his high priestly robe, and pronounced the death penalty.

Such a sentence required Roman approval because the Romans would have to carry it out. This meant taking the case to Pilate who, seeing the Jewish



It was death for the Jews to speak the name of God. When they wrote it, it was called the Tetragrammaton for the four Hebrew letters of the name, YHWH (read in Hebrew from right to left). Its written form, however, became an object of devotion and was placed on the Shiviti, a decorative plaque usually hung on the eastern wall of synagogues to indicate the proper direction of prayer. This Shiviti is a nineteenth-century folk-art version from Persia.



HARRINGTON

Confronting a crowd of followers and detractors, Jesus horrifies both. He not only speaks the unutterable name of God—I AM—but applies it to himself. "At this," records John, "they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the Temple grounds."

authorities wanted the man dead, instantly decided to try keeping him alive. He stalled, sending the case to Herod Antipas because the man was a Galilean, not a Judean, and therefore the matter was not within his jurisdiction. But Herod bounced it back after discovering the man had been born at Bethlehem in Judea after all, and was therefore Pilate's problem.

Now Pilate, whatever else might be said about him, was a Roman. And the Romans, for all their brutality, had a powerful sense of justice. There seemed to be a miscarriage of it here. Furthermore, Jesus, standing calm, silent, utterly controlled, impressed him. Here was a Jew behaving like a Roman. Then, too, there was that curious story of Pilate's wife dreaming about the man and sending a note warning her husband to have nothing to do with the case.

So Pilate's next move was to offer Jesus as "Passover Prisoner"—it was a tradition that one condemned man be liberated every year on the national holiday. But this move had been foreseen, and the crowd was coached into demanding someone else. "Ecce homo!" cried Pilate to the crowd—"Behold the man!" But, stirred up by the high priests and elders, they cried for his blood: "Let him be crucified!"

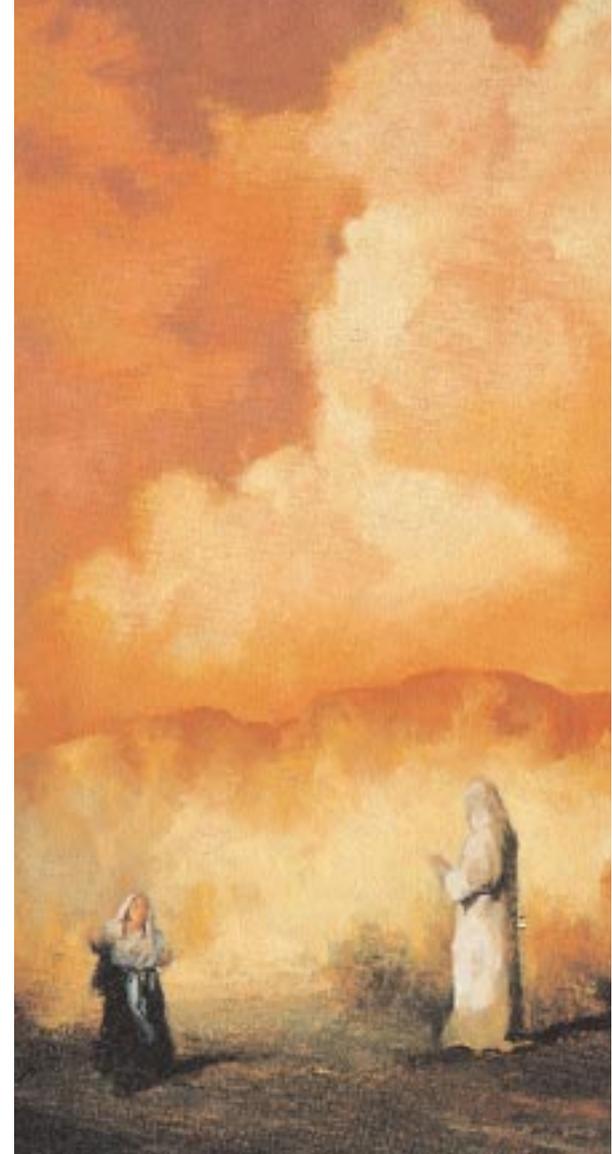
And in the end, Pilate caved in. Caiaphas apparently knew him well. Pilate had already been on the carpet at Rome for his treatment of the Jews. Jesus was talking of establishing a "kingdom." That would have to be deemed sedition. If Pilate let him go, said Caiaphas, he would demonstrate himself "not Caesar's friend." That ploy was all it took. Pilate symbolically washed his hands to absolve himself of what he considered an unjust verdict, then ordered the crucifixion to proceed. That meant first the lash, and then the cross.

Jesus unquestionably died well. None of the usual cursing and screaming. Even the duty centurion commanding the execution squad was impressed, calling him "Truly, the Son of God." Not that it proved much. This Jesus seemed to have had what people would consider an unhealthy respect for the Roman army. He had actually once cured the servant of a centurion and announced the man had greater faith than anything he had encountered among the Jews. Something about their discipline, no doubt. In any event what did it matter that a Roman called someone "Son of God"? Roman gods constantly haunted the earth, even breeding with mortals to beget hybrid children.

By that night, the prisoner was declared dead, and the Passover Feast had still not begun. The whole business was over and done with in little more than a day—all told, a very efficient piece of work by Caiaphas, considering the problems he faced. Understandably, therefore, by that Passover eve it seemed certain that this would spell the end of the "Jesus" movement, or whatever they called it.

There had been, or so it was rumored, a curious incident, however. When the man died, the veil of the curtain covering the Holy of Holies, the most sacred precinct in the Temple, had suddenly split in two from the top to the bottom. If true this was a most ominous sign. Then, two days later the whole thing began blowing up. His followers, who it was assumed would rapidly disperse, instead were all over the city and countryside. "Jesus is alive," they proclaimed. "He is

Archaeological proof of the existence of the high priest Caiaphas, this forty-inch-long ossuary found in a Jerusalem tomb, held his bones. After a body disintegrated, the bones were often deposited in an ossuary to preserve scarce burial sites for future members of the family.



Only when the resurrected Jesus addresses her by name does Mary Magdalene recognize the man she had assumed to be a gardener as the resurrected Jesus. "Mary," he says softly. "Rabboni!" she replies ecstatically in Aramaic, meaning "my teacher," probably the term by which his disciples affectionately knew him.

risen.” They seemed absolutely convinced of it—convinced enough, anyway, to risk arrest for saying so. For the high priests, the thing was getting completely out of hand, and now came this drunken extravaganza in the streets.

Messiah is come, said the Nazarene’s followers. They will convert Jewry. They will convert the world. “Some hope!” the high priests no doubt scoffed. A ragged mob of fishermen, ex-tax collectors, shopkeepers and shepherders. Human gullibility seems boundless. They have no leaders, no money, no sound scholarship, no credibility, and no official status. And what was all this babbling about the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Do they not understand that the faith is as permanent and secure as the Temple itself? And firm the Temple would stand, the high priests said, until the real Messiah finally arrives. ■

Crucifixion: No death more hideous

Rome’s awful experts made certain it was painful, humiliating—and slow

The “most extreme form of punishment,” wrote the Roman senator and lawyer Cicero about seventy-five years before the birth of Christ, is crucifixion. He called it “atrociously cruel,” not only in the physical pain it inflicts, but equally in the humiliation it brings to the man crucified.

“The very word ‘cross’ should be far removed,” he said, “not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not merely the actual occurrence of these things but the very mention of them that is unworthy of a Roman citizen or a free man.”

To Romans, both the cross and the

executioner who tied the prisoner’s hands, veiled his head and crucified him, were realities not mentioned in polite company. Only rarely were Roman citizens crucified, usually on a charge of high treason in wartime.

For slaves, however, or for rebellious Roman troops, or cities resisting siege, or brigands and highway robbers, it was the acceptable form of punishment, and its usage goes back long before the Romans to the Phoenicians, Persians, and Egyptians. The Phoenicians had tried other forms of execution—spearing, boiling in oil, strangulation, stoning, drowning, burning—but had rejected them all as too quick. Crucifixion, especially in its early usage, was rarely quick.

It was also much-used by the Greeks. Writing in the fifth century B.C., Plato describes the fate of a conspirator who had sought to establish himself as a tyrant: “He is put on a rack and

mutilated, forced to watch his wife and children subjected to many other signal outrages, then finally crucified or burned on a coat of pitch.” Herodotus, Plato’s contemporary, describes the execution of the ruler Atayctes: “They nailed him to a plank and left him there, then stoned to death his son before his eyes.”

But it was the ever-efficient Romans who made the most use of crucifixion. Of their three common forms of execution, decapitation by sword was the least severe, burning next, and crucifixion the worst. In its early Roman form, it was reserved entirely for slaves who would hear the dread words from the sentencing magistrate: “*Pone crucem servo*”—“Put the cross on the slave.” In the Spartacus rebellion of 73 B.C., six thousand slaves were crucified on a single day.

Even death in the arena, where the victims were torn to pieces by wild animals, was not as severe as crucifixion, if only because it came more quickly. But death by wild beasts was costly and cumbersome. Crucifixion, on the other hand, was cheap and could be arranged almost anywhere.

In the Roman practice, the prisoner was always flogged first. The Romans saw this beating as “half death,” because it must stop short of actually killing the prisoner. A man, called a *lictor*, was trained

in the use of the *flagellum*, which consisted of a wooden handle and several long thongs of leather at the end of which were sewn pieces of bone or chain. The number of strokes was never specified, nor was the part of the body upon which the prisoner could be beaten. As the strokes followed one after the other, however, the prisoner must be checked carefully, because a man could die under a Roman flogging, and if he did, the *lictor* would be held responsible.

Sometimes the cross consisted solely of a six-foot vertical stake (they called it the *stipes crucis*), but more frequently this was combined with a crosspiece (*patibulum*) in the form of a T or an X. Sometimes (as with Jesus)



A reconstruction near Jerusalem of the type of cross likely employed by the Romans in first-century Judea shows the *sedecula*, a plank fastened to the upright below the main cross-beam. It provided the victim, whose torso had been twisted to the side, sufficient support to prolong the agony of his death.

In 1968, construction crews uncovered the tomb of “Jehohanan the son of HGQWL,” who had been crucified in the first century A.D. The right beel bone was pierced laterally by a four and a half inch spike, and remains of olive wood were found between the nail and the bone. This suggests that the nail had first been driven through a wooden plaque to hold the victim more securely to the main upright of the cross.





HARRINGTON

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
... a company of executioners encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet...
they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots.
But thou, O LORD, be not far off! O thou my help, hasten to my aid!
... I will tell of thy name to my brethren;
... men shall tell of the LORD to the coming generation, and proclaim
his deliverance to a people yet unborn, that he has wrought it."

Psalm 22 (RSV), written a thousand years before that day on Golgotha

the crosspiece was lowered slightly below the top of the upright to make room for a placard proclaiming the man's crime.

The assembled cross they called the *crux humilis*, if it was for a common slave or brigand. For a distinguished prisoner—an enemy leader or a celebrated rebel—a *crux sublimis* was used, raising the victim much higher off the ground.

The victim carried either the whole cross or the crosspiece to the scene of his execution. The Romans made a practice of conducting crucifixions beside the most crowded roads, so that as many people as possible would be paralyzed with horror and fear.

Once at the site, the victim was stripped naked, save for a cloth that covered his genital area and was folded behind his back. His near nakedness was not only intended to add to his humiliation, but more pertinently to expose him to the constant torment of insects.

The soldiers first tied his shoulders to the upright beam, then held one arm flat against the crosspiece. A five-inch spike was then hammered through the tender gap between the bones in the middle of the wrist. After the other wrist was impaled, the legs were then stretched out, one foot placed over the other, and a single spike driven through both feet.

At this point, kind women would sometimes approach the victim and give him a mixture of wine and an herb intended to relieve pain by rendering the accused groggy. This was in fact against the Law. Usually, however, the soldiers allowed it. In Jesus' case, he refused to take it, apparently convinced that he had to remain fully conscious

throughout the whole ordeal.

When the cross was raised, the ultimate torment assailed the prisoner. His shoulders were tied back to the upright beam, and by hoisting himself upward he could relieve, to a degree, the excruciating pain in his feet, which were carrying most of his weight. But in this position, he could not properly breathe. He would gasp for air, and in so doing let his weight fall back onto his feet. Sometimes a small plank called a *sedecula*, or seat, was fastened to provide support and thereby prolong the agony.

Since no vital organs were injured, death usually came very slowly, perhaps over several days. The worst aspect of it, said one witness, was the screaming. Sometimes, out of pity, their own boredom, or some other consideration, the soldiers would break the prisoner's legs. This prevented him from resting his weight on his feet, and he would suffocate. Such a "humanitarian" measure, however, was not common among Romans. If for no other cause, the victim would eventually die from hunger or thirst.

The actual posture of the victim on the cross depended on the sadistic whim of the executioner. The Roman philosopher, statesman, and actor Seneca notes: "I see crosses there, not just of one kind, but made in many different ways; some of their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the gibbet." Sometimes, writes the Jewish historian Josephus, "the soldiers themselves in rage and bitterness nailed up their victims in different

postures as a grim joke.”

It was slaves, however, far more than enemies, who suffered crucifixion under the Romans. The satirical poet Juvenal, born about the mid-first century, tells of a Roman matron who wanted a slave crucified. To her husband’s objection, she replied: “This is my will and my command. If you are looking for a reason it is simply that I want it.” The poet Horace tells of a slave whose master caught him tasting the soup as he brought it from the kitchen. The master had him crucified.

Horace, with gallows humor, speaks of “feeding the crows while on the cross.” Plautus, in 184 B.C., writes of the “horrible cross of slaves,” and he quotes one slave’s fatalistic pessimism: “I know the cross will be my grave, that is where my ancestors are, my father, grandfathers, great-grandfathers and great-great-grandfathers.”

The usual Jewish form of execution was stoning. However, the idea of exhibiting bodies as a warning to others was required by the Jewish Law. The corpses of convicted blasphemers and idolaters must be hanged on a tree to show that they were cursed by God.

Jews, too, occasionally imposed crucifixion. Josephus recalls that during the Hasmonian-Hellenistic period, the high priest Alexander Janneus (103–76 BC) had eight hundred Pharisees crucified, and ordered their wives and children to be slaughtered before their eyes as they hung dying.

Like the Romans, Jews regarded crucifixion as shameful. A crucified person was regarded as cursed by God. The sheer dishonor of such a death, many said, argued incontestably against Jesus being the Messiah.

Crucifixion remained the standard method of Roman execution until the emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in the fourth century A.D., and formally abolished it.

Not for another two hundred years did “naturalistic” crucifixes, showing the body of a human Christ nailed to the cross, appear in Christian devotions, and not until the thirteenth century did they regularly appear over the altars of Christian churches. By then, the hideous reality of the act itself was something few human beings would ever have to see. ■