

In the last centuries before the Common Era, it was the Greek and Roman authors who used the term, Jews (*Ioudaioi*), with reference to those diverse religious groups scattered throughout the Mediterranean world which claimed continuity with the beliefs and practices of ancient Israel. Following their lead, around the turn of the era, Jewish writers began to use the term as well. It appears in inscriptions from this period and, for example, in the writings of Philo of Alexandria particularly in his explicitly apologetic writings: *Flaccus*, and *On the Embassy to Gaius*. Philo is using "Jews" as a term for those of his tradition that is understood and employed by his Gentile readers. In one place the Jewish historian, Josephus, uses "Jews" with reference to proselytes (*Antiquities* 13.258), where he is describing those who as non-Israelites accepted circumcision and became "Jews in other respects."

In the first three gospels, "Jew" is a rare term, and occurs only on the lips of Gentiles, except when Jews are mimicking them. Never in Matthew, Mark or Luke is Jew a self-designation of those who were born in and identify with the traditions of Israel, and it is never used by Jesus. In the New Testament, it first appears when spoken by the magi, who came from Persia or Mesopotamia seeking Jesus, who is said to have been divinely destined to be "King of the Jews" (Mt 2:1-2). Significantly, the priests of whom he inquired recalled the prophecy (Micah 5) that one born in Bethlehem was to be a "ruler who will govern my people, *Israel*." "Jews" also appears in Mt 27:11, where Pilate asks Jesus if he is "King of the Jews," and adds "who is *said* to be the Christ." The term is conceived as a purely political designation.

In clear contrast to this terminology are the deliberations of the regional council of Jewish leaders. In Jerusalem and throughout the empire these councils served as advisory agencies for the Roman officials in charge of the area. In their examination of Jesus, the council's discussion (Mt 27:57-68) has to do with religious issues and Jesus' alleged relationship to God ("Son of God"). There is evidence elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 7:58) that a violator of Jewish religious standards (Stephen) could be executed by mass action, in which the crowd hurled large stones and crushed to death the guilty one. This mode of group action for dealing with a violator of Israel's covenant is prescribed in Deut 21:20. In the case of Jesus, however, the responsibility was shifted to the political leader, Pilate (as reported in the oldest of the synoptic gospels: Mk 15:19) again identified Jesus as "King of the Jews." The call from the council for his death by crucifixion implies a violation of Roman law, rather than of Jewish law, which could have led to his death by stoning. The political nature of the charge against Jesus is confirmed in the account of this event by the Roman historian, Tacitus, who reports the crucifixion as the result of a sentence by Pilate (*Annals* 15.4). The gospel accounts underscore this by their descriptions of Jesus' being mocked by the Roman soldiers as "King of the Jews" (Mk 15:18) and by the inscription on the cross thus designating him (15:26; Lk 23:36-38).

It is only in the later polemic of early Christian writers against the Jews that Pilate declares Jesus' innocence and the Jewish leaders are reported as accepting responsibility for Jesus' death (Mt 27:24-25). In the oldest traditions, both the charge that Jesus was "King of the Jews" and the resulting death penalty and mode of execution conform to Roman legal and governmental policy. Responsibility for this

political decision and action rest with the Roman regional governor, Pontius Pilate, not with the Jewish authorities. It is completely a distortion of the evidence to place the blame for the death of Jesus on “the Jews,” implying that all were responsible for his execution.

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