

What killed Jesus?

By SYLVIA HART
Press Register Reporter

In addressing the question "What killed Jesus?" a Jewish scholar who spoke in Mobile gave the answer, "Roman imperialism."

DR. ELLIS Rivkin, professor of Jewish history at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, said in a public lecture at Spring Hill Avenue Temple that Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of Christianity, was killed nearly 2,000 years ago by a system that included various officials who received their authority from the Roman government.

Rivkin said he made his statement on the basis of more than 30 years of careful studies of the limited sources available about Jesus.

BECAUSE OF limited sources about Jesus, a modern-day scholar could conclude that "we'll never be able to restore who that historical Jesus was," Rivkin said in his lecture of 1-3/4 hours.

"Therefore, (a scholar might say that) one should content oneself with the Jesus of faith, the Jesus of the Christian community, the Christ that ultimately is the reality that Christians should be concerned with, and we should give up the kind of quest that is bound to be in vain."

RIVKIN SAID the purpose of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the four Christian Gospels, "was not to give us biography (of Jesus). The purpose of these Gospels was to give us teachings, give us illumination."

Moreover, he said the first three Gospels, known as the Synoptic Gospels, give a different portrait of Jesus from the Gospel of John.

The Synoptic Gospels, Rivkin said, present "a human portrayal of a kind of charismatic person (Jesus), someone who is certainly endowed with God's spirit and who has a certain kind of divine destiny, but nonetheless the humanity of Jesus is everywhere in the forefront."

THE GOSPEL of John gives a portrait that is "quite the reverse. It's Jesus' divinity that we are most struck by, and his humanity is something that's much more in the background."

The major Jewish source, Josephus, a Jewish historian who was born "about the time the crucifixion of Jesus took place," does not "tell us anything about Jesus or his ministry or the trial or the crucifixion," according to the lecturer.

NONETHELESS, FROM careful study, "what we build up from Josephus is the structure of the time and the matrix within which Jesus would have had to carry through his ministry and in which he would have had to go through the trial and crucifixion and the reported resurrection."

Josephus describes the Jews in the time of Jesus as living under the rule of

Rome. "They were not independent. Roman imperial authority held sway over Palestine."

RIVKIN TALKED about the various authorities of Roman imperialism.

AT THE TOP was the Roman emperor, who had a goal of becoming financially rich by the "exaction of tribute" from the Jews and other people under his authority. Another goal was to maintain law and order, to keep the subject people from rising up in revolt.

THE EMPEROR appointed a procurator, or governor, over Palestine, whose goals were, "in order to keep his own position and move up in the hierarchy of governing opportunities and power, to find ways of exacting tribute without at the same time provoking revolt."

A special problem in Palestine for the procurator was that the Jews worshiped a single God, not the Roman emperor, as did others under Roman authority. Thus "the emperors and procurators for the most part were very careful lest they provoke these people to revolt by interfering in their belief in a single God."

IN ORDER to achieve his goals, the procurator "needed some kind of help from among the Jews themselves." Thus the procurator appointed a high priest from among the Jews.

This type of appointment by the procurator "had no religious legitimacy or justification whatever. In the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), the priesthood was ordained by God through Moses. It was to be carried through in the family of Aaron ... as an hereditary right," according to the lecturer.

He added, "One who was willing to be a high priest under such conditions (as being appointed by the procurator) could only be a person who had political ambitions, who was motivated by power and whose commitment to Judaism was very secondary."

The high priest served as the eyes and ears for the procurator, looking and listening for signs of disloyalty among the Jews toward the Roman Empire. The high priest, according to Rivkin, was "an extension of the authority of the emperor and the procurator."

RIVKIN CONTINUED, "The high priest alone was not able to carry out his function as the eyes and ears. He needed some kind of additional counsel and advice, and therefore he appointed a council called ... a sanhedrin, made up of individuals he could turn to and consult as to whether this particular dissident or that particular dissident is engaged in activities that should be called to the attention of the procurator."

The sanhedrin, according to Rivkin, "exclusively means an appointive body by someone in political authority ... to serve political purposes and have no religious function whatsoever."

TURNING HIS discussion away from the political system, Rivkin talked about the religious system in the Palestine of Jesus' day.

"THE SCRIBES-PHARISEES were the establishment that the majority of Jews followed, the ones who were normative Judaism," the lecturer said.

He described the Scribes-Pharisees as having "the goal of salvation, of eternal life and resurrection that awaited the individual who was law-abiding and listened to the teachings of the Scribes-Pharisees, who taught that God had given two laws, a written law and an oral law, and that if one internalized these laws and observed these laws then that person could look to eternal life and resurrection."

ANOTHER RELIGIOUS grouping in Judaism was the Sadducees, "who mainly represented the priesthood and a very small minority of the people who believed only in the written law — not the written and oral law."

A THIRD grouping: the Essenes, "a group that had withdrawn from society to live an ascetic life."

RIVKIN ALSO listed a so-called "fourth philosophy," a group of Jews who "challenged the right of the (Roman) emperor to take tribute, and they became revolutionary."

A FIFTH grouping that developed could best be described as charismatic, according to Rivkin. Many adherents to this movement had "messianic pretensions, who did not call on the people for violent revolt but who called on the people to undergo some kind of religious transformation ... and one way or another promised them as consequences for this kind of renewal that God would bring his kingdom. The messianic age would be at hand."

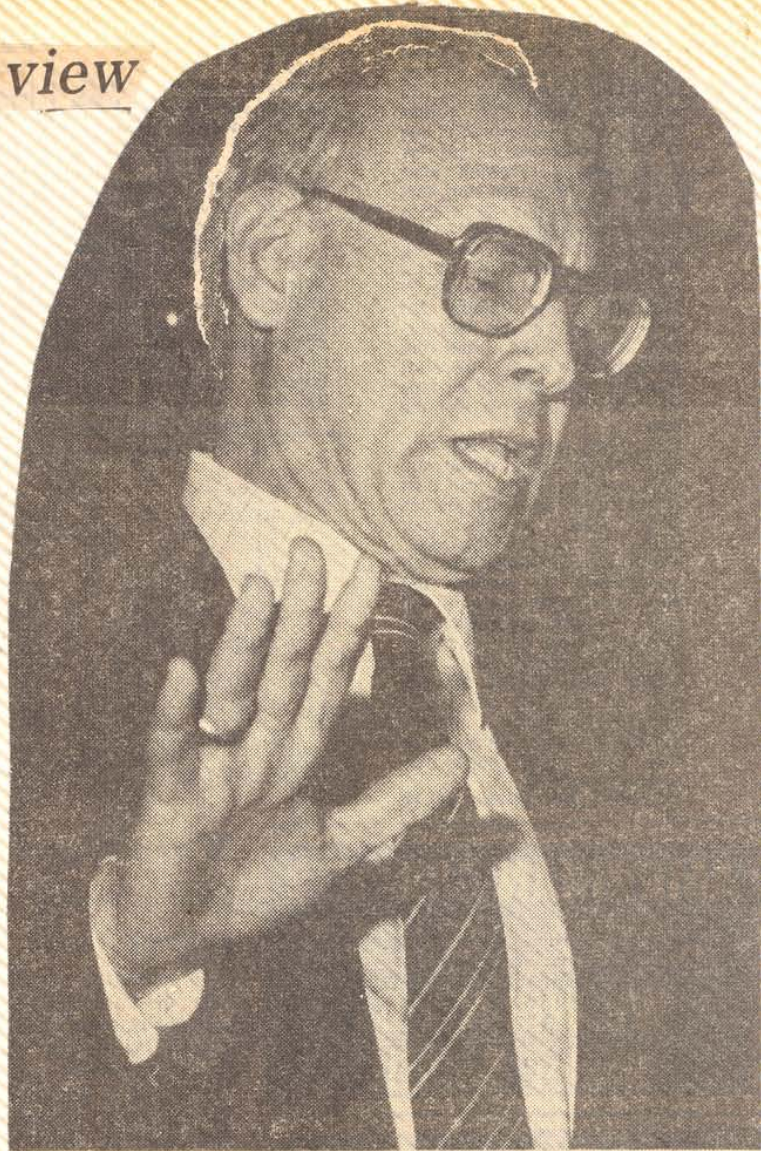
Rivkin identified John the Baptist as a charismatic. John the Baptist was "a person who Josephus called a goodly man who was simply a religious leader, and Josephus found no kind of evil in him."

Josephus says that John the Baptist "was put to death not for what he taught but because his eloquence attracted crowds, and crowds were dangerous.... It didn't make any difference that John the Baptist preached nonviolence.... The crowds could get out of hand."

The "eyes and the ears" of the procurator were "especially adapted to" detecting trouble in situations such as created by John the Baptist.

RIVKIN DESCRIBED Jesus as "the charismatic of charismatics." He would "be a person whose caring concern was for those who were suffering, the poor, the downtrodden, the wretched, the sick, the helpless, even sinners themselves; moving among those who were the rejects of society bringing love, bringing affection, bringing healing, bringing comfort, bringing promise of the coming of the kingdom that will be precisely for those who have been the rejected, those who have been suffering, those who have been neglected if only they were to have that faith that the kingdom would come and their lives would show it."

Jewish teacher's view



(Mobile Press Register photo)

Ellis Rivkin

The speaker said, "Such a charismatic of charismatics would be attracting crowds with his eloquence.... Any kind of incident could immediately alert the high priest to a danger that was here, and the high priest would bring that charismatic of charismatics before a political council and there try him not on religious grounds but on political grounds.

"REMEMBER, POLITICAL grounds did not have to be the preaching of violent revolution. Political grounds were simply preaching the coming of the kingdom as other than the Roman kingdom."

When Jesus was crucified, "those who were touched by this charismatic of charismatics would ... deny the reality of Jesus' death. Given their belief in eternal life and resurrection which the Scribes-Pharisees taught and which this charismatic of charismatics likewise

taught, they would be prepared to see their beloved charismatic of charismatics, their beloved teacher, risen from the dead, resurrected."

Rivkin said the only mention by Josephus of Jesus is a reference to the illegitimate killing of James by the high priest. Josephus refers to James as "the brother of Jesus called the Christ."

RIVKIN PRESENTED the view that Josephus, who was writing in about the year 90, did not need to make further reference to Christ because the Greco-Roman readers of Josephus' time "all knew about this Christian movement."

Therefore, "all Josephus had to write, 'You know why James got into difficulty — because he was the brother of Jesus called the Christ.' Consequently, he must have been teaching Jesus as risen from the dead."