

Crowd control: A critique of *The Passion of the Christ*

by [John Dominic Crossan](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Every version of the Passion story deviates fundamentally from the New Testament, which contains four divergent Gospels rather than one conflated version. The Gospels also emphasize the life before and the resurrection after the death. The life/death/resurrection proportions, judged by the number of chapters devoted to each part, vary—from a 13:2:1 ratio in Mark to 25:2:1 in Matthew—but a Gospel never sums it all up as Passion.

Making a Passion film, therefore, involves choices that reveal prejudices. If Jesus is scourged in Mark, Matthew and John, but not in Luke, which option will you choose and why? Or, to take an even more explosive example, when the Gospel has a “crowd” demanding Jesus’ crucifixion from Pilate, how many extras will you hire? How many is a “crowd” and how do you decide that number? The term is, of course, always relative to the situation (“two’s company, three’s a crowd”). What is the identity, purpose and number of that “crowd” before Pilate?

When you read the Gospels you can leave the “crowd” vague and indeterminate in your mind, but viewers of *The Passion of the Christ* see a crowd that fills the Jerusalem streets and the theater screen. How did Mel Gibson know that? From the Gospels?

Reread the account in Mark 11-14 and then 15:6-9. Remember that Mark is not only the earliest of the four Gospels but is almost certainly the source for Matthew and Luke and possibly even for John. Follow the story’s narrative logic, whether you consider it a historical event or a Markan parable. Think about the identity, purpose and size of that crowd demanding Jesus’ crucifixion before Pilate.

Identity: The film does not begin at the start of Holy Week, on Palm Sunday, with Jesus’ antitriumphal entry into Jerusalem—as happens, for example, in the classic Oberammergau Passion play. The film omits, therefore, the accounts of those days from Sunday morning to Thursday evening. On every one of those days, the Jewish “crowd” is described as directly supporting and indirectly protecting Jesus against the high-priestly authority which opposes him, according to Mark’s Gospel.

On Sunday, “many people [*polloi*] spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ (11:8-10). On Monday, after the temple incident, “the chief priests and the scribes . . . kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd [*pas ho ochlos*] was spellbound by his teaching” (11:18). On Tuesday, after Jesus’ praise for John the Baptist, “they were afraid of the crowd [*ochlon*], for all regarded John as truly a prophet” (11:32). Later, “the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders . . . realized that he had told this parable [of the evil tenants] against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd [*ochlon*]. So they left him and went away” (12:12). Still later that same day, “the large crowd [*polus ochlos*] was listening to him with delight” (12:37).

Finally, on Wednesday, “the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people [*tou laou*].’” That, of course, is why the services of Judas and a secret nighttime move are required to arrest Jesus—the point where the Gibson film begins. But if Mark 11-14 emphatically insists on that pro-Jesus “crowd,” whence comes the anti-Jesus “crowd” in Mark 15? Is Mark writing about some different “crowd”?

Purpose: Mark says, first, that Pilate had established an open Passover amnesty: “At the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked” (15:6). It was open because they and not the governor chose the individual to be released. Next, Mark notes that “a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection” (15:7). They were, in other words, Jewish freedom fighters (like the Scottish hero of *Braveheart* or the American hero of *The Patriot*—both Gibson films). Naturally, therefore, “the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom” (15:8).

That Markan sequence is very clear. The “crowd” comes up to request freedom for Barabbas; they come, that is, for Barabbas and not against Jesus. Confronted with the undesirable possibility of Barabbas’s release, Pilate offers them Jesus instead. Of course he would offer freedom for the nonviolent Jesus rather than the violent Barabbas. We know Pilate’s view because, while he arrested Barabbas’s followers (two of whom died beside Jesus), he did not arrest Jesus’ disciples. Those were appropriately different administrative responses to two leaders who opposed Roman

law and order, one by violent rebellion, the other by nonviolent resistance. So, therefore, “he answered them, ‘Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?’” (15:9). Maybe Pilate thought Jesus innocent, but more likely he simply knew he was a lesser threat than Barabbas.

In other words, for Mark there are two “crowds.” There is a general and presumably much larger pro-Jesus “crowd” throughout 11-14 and a particular and presumably much smaller and directly pro-Barabbas and only indirectly anti-Jesus “crowd” in 15:6-9.

Size: Granted that purpose, and whether we take Mark’s Barabbas-Jesus story as fictional or factual, parabolical or historical, how big should we imagine his “crowd” to be? How many people were in it—granted, of course, that crowd-size is always relative. How many is a crowd in the Oval Office? Maybe 15? How many is a crowd at the Super Bowl? Maybe 75,000?

At Passover, thousands of Jews concentrated in a rather small area in and around the temple to celebrate, while under Roman rule, their deliverance from ancient Egyptian bondage. From an imperial viewpoint, the atmosphere was that of a tinderbox, the toleration for disturbance was zero, and the governor was in residence to ensure order. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, “about three thousand” died during one Passover riot in 4 BCE and “upwards of thirty thousand perished” in another one around 50 CE.

Two contemporary Jewish authors portray Pilate with characteristics that flatly contradict the equivalent ones in the Gospels. One is his method of dispensing justice, the other is his method of handling crowds.

The philosopher Philo’s *On the Embassy to Gaius* describes Pilate as “a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate.” It speaks of “his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity.” Pilate was “exceedingly angry, and . . . at all times a man of most ferocious passions.” Pilate is Philo’s posterboy for a bad governor.

The historian Josephus records, in both *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, that an unarmed crowd came before Pilate’s tribunal at coastal Caesarea to demand that he remove from Jerusalem the pagan images on his military standards. He

surrounded the crowd with soldiers “three deep,” and people were saved from slaughter only by a willingness for martyrdom. But the next time they tried the same nonviolent resistance, Pilate infiltrated them with soldiers dressed “in Jewish garments, under which they carried clubs,” and “many of them actually were slain on the spot, while some withdrew disabled by blows.”

Finally, according to *Jewish Antiquities*, the Syrian governor, Vitellius, removed Pilate from office and sent him back to defend himself before the emperor Tiberius in Rome. You can probably guess for what offense. His soldiers attacked a Samaritan crowd on Mount Garizim. The high priest Caiaphas, by the way, was removed from office at the same time, and that ended his ten-year collaboration with Pilate, a collaboration ultimately judged unwise even by Roman imperial interests.

The purpose of the Markan crowd was to request amnesty for one whom they may have considered a heroic freedom-fighter but whom Pilate considered a murderous bandit. In that situation, the members of the crowd could themselves easily have been arrested as Barabbas’s sympathizers if not his actual followers. Recall, for example, that Joseph of Arimathea needed “courage” even to request the dead body of Jesus from Pilate, in Mark 15:43 (only). That “crowd” needed to appear peaceful, respectful and very, very polite.

When I put together the dangerous context of Passover, the volatile character of Pilate, and the hazardous purpose of the request, my best historical reconstruction images a Markan “crowd” [*ochlos*] of definitely fewer than a dozen people. But it is also absolutely clear that, as later Gospel writers copy their Markan source, they both change the purpose and expand the size of that original (very small) crowd.

Change of Purpose: Notice how both Luke and John retell Mark so that in their accounts the crowd comes up against Jesus rather than for Barabbas. In Luke, the Markan sequence is reversed so that “the chief priests and the crowds” (*ochlous*) in 23:4 or “the chief priest and the rulers and the people [*laon*]” in 23:13 are already there accusing Jesus. “Then they all shouted out together, ‘Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!’ (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, ‘Crucify, crucify him!’” (23:18-21).

Similarly, in John, Pilate himself raises the issue of amnesty: “‘But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?’ They shouted in reply, ‘Not this man, but Barabbas!’ Now Barabbas was a bandit” (18:39-40). You could scarcely tell from those changes that the crowd came up originally for Barabbas and not against Jesus and only became anti-Jesus when Pilate tried to switch prisoners on them.

Increase in Size: The process of expansion is seen most clearly in Matthew. He starts by accepting Mark’s “crowd” (*oclos*) in 27:15, but it becomes “crowds” (*ochlous*) by 27:20. Then he reverts to the “crowd” in 27:24 but again expands it exponentially to “all the people [*laos*]” in 27:25. John changes all those options to “the Jews” (18:31, 36,38;19:7). Those expansions, however, must be understood to mean: all the Jewish (John) people (Matthew and Luke) in that very small crowd (Mark).

It is not enough to assert even truthfully that one is not anti-Semitic or that one’s film is not anti-Semitic. It is necessary to ask whether what one says or does serves to cauterize the continuing venom of anti-Semitism. I did not expect Gibson to be an exegete, but I did want him to respect the Gospels, to ponder their inspired multiplicity and, before homogenizing them into a single story, to consider what their canonical diversity might tell him about the will of his God. Further, I expect any conscientious Christian who knows how stories about the Passion of Jesus became, across two millennia, a seedbed for both theological anti-Judaism and ethnic anti-Semitism, to proceed here with infinite care—not with political correctness but with thoughtful accuracy.

In my judgment, *The Passion of the Christ* portrays the identity, purpose and size of that “crowd” before Pilate with careless irresponsibility at best and depraved indifference at worst.

Other reactions to The Passion of the Christ in this issue:

[The problem with *The Passion*](#), by Matthew Myer Boulton
[Christians and Jews](#), by Richard A. Kauffman

And [Passion pointers](#) from the American Jewish Committee