Who Was Responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus?

Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, and the Herods

The question of who is responsible for putting Jesus to death has been argued and re-argued on a regular basis. Those who read the gospel accounts literally assign the blame largely to the Jews, led by Caiaphas, and see Pilate as someone who unwillingly went along with their demands. Current scholarship points toward Pilate and the Romans who were seeking to prevent a riot, though Caiaphas and the other Jewish leaders might have encouraged such a view.1 Herod is mentioned in the gospels in relation to Jesus’ death only because Pilate sees him as a way to avoid responsibility. Historically, Herod probably had nothing to do with Jesus’ death, though he did put John the Baptist to death, whether to prevent a rebellion or because of John’s criticism of his marriage. The books of three of the five authors here—Burgess, Ricci, and Kazantzakis—divide the blame between the Romans, led by Pilate, and the Jews, led by Caiaphas. Mailer’s novel puts the burden completely on the Jews, while Ricci’s does the same for the Romans. All five writers draw on the gospels and noncanonical writings and legends in crafting their characterizations of Caiaphas, Pilate, and Herod.

Caiaphas

Burgess’ novel develops Caiaphas much more fully than do any of the other books. The novels by Kazantzakis, Ricci, and Saramago barely mention him, as does Mailer’s, though Mailer’s lack of mention means much more than those of the others.

1John Dominic Crossan’s Who Killed Jesus? is a good example of this argument, as are most books by members of the Jesus Seminar.
Although the early parts of *Man of Nazareth* seem to deviate from the gospel portrayal of Caiaphas, the book eventually follows it completely, and then even makes Caiaphas seem worse than he is in the gospel accounts. In the gospels, both Luke and Mark largely ignore Caiaphas; Luke mentions him in passing, and Mark shows Jesus being taken to the high priest, but he is not named. John gives the fullest description of Caiaphas, especially with respect a meeting of the Sanhedrin. There, Caiaphas says, “You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish” (John 11:50). As if this portrayal of Caiaphas is not negative enough, John adds: “He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one” (John 11:51–52). Thus, John’s Caiaphas does not merely want to kill Jesus because Jesus claims to be the King of the Jews or because of the trouble he is causing but because Caiaphas has said that Jesus will die as a sacrifice, and he must make that happen.

Of course, Caiaphas does make it happen by striking a bargain with Judas to capture Jesus without any crowds around. Then, according to Matthew, he asks Jesus outright if he is the Son of God because the accusers have been unable to get enough testimony to condemn Jesus. Once they have his confession, they are able to take him to Pilate who will be able to execute him. Caiaphas, however, does not accompany any of the other Jewish leaders on the visit to Pilate, allowing them to speak on his behalf as to what they expect from Pilate.

Burgess’ novel originally presents Caiaphas to the reader as one who seems to see no threat in Jesus’ ministry. In fact, when he first speaks of Jesus, he talks of the beneficial actions that Jesus has been performing. Ultimately, when one of the leaders suggests that Jesus be killed, Caiaphas does raise the idea for which he is most famous in the gospel accounts that “it is meet that one man die for the people” (233). However, in the face of resistance to this idea, he reminds the council that it does not have the power to put anyone to death, and Caiaphas concludes the meeting by saying that they may meet again after Passover. However, after the meeting, his
feelings concerning Jesus are exposed. Almost immediately after everyone has left, Caiaphas tells Zerah, another of the religious leaders, “There is an area where blasphemy and treason become one. The Romans, as we know, regularly use blasphemy to compound treason. Speak against the Emperor, and you are also speaking against God. For us, it is a question of making our blasphemy their treason” (234). Thus, Zerah and Caiaphas plot to get Judas to say that Jesus has claimed to be God. Judas, in Burgess’ work, is innocent and naïve, and, thus, the two plan to take advantage of that innocence. By altering Caiaphas’ behavior among the Sanhedrin, Burgess’ novel renders him duplicitous, as he even tricks other members of the Sanhedrin who may believe as he has. With this change, Caiaphas seems more evil, acknowledging the good that Jesus does, yet seeking to put him to death anyway, more along the lines of John’s presentation. The other gospels are less clear about Caiaphas’ motivation, but here it is clear that he knows exactly what he is doing.

Not only does Caiaphas recognize Jesus’ positive actions, Caiaphas also understands Jesus’ ultimate purpose more clearly than anybody else in the novel. Caiaphas goes to Pilate after Jesus’ death, and the two discuss Caiaphas’ reasoning for wanting Jesus dead. Caiaphas tells Pilate, “Let me say this only—that if God did decide to create a new aspect of himself, confining his entire spiritual essence within the body of a human being, then it would be for one purpose only: that he might sacrifice himself to himself, achieving the supreme expiation of man’s sins” (283). However, this is not the reason for Caiaphas’ wanting Jesus dead. Rather, Caiaphas says, “The Messiah—of the Jewish people—that is a very different notion. And the time of the Messiah is not yet” (284). However, he willingly admits that Gentiles might very well believe in such an idea of the Messiah. The implication here is that the Jews have missed the coming of the Messiah, but the Gentiles, because of their different understanding of the Messiah, see it clearly. This novel follows an orthodox Christian view that the Jews completely missed Jesus’ role as Messiah, which provides support for the case that the Jews are completely responsible for Jesus’ death. Since the Romans are Gentiles who might
They Love to Tell the Story

ultimately understand Jesus, they are portrayed in this reading as much more innocent of the crucifixion, but the Jews, according to Burgess, have no hope of ever understanding.

The novels of Kazantzakis, Ricci, and Saramago largely ignore Caiaphas, which is not surprising since, apart from the gospel stories, Caiaphas is seldom discussed. Josephus mentions that he was appointed to the rank of high priest by Valerius Gratus and that he was later removed from the office by the Procurator Vitellius. He served from approximately 18 CE to 36 or 37 CE (Sandmel, “Caiaphas” 481). And that is the extent of the record.

The Last Temptation of Christ mentions Caiaphas very briefly and only in passing. Caiaphas is one of the main perpetrators behind Jesus’ death; however, this novel does not show the reader any of Caiaphas’ actions or thoughts. Instead, it merely relates that Caiaphas is involved. Oddly enough, the only time it shows Caiaphas to the reader is when Jesus is leaving Pilate for the first time. As Jesus exits, he sees Caiaphas, who is “so fat that globs of blubber formed cocoons around his eyes.” When he sees Jesus, he asks him, “What do you want here, rebel?” to which Jesus severely responds, “I’m not afraid of you, high priest of Satan” (385). Kazantzakis’ novel does show Caiaphas pampered, carried on a litter, and his obesity is certainly intended to show how gluttonous (beyond merely food) members of the priesthood have become. Otherwise, however, Caiaphas is left out of Kazantzakis’s novel.

Caiaphas is not even given a name in The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, referred to merely as the high priest. He encourages Pilate to have Jesus executed, but he does little else in the novel. There is no plotting behind the scenes to have Jesus killed; in fact, it is not made clear exactly why the high priest sees Jesus as such a threat. It is clear that he believes Jesus is guilty of blasphemy, but nowhere does the reader get the impression that Jesus is much of a threat to the religious establishment other than when he overturns the tables in the temple.

Testament does not mention Caiaphas at all, and it lays all of the responsibility for Jesus’ death at the feet of the Romans. Judas is aligned with a rebel group who wants to overthrow the Romans, and it is this connection that leads to Jesus’ being crucified for treason. It is not anything Jesus says
that angers the Jews enough to want him dead; in fact, almost no one in Jerusalem knows who he is. Given Ricci’s admission that he spent time reading the writings of the Jesus Seminar, this approach makes sense. Scholars who have tried to find the historical Jesus tend to the argument that the Romans were probably responsible for Jesus’ death, as the Jews had little power under Roman rule. Thus, Ricci’s novel completely omits mention of the Jews in this instance and provides only the political connections between Judas’ group and the Romans as the reason for Jesus’ death. The exact opposite is true of Mailer’s novel, which blames the Jews for Jesus’ death.

_The Gospel According to the Son_ gives Caiaphas less mention than Herod or Pilate, yet his actions may be more telling. Mailer’s novel does not show Caiaphas meeting with any other Jewish leaders, planning what must be done to Jesus; instead, it tells us that Jesus imagines what they were saying, that one man must die for the good of all the Jews. The first time the reader sees Caiaphas in this novel is when he is questioning Jesus in an attempt to find him guilty of something meriting capital punishment. Caiaphas asks him outright if he is the Christ, and Jesus responds that what Caiaphas has said is true. Then Caiaphas rips Jesus’ clothes and takes Jesus to Pilate for execution. The only other appearance of Caiaphas is when Pilate needs to know there will be a reward for Jesus’ death, and Caiaphas smiles in agreement.

However, the book makes clear that it is the Jews who are responsible for Jesus’ death, not the Romans. While this approach certainly coincides with the literal, Biblical accounts, numerous theologians in the twentieth century have argued that the Romans are much more responsible than are the Jews. Mailer’s approach becomes even more interesting when we recall that Mailer is Jewish. David Gelernter comments, “Don’t conclude that, because Mailer doesn’t tell this story like a Christian, he tells it like a Jew. Jewish scholars have long rejected as impossible the Gospel account of the legal proceedings culminating in the Crucifixion, and Mailer is scrupulously faithful to the Gospels” (55). Mailer himself, though, says,

What came over me as I began to write the book was how very Jewish he is. One has to come to think of him as probably
They Love to Tell the Story

the greatest Jew who ever lived. So, no, I was—I’m Jewish. So, you know, for me it was most interesting to recognize, as you begin to study it closely, how very Jewish he is. One has to face the fact that the New Testament is intensely anti-Semitic, particularly the Gospel of Luke. And it seemed to me the way to diminish the anti-Semitism implicit in the question is to deal with the intensity of how Jewish Jesus is. (“The Gospel According to Mailer”)

However, by mirroring the gospel accounts of the death of Jesus, Mailer’s account is just as critical of the Jews.

Mailer’s Jesus realizes early in his ministry that he might have to counter his own people in order to convey his message to those who need to hear. He comes to this realization about the Pharisees when he is healing a man on the Sabbath. Most of the Pharisees who are there leave after this action, and Jesus thinks, “I had to conclude that a time might come when I would go to war with some of my own people” (88). He also realizes that he must contend with the Jewish idea of the Messiah, the idea that the Christ would be a king like David who would lead his followers to political freedom. When he enters Jerusalem for the second time, some of the people called him King, but “they did not know that [his] kingdom . . . would be in heaven. They were looking for a monarch who would restore the greatness we had known in Israel under King David” (180). On his first entrance into the temple, Jesus has a long debate with a scribe about healing on the Sabbath, which ultimately leads to a discussion of the gentiles. The scribe finally asks Jesus, “Are you saying that you would give a light to the gentiles?” to which Jesus in the end responds clearly, “But He [God] also said, ‘I will give you a light to the gentiles in order that you may be My salvation unto all the ends of the Earth’” (171). The scribe believes this statement is blasphemy, so he and many of the others who were listening leave. Jesus, however, believes that he must battle the Temple and all that it represents. Mailer’s book completely ignores the presence of the Romans and the threat that Jesus may have posed to them. Instead, it focuses
Chapter 10: Who Was Responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus?

completely on Jesus’ interactions with the Jews, not exploring what Jesus’ Jewishness truly meant.

**Pilate**

The novels of Kazantzakis and Ricci both focus heavily on Pontius Pilate, the first on Pilate’s question of truth and the second, showing him as a cruel ruler who angers the Jews at every opportunity. The novels of Burgess, Mailer, and Saramago barely develop Pilate beyond his portrayal in the gospels.

The accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke follow the same pattern: Jesus is accused by the chief priests; he does not defend himself, which surprises Pilate who tries to let Jesus go, but the chief priests (either on their own or via the crowd) convince Pilate to have him crucified. John’s portrayal of Pilate follows much the same pattern, but both Pilate and Jesus have more to say. Pilate is still portrayed as hesitant to crucify Jesus, and, in fact, goes to greater lengths to avoid doing so than in the Synoptics; however, he is also shown to be more cynical and concerned with his own power. When Jesus says that he testifies to the truth, Pilate responds, “What is truth?” (John 18:37–38). And when Jesus finally refuses to talk to Pilate, he comments, “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” (John 19:10).

Kazantzakis’ novel draws on John’s account to consider Pilate’s view of the inability to know truth, his relativism, even before Jesus is brought before him to be crucified. Pilate calls Jesus to him in order to warn him, to discourage him from following his current plan of action. The first description of Pilate shows his nihilism: “He believed neither in gods nor in men—nor in Pontius Pilate, nor in anything. Constantly suspended around his neck on a fine golden chain was a sharpened razor which he kept in order to open his veins when he became weary of eating, drinking and governing, or when the emperor exiled him” (380). He returns to this nihilism when Jesus is brought before him. Jesus simply states that he has proclaimed the truth, but Pilate responds, “What truth? What does truth mean?” Jesus sees Pilate here as representing the world: “Jesus’ heart constricted with sorrow. This was the world, these the rulers of the world. They ask what truth is,
and laugh” (437). Since Kazantzakis says in his introduction that he writes his book so that people may know Jesus, Pilate works as a foil here to the truth that Jesus brings. Kazantzakis sees the modern world as one that has lost the concept of any kind of truth, but especially spiritual truth that Jesus represents. By creating a Pilate who is an extreme representation of the world’s relativism and nihilism, Kazantzakis further highlights the hope that Jesus brings to the world. However, Jesus does not have a chance to respond, as Pilate’s comment ends the discussion he and Jesus are having, and he allows the crowd to choose Barabbas to be freed.

In their earlier meeting, though, Pilate shows himself to be both compassionate and prescient. He has called Jesus before him on behalf of his wife, who has been dreaming about Jesus on a regular basis. He seems to honestly want to help Jesus avoid trouble: “Well, she fell at my feet to make me call you and tell you to go away and save yourself. Jesus of Nazareth, the air of Jerusalem isn’t good for your health. Return to Galilee! I don’t want to use force—I’m telling you as a friend. Return to Galilee!” (383). When Jesus will not listen, though, Pilate washes his hands, as he will later do after condemning Jesus to death.

Pilate, though, accurately foresees what will happen to Jesus if he continues on his present path. He even sees beyond Jesus’ crucifixion to the disciples and what they will tell others: “You insult Rome in order to make me angry, so that I’ll crucify you and you’ll swell the ranks of the heroes. You prepared everything very cleverly. You’ve even started, I hear, to revive the dead: yes, you’re clearing the road. Later on, in the same way, your disciples will spread the word that you didn’t die, that you were resurrected and ascended to heaven.” However, Pilate claims that he will have no part in Jesus’ plans: “I’m not going to kill you, I’m not going to make a hero out of you. You’re not going to become God—so get the idea of your head” (382). Of course, Pilate does crucify him and make a hero out of him, and Jesus either is or becomes God through that crucifixion. Kazantzakis’ Pilate here is similar to Burgess’ Caiaphas who can see Jesus’ ultimate mission yet seeks to prevent it. The idea of Pilate’s ever being convinced of Jesus’ message is never presented, and the implication seems to be that someone
who embraces such nihilism and relativism is not open to such a message. Whether or not Pilate is unable or unwilling to prevent Jesus’ ultimate plan remains unclear. Since he sees the result clearly, he should be able to find another way to remove Jesus, but he does not do so.

Unlike the compassion that Kazantzakis’ Pilate shows, Ricci’s novel creates a Pilate who is shown early in the work to be a man of extreme cruelty and one who angers the Jews simply because he can do so. He puts his standards near the temple, which the Jews view as idolatrous, so they begin to riot in the streets. Pilate ignores them for a while, but he finally agrees to meet with them. His soldiers direct all of the protesting Jews into a stadium, so he can address them. When they are all in the stadium, he has his soldiers surround them, and he tells them to stop their protests and return home and they won’t be killed, and his soldiers all unsheathe their swords. The Jews ultimately win the protest by baring their necks to the soldiers, showing that they are not afraid to die; however, the incident illustrates Pilate’s disregard for the Jewish faith and his cruelty.2

Ricci seems to draw this event from one that occurred in Caesarea. According to Brian McGing, Pilate introduced soldiers with the military standards almost immediately after he took over in Judea. The Jews protested and went to Caesarea to complain, but Pilate refused to negotiate on the issue of the standards, as he claimed that removing them would be an insult to the emperor. The Jews protested for five days until he made a decision to surround them with troops with the order to put them to the sword if they did not move. The Jews “stayed where they were and showed themselves quite unwilling to back down. Pilate was the one who backed down; the standards were removed from Jerusalem” (428–29). As McGing comments, “The episode shows in Pilate a curious mixture of (apparent) provocation, indecision, stubbornness, and finally weakness, a willingness to give in. Not for the last time we observe Pilate getting himself into an awkward situation

2Margaret George's Mary Called Magdalene has Pilate kills pilgrims from Galilee in the Temple, for no particular reason, also showing his cruelty. However, when Pilate gives in to the Jewish leaders' demands for Jesus' crucifixion, Mary describes him as "cruel as his reputation," but also as "frightened" of the Jewish leaders. Thus, we get a Pilate who is more in line with the biblical portrayal of him, but with the historical, cruel background, as well.
over the matter of loyalty to the emperor” (429). Thus, the historical Pilate and Ricci’s Pilate are much more complex than the Pilate of the gospels who seems merely weak-willed and willing to give in to the demands of the Jewish leaders.

Pilate also angers the Jews merely by being present at their festivals. He parades through the streets with his Samaritan soldiers, reminding the Jews that they are under Roman rule. On one of these parades, he passes Jesus and three of his disciples, foreshadowing Jesus’ encounter with him in the prison.

This portrayal of Pilate fits in well with many of the accounts we have of him. In non-Christian works, he is shown to be ruthless and cruel. Philo accuses him of rape and murder, while Josephus recounts several accounts of Pilate’s ordering troops to disperse large groups, sometimes merely by show of force, but sometimes by execution of leaders of those groups (Sandmel, “Pilate, Pontius” 811). Brian McGing gives an interesting interpretation for why the gospel writers portray Pilate as much more benign than historians: “In the Gospels the Jews get all the blame for forcing a reluctant Roman governor to execute an innocent man. In reality, so it is argued, Jesus was executed unhesitatingly by Pilate as a rebel, because he was a rebel, or something very like it. Representing the young Christian sect in a hostile Roman empire, the evangelists could afford neither to admit Jesus’ guilt as a terrorist, nor to lay the responsibility for his death on the Romans, hence the reasonably favorable (but incorrect) portrait of Pilate” (418). He adds, “And the Jewish involvement in Jesus’ end was merely a Christian construct designed to provide a scapegoat for the Messiah’s death, and to disguise the Roman responsibility for it. In truth Pilate behaved with the pragmatic ruthlessness displayed so consistently by Roman officials in their dealings with people like Jesus, and displayed, according to Philo and Josephus, by Pilate himself in other incidents of his governorship” (422).

However, Philo and Josephus’ portrayal of Pilate may not be quite complete, either. As McGing writes, Philo merely speaks of Pilate in “very general terms,” with few examples to back up his portrayal. “The only hard evidence Philo . . . puts forward is the one incident with the golden shields.
Chapter 10: Who Was Responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus?

The rest is a string of insults which looks highly rhetorical in nature. . . . If he had other evidence for his assertions, he does not give it to us. Modern writers have perhaps been too influenced by aspects of Philo’s rhetoric” (431). Ricci’s account may, then, be one of those highly influenced by Philo.

Ricci also draws on the gospel of John, though, in Pilate’s questioning of Jesus. Jesus is arrested for a misunderstanding; a riot begins in the temple when Andrew begins wailing, and Jesus and several of his disciples are arrested, as the Roman soldiers are on guard for a rebellion they have heard could happen during Passover. Pilate encounters Jesus in the prison, where he is reviewing the prisoners to see who will die and who will be set free. Jesus is the only prisoner who talks back to Pilate, telling him that he is a fool for believing what he has heard to be the truth. Pilate asks the guard to ask him (not knowing that Jesus knows Greek), “Ask the man what he means to say by the truth,” the equivalent of the question Pilate asks Jesus in the book of John. Jesus responds in Greek, “Don’t ask for something you can’t understand” (432). From then on, Jesus refuses to answer Pilate, leading Pilate to condemn him for treason for his association with Judas.

Pilate condemns Jesus without any hesitation, nor does he have to be persuaded to issue the death sentence, as in the gospel accounts. Pilate is presented as bloodthirsty and disrespectful of Judaism, more in line with Philo’s portrayal, and he needs little reason to sentence Jesus to death.

Pilate serves only this one role in the gospels: he must give his assent to the crucifixion of Jesus. He is characterized as not being particularly willing to do so, yet he is led into this action either by the Jewish leaders or the crowd, depending on the gospel. In all the accounts, for whatever reason, Pilate seems to be on Jesus’ side much more so than on the side of the chief priests. However, in the end, he bends to their pressure and has Jesus crucified.

Overall, the novels by Burgess, Mailer, and Saramago follow this general outline and create a Pilate who fulfills the role of ordering Jesus’ crucifixion, though each adds one or two aspects. In Burgess’ novel, though, Pilate does see through the Jewish leaders’ reasons for wanting Jesus executed. As he says to his deputy, Quintilius, “It sounds to me as if they have reasons for getting rid of him which have nothing to do with what they call treason.
They Love to Tell the Story

Slimy lot, these Jews” (261). In fact, it seems as if Jesus has to convince Pilate not to let him go, to actually give the order for the crucifixion. And, Pilate tries to allow the crowd to give him a way out of the execution. However, the crowd is made up of Zealots, whom Jesus has angered by healing a Roman and eating at the house of a centurion; thus, they call for Jesus’ crucifixion as both Jesus and the Jewish leaders knew they would.

In the end, Pilate falls back on a procedural answer in that he renders himself officially absent. His deputy, then, having been bribed by the Jewish leaders, gives the order for the crucifixion. Pilate stops a young boy carrying water, and it is then that he physically washes his hands of this decision. Thus, Burgess’ novel shows Pilate quite unwilling to participate in the death of Jesus and as one who does almost everything he can to get out of it. However, he does not send Jesus to Herod, as in the gospel accounts, nor does he let him go outright. He is still politically savvy, and he knows that he does what he must do in order to keep the peace. Thus, Burgess’ novel adds to the portrayal of Pilate in the gospels to make him appear even a bit more cowardly by means of the official absence that he uses to remove himself from the decision. In the gospels, he seems afraid of the crowd, but, in Burgess’ work, it seems he is just as influenced by the Jewish leaders as he is by the Zealots who want to see Jesus die.

Mailer’s Pilate is fairly consistent with the gospel accounts: Pilate is willing to work with the Jewish leaders in order to keep the peace, but he also lets them know that he is in charge of the situation. He doesn’t seem particularly unwilling to kill Jesus, but he wants to know that he will be repaid for this action. When the people express their willingness to have Barabbas released rather than Jesus, Pilate smiles. Caiaphas returns his smile, as if to say, “I have the strength to bear this burden” because Pilate knows that “it would cost the Temple a goodly sum to free a Jew who had killed a Roman soldier” (229). As in the gospel stories, Pilate questions Jesus, tries to send him on to Herod, but then ultimately washes his hands of the entire situation and allows Jesus to be put to death. Mailer’s portrayal of Pilate is more in line with McGing’s ultimate understanding of Pilate as one for whom “opposition and eventual capitulation are remarkably
consistent with the Pilate we know from Philo and Josephus” (437). Thus, Mailer’s presentation of Pilate shifts the blame back to the Jews for their behind-the-scenes conspiracy that results in Jesus’ death.

Pilate is barely mentioned in The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, serving the role of ordering the crucifixion after interrogating Jesus briefly, but doing little more. There is no attempt to pardon Jesus, though Pilate does regret having sentenced him, but that is due more to the high priest’s annoying Pilate than it is to his belief in Jesus’ innocence. Pilate, in fact, seems to be quite indifferent throughout the entire account.

What is interesting is that none of the authors draw from the Christian legends surrounding Pilate after his death. A Christian version of Acta Pilati (Memoirs of Pilate) was published, probably around 425 CE, wherein Pilate is “depicted as treating [Jesus] with great consideration. . . . Pilate is described as consulting Jesus as to what he should do with him” (Brandon 154). Pilate ultimately blames a list of Jewish leaders, including Herod, Archelus, and Caiaphas, for Jesus’ death (Brandon 155). Justin Martyr cites the Acts of Pontius Pilate much earlier, saying that that work attests to the miracles of Jesus. Tertullian accuses the Jews of having coerced Pilate (who was “himself in his secret heart already a Christian”) into handing Jesus over to them, and Pilate then presents his report to the Emperor, Tiberius, in such a way that Tiberius is convinced of Jesus’ divinity. Origen does not hold Pilate responsible for the crucifixion at all; instead, he largely blames Caiaphas, though he also includes Herod in his attacks (Brandon 155). Because of these positive portrayals Pilate is eventually honored as a saint and martyr by the Coptic church (Sandmel, “Pilate, Pontius” 813).

However, the Christian view of Pilate ultimately changes. Eusebius relates that Pilate committed suicide sometime during the reign of Gaius. Another legend has Tiberius cast his corpse into the Tiber. However, the mere presence of the corpse attracted so many demons that it was moved to Vienne. It was then moved to Lausanne where demonic activity continued, leading ultimately to his body being put in either a well or lake (depending on the legend), where the demons continued to seek it out (Brandon 156).
In the end, probably none of these views of Pilate, including the gospel portrayal, are completely accurate. Sandmel writes, “Neither the Christian nor the Jewish depiction of Pilate is historical, but each is a product of varied and varying biases” (“Pilate, Pontius” 812). Simon Légasse agrees, “[Pilate] does not deserve the merciless picture which Philo paints of him, nor the features of a weak-willed person yielding to the pressure of the crowd, as the Synoptic Gospels suggest” (62). As in most cases, the truth must lie somewhere between these extremes, and these authors, save for Saramago, try to plot out a course in this middle ground.

**HEROD ANTIPAS**

In the gospels, Herod Antipas only encounters Jesus once, but he plays an important role in that encounter. According to Luke, Herod meets Jesus near the end of Jesus’ life. In an effort to avoid responsibility for Jesus’ death, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, as Herod has long wanted to see Jesus and Jesus is under Herod’s jurisdiction. However, Jesus refuses to answer any of Herod’s questions, so Herod and his soldiers mock Jesus and send him back to Pilate (Luke 23:6–12).

Historically, though, whether or not he is involved in Jesus’ trial is questionable. The Gospel of Luke mentions that he is, but “the absence of a comparable passage in Mark, Matthew, and John suggests strongly that this passage is legendary” (Sandmel, “Herod” 593). Brandon adds, “It is conceivably possible that Pilate might have consulted Herod (Antipas), the tetrarch of Galilee, about a Galilean accused of sedition, if he requested more information about him. However, according to Luke, this was not what Pilate did; he implies, instead, that Pilate handed the case over to Herod, which seems to be very improbable in view of the fact that Jesus was accused of seditious action also within Pilate’s area of jurisdiction” (121).

Not surprisingly, due to this lack of historical evidence and scant mention in the gospels, these authors largely overlook Herod’s involvement in Jesus’ trial (only Mailer’s novel gives him any mention there at all, and his role is reduced greatly). Margaret George’s *Mary Called Magdalene* seems to be the only exception. While Herod is far from a major character in this work, he
does actively participate in the death of Jesus. Before Jesus even arrives in
Jerusalem, Herod sends troops to warn Jesus because of his large gatherings:
“But we will be watching. And the first wrong thing you do . . . you will go
straight to Antipas” (421). Later, when Jesus is in Jerusalem, Herod sends his
spymaster to watch him: “Eliud! Antipas's spymaster. . . . But it means that
Antipas is having Jesus followed. That incident with the money-changers—
although he wasn’t arrested, it means he will be kept under surveillance
from now on” (470). However, what clearly shows Herod’s involvement in
Jesus’ death is that Caiaphas, Annas, and Judas all meet at Herod’s residence
to discuss Judas’ betrayal. While Herod says little in this exchange, it is
clear that he is involved, given his previous warnings to Jesus and that he
allows them to use his dwelling for their meeting. This approach shifts the
blame back to the Jews, as it shows Herod not merely as a means for Pilate to
escape responsibility, but as someone who is involved with the plot from the
outset. Even though the Jews are not fond of Herod, he is still Jewish; thus,
the meeting at his house is clearly portrayed as a meeting of Jewish leaders,
and there are no Romans present.

Matthew and Mark recount Herod’s other appearance: his order to
behead John the Baptist (Luke merely mentions it in passing). According to
Matthew, Herod wants to kill John, as John has criticized his relationship
with Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; however, he is afraid of the people,
so he simply lets John languish in prison (Matthew 13). Mark, however,
points out that Herod likes to listen to John, which is why he does not kill
him (Mark 6). Regardless, Herodias wants John dead. Thus, she has her
daughter dance for Herod, and he enjoys her performance so much that
he offers her anything she wants, up to half his kingdom. She demands, as
requested by her mother, the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod
has no choice: “The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths
and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately
sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head” (Mark 6:26–27).

In contrast to George’s book, the novels by these male authors mention
Herod, only in terms of his involvement with John the Baptist. Burgess, in
fact, is the only author whose book develops the character Herod Antipas
(or Antipater, as he calls him). Mailer’s book mentions him more than does Ricci’s and Kazantzakis’, whose books merely mention him in passing.

*Man of Nazareth* draws on Matthew and Mark’s account of Herod’s execution of John the Baptist. Here Herod is much more hesitant, but the event is used to foreground Herod’s sexual perversions that lead him to be easily swayed by Salome’s dancing. Herod is described as having “in youth worn out the possibilities of normal sensual gratification and, in maturity, had to exploit such fantastic variations on the basic theme of coition as a fevered imagination could suggest to him” (101). In fact, it is the incestuous nature of his marriage to his brother’s wife Herodias that appeals to him at all. Salome’s youth also is given as a reason he is drawn to this union:

For he had reached a stage in his libidinous odyssey when he could only attain erotic purgation through contact with very young flesh of either sex, and the flesh of Salome was very young, though undoubtedly female, flesh. Herod Antipater did not demand coition at this phase of his anabasis towards eventual impotence: it was enough that his eyes be excited by the sight of a young body unclothed, half-clothed, progressively and somewhat slowly divested of its clothes with, if possible, an accompaniment of precociously wanton writhings, leers, poutings, pantings, the movements of simulated rut. (101)

Thus, Herodias exploits this weakness and encourages Salome to dance for him, though it seems that Salome is unaware of what her mother will ask for. In Burgess’ account, it is Herodias that speaks to Herod, not Salome and, later, Salome flees the temple, realizing that she is responsible for the death of John. Burgess, thus, gives an explanation of why Herodias would have her daughter perform a dance of seduction for her relatively new husband and why Herod might demand such a thing. By providing Herod with a background of perversion, his promise to Salome makes more sense.

Herod, however, has already let John go. He has first merely told John that he will not execute him if for no other reason than to “spite that bitch of a queen of mine” (157). He then sends John back to prison, but Herodias
comes in complaining of a crowd outside the palace calling her an adulteress. Thus, Herod agrees to exile John, though not kill him, and Herodias accepts this arrangement, knowing of her plan with Salome. Herod believes that Herodias will have John killed once he is out of prison, so he sends troops to protect him on his journey to Egypt. Before he arrives, Herodias sends a message for his head to be severed on the spot, and Herod signs the papers because of his promise. Thus, even though John ultimately dies, this extra scene develops Herod’s unwillingness to kill John further than the gospel stories do. Herod is presented as someone who may be perverted but who does not wish to kill a prophet.

It is not surprising that Burgess would be so concerned with Herod’s connection with John the Baptist because that is the one aspect of Herod from the gospels that can be verified by other sources. While it is true that Herod divorced his first wife and married Herodias, the wife of one of his half brothers, Herod II, and that Herod had John the Baptist executed, Josephus gives the reason as Herod’s fear of John’s leading a rebellion, not his relationship to Herodias (Sandmel, “Herod” 591). Brian McGing supports the interpretation that John’s beheading was political, not merely the granting of a birthday wish: “According to Josephus, Herod Antipas was afraid that John’s eloquence might lead to civil disorder. So Antipas forestalled the trouble and had John executed; it was a political execution” (422–23).

The focus of The Gospel According to the Son seems to be on Jesus, ignoring most of the minor characters in the story, especially those associated with Jesus’ death. The novel mentions Herod early in relation to the execution of John the Baptist, so the reader expects him to be more important than he is. Jesus is afraid of Herod because of what Herod has done, but when Jesus appears before Herod, Herod says only a few words to him. He does provide Jesus with a purple robe that better suits a king, or “a robe fit at least for the officers of a king” (227). Other than this action, though, Herod is merely shown as being distracted by a beautiful woman. This distraction harkens back to John’s execution, finally caused by Salome’s dancing. Accordingly, Jesus is sent back to Pilate without even being asked to perform a miracle, which is what Pilate expects Herod would ask him to do.
They Love to Tell the Story

*The Last Temptation of Christ* doesn’t much mention Herod. Instead, it covers the gospel accounts. The reader finds out that Salome dances for Herod, and he gives her what she wants: the head of John the Baptist on a platter. However, it also gives us an intimation of Herod’s cruelty: “One night Herod the aged king of Judea—a wicked, damnable traitor!—had smeared forty adolescents with tar and ignited them as torches because they had pulled down the golden eagle he had fastened to the previously unsoiled lintel of the Temple” (36). In this instance, Herod sounds much more like the typical presentation of Pilate: brutal, cold, and unforgiving.

The only other appearance of Herod is in relation to the resurrection of Lazarus. The old rabbi, Simeon, cannot understand why Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, and he confesses that the one thing he cannot stand is the smell of a rotting body. In anticipating Herod’s disgusting death, Simeon points out that Herod’s problem may stem from his not having a soul as much as from the problems of his body: “Is this a king? I asked myself. Is this what man is: filth and stench? And where is the soul to put things in order?” (396). This novel does show that Herod seems to lack a soul, but that is not connected with the earlier cruelty. Rather than having Jesus appear before Herod and reminding the reader of this cruelty, the book lets it drop.

Herod is not a major character in *Testament*, but he does arrest and kill John the Baptist for criticizing his relationship with his brother’s wife. Otherwise he is mostly neglected. He employed Mary’s father as a clerk, which changes Mary’s status from that of a peasant as in the gospels to someone more courtly, but Herod has no other connection with her. Given this book’s historical approach, it is not surprising that Herod is largely ignored, as he probably did not have any connection to Jesus’ crucifixion.

The changes these five writers introduce to the characters responsible for Jesus’ death show biases or historical leanings with respect to the crucifixion. Ricci relies on historical research so that his book blames the Romans for Jesus’ death, while Mailer’s book focuses on the Jews and completely ignores the Romans. The remaining three books distribute the blame between Pilate and Caiaphas, usually ignoring Herod Antipas, save for his role in the death of John the Baptist, much as the gospel accounts do.