

Historical account of Jesus' execution said unavailable

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Historical evidence surrounding the trial and execution of Jesus is not available, said a Jewish scholar who spoke to Jews and Christians in a community lecture in Mobile.

Dr. Michael Cook, associate professor of intertestamental and early Christian literatures at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, spoke for nearly an hour at the Jewish Community Center about various scholarly views that have been presented concerning Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Rabbi Cook said, "There is no way by which historians are ever going to be able in a persuasive manner to convince us of what really happened because the historical evidence simply is not available to us.

"The Gospel accounts are available, but they reflect events and problems that arose after the death of Jesus."

The speaker said scholars, primarily Christian scholars, have written hundreds of books and articles analyzing events surrounding Jesus' execution, but Christian lay persons generally are unaware of this scholarly work. "There is a tremendous gap between good Christian scholarship on the one hand and that which filters down to the Christian laity on the other."

Cook said Jews have suffered for centuries because "the Gospels hold the Jewish people responsible for Jesus' trial and accountable for his death...."

Christian scholars, Cook said, are aware of discrepancies "between

the way in which, on the one hand, we are told the Jews conducted capital court cases and, on the other hand, the way in which we are told in the Gospels that Jesus in particular was tried.

"The Talmud, the ancient compendium of Jewish law, tells us that defendants in capital cases were tried with the utmost respect for their rights, and stringent measures were taken to prevent any wrongful convictions.

"The Gospels tell us, by extreme contrast, that Jesus was tried summarily by a court bent on immediate conviction, a court not only entirely unconcerned with Jesus' rights but willing to secure false witness so as to guarantee his condemnation."

According to the speaker, the account of the Gospels of the way Jesus was tried "seems to contradict much of what we presumably know about Jewish trial procedures in as many as 22 different ways."

He selected five of the 22 ways as examples:

"The Talmud tells us that all capital cases begin with arguments for the defense so that all judges may be persuaded of the innocence of the accused, but according to the Gospels, the only arguments given at Jesus' trial were those of the prosecution...."

"The Talmud says that no capital case may be held on a holiday, including the Sabbath, or on the day before a holiday. Yet three of the Gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — tell us that Jesus was tried on the festival of Passover while the Gospel according to John says that the trial was on the day before Passover...."

"The Talmud tells

us that while a verdict for acquittal may be reached the same day as the trial, a verdict of guilty can only be reached on the following day so that the judges may have a whole night to think the matter over and possibly change their minds, saving the defendant ... but the Gospels tell us that Jesus was convicted virtually immediately after the trial began...."

"The Gospels tell us that Jesus was tried for blasphemy at his trial, but the Talmud tells us that no one can be convicted for blasphemy unless he utters the name of God as part of a blasphemous statement. In the Gospels, of course, Jesus never says anything blasphemous of God at his trial or at any other time...."

"The Gospels say that Jesus was crucified at the behest of the Jews, but according to the Talmud, while the Jews did have the right to execute criminals, crucifixion was not a type of punishment practiced or called for by Jews in Jesus' time or ever...."

The rabbi explained the procedures for capital cases named in the Talmud are for capital cases in general. "It is only the Gospels that tell us about the trial of Jesus in particular." Since the Talmud does not discuss Jesus' trial, the discrepancies are between "procedures in capital cases in general according to the Talmud and the procedures in Jesus' trial in particular according to the Gospels."

Solutions which scholars, mainly Christians, have offered for the discrepancies were categorized into five major classifications by Cook:

Solution one — "If

there are discrepancies between the Talmud on the one hand and the Gospels on the other, we must assume that it is the Gospels which are correct and the Talmud which is wrong when it comes to the case of the trial of Jesus.... Perhaps the trial of Jesus was unique, this argument goes, and the usual procedures for capital cases as outlined in the Talmud were suspended in this one case...."

Solution two — The Gospels are "to be considered incorrect in their account of the trial, and furthermore, Christian bias, as some have alleged, may have distorted what the Jewish trial procedures actually were. Moreover, this argument often continues, none of Jesus' followers was in the courtroom anyway. By the Gospels' testimony, all of them had run away except for Peter, who was in the courtyard outside. Hence, no Christian actually witnessed the trial, which was really conducted with decency and respect for the accused just as the Talmud prescribed...."

Solution three — "Both the Talmud and the Gospels are right, but they refer to essentially different centuries.... The procedures of Jewish jurisprudence outlined in the Talmud were those followed by the Sanhedrin (Jewish court) in the end of the first and in the beginning of the second and then later centuries, long after Jesus died ... but the sanhedrin's procedures decades earlier at the time when Jesus himself lived, in the very early first century, were different. Those procedures were less humanitarian...."

Solution four — "Both the Talmud and the Gospels are right, but

their descriptions do not refer to one and the same sanhedrin. In other words, in Jesus' day, it is proposed by some scholars, there were two sanhedrins existing contemporaneously. One was a religious sanhedrin, which is described in the Talmud. The other was a political sanhedrin, described for us by the Gospels...."

Solution five — The Talmud's account of Jewish jurisprudence in the sanhedrin is "an idealization either of what the rabbis imagined the sanhedrin had been in the remote past or what they dreamed it would or should or could be in the distant future. Since a sanhedrin of the type which the rabbis described never actually existed, the problem over the discrepancies between the Gospels and the Talmud loses all practical significance...."

(Cook disagreed with the five solutions, and next Saturday The Press Register will present the Jewish scholar's views of Jesus' trial.)