

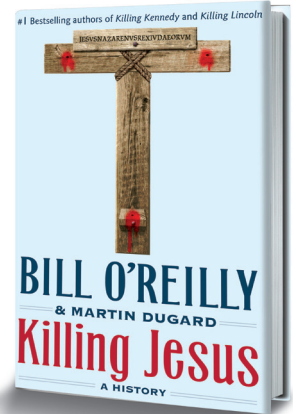
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Killing Jesus

A History

A HENRY HOLT READING GROUP GUIDE



1. In Chapter 1, we learn that Caesar Augustus was thought to have once said, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than to be his son.” Discuss what this remark says about the sort of man Herod was—as a leader, a parent, a human being, etc.

2. Look again at the extended footnote at the end of Chapter 1. What do we learn here about the Gospels: about the people who are commonly thought to have written these Gospels, and about their motivations or reasons for writing them? Also, what do you personally think about using the word “facts” (as this footnote does) in reference to the Gospels? Expand on and/or defend your views.

3. Chapter 2 explicates “the first world war in history.” Who are the allies and who are the opposing forces in this conflict, and where are these armies situated? And what are they fighting for, or fighting against, or fighting over, as the case may be?

4. In Chapter 3, the authors write: “The Nazis would one day borrow from the basic tenets of Roman occupation.” How so, and for what reason(s)? Expand on this point.

5. “While the Roman Republic kept its distance from Judean politics during the reign of Julian Caesar,” as we read in Chapter 4, “the Roman EMPIRE [ruled] the Jews in an increasingly oppressive fashion.” Discuss how this fundamental shift—this reworking of the order of things—affected the life and ministry of Jesus. (Also, in this regard, define these terms: “tetrarch” and “Great Sanhedrin.”) How might things have happened differently if Jesus had been born into a world where Rome was still a republic? Would Jesus have flourished—or would he have even gotten started—as a leader/teacher/preacher if he hadn’t had an imperial status quo to rebel against?

6. Consider the illustration appearing near the opening of Chapter 5. What are we as viewers being “told” about Jesus in this painting? Where or what is his attention focused on? What is he communicating; what point is he making? How do the men surrounding him seem to regard him? And who are these men? Also, look at the various hands depicted in the painting: what are they holding, doing, expressing, or conveying?

7. Why isn’t the young Jesus guilty of blasphemy when he preaches at the Temple (as per Luke 2:48-50) about his relationship with his Father?

8. Who was Judas of Gamala? What did he try to do on behalf of the Jewish people? What did he try to accomplish for and with them? And how did the Romans stop him from doing so? And finally, why is it that, as the authors of *KILLING JESUS* assert, “generations later, few remember the story of Judas of Gamala”?
9. Near the end of Chapter 5, Herod Antipas is described. Who was this man? When and how did he govern? How was he similar to his father, and how did he differ? How would you characterize the relationship that Antipas had with Rome?
10. Early in Chapter 6, John the Baptist is said to be preaching “a message both religious and political.” Explain how John’s words and ideas challenge both the religious and political institutions.
11. Identify and describe these key historical figures: Tiberius, Archelaus, Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate. Moreover, talk about the uneasy partnership that Pilate and Caiaphas share. Why has this partnership been formed, and what does each man (and his constituency) stand to gain from “this careful balance of power” (as the authors later call it in Chapter 11)?
12. When Jesus encounters John the Baptist at the Jordan River, a dove lands on the shoulder of the Nazarene. And it stays there. “The dove changes everything,” as the authors of *KILLING JESUS* write. Why is this dove so important, so transformative? And is its appearance, in effect, miraculous? Explain. Also, a bit later, what is meant by the “Davidic title” that John the Baptist is said to ascribe to Jesus of Nazareth?
13. Who are the “shulhanim”? And why does Jesus so aggressively confront them (with a whip in hand, no less) in Chapter 8?
14. “Four of the apostles—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—are fisherman,” as we read in Chapter 9. Why does Jesus “specifically [single] out men from this calling” to follow him?
15. As a group, discuss how women are treated, described, and thought about in the Bible—in the Old Testament as well as the New. And how does Jesus interact with the women he meets in his travels? Also, reread and discuss the in-depth footnote in Chapter 9 that begins: “Women often played pivotal roles in Jewish society . . .”
16. Who are the Pharisees and Sadducees, and why are they devising a plan to subject Jesus, as we read in Chapter 10, to “a quiet arrest followed by a hasty execution”? Describe the ways in which they try to “trap” Jesus. Are any of these efforts successful? Why or why not?
17. Name the only one of the twelve disciples who was not raised in Galilee. What else sets this man apart from all the others? And why is this particular disciple following Jesus in the first place? Do we know?
18. In Chapter 11, Chapter 14, and maybe in one or two other instances, the authors mention how and why the Nazarene spoke in parables. What are the advantages or benefits of relating a lesson by way of a parable? And what might be the drawbacks or limitations?
19. In Chapter 12, we note that Jesus “has been very specific with the disciples that he is more than just an earthly Christ. They don’t understand. He has told them again and again that he is a divine being, the Son of God. They cannot comprehend that concept.” Why are the disciples unable to grasp this message? Or, to put the question differently, why can’t Jesus make them see this point?

20. “Caiaphas knows that Jesus is playing a very clever game by using the crowds as a tool to prevent his arrest.” As we read near the end of Chapter 13, “this is a game that Caiaphas plans to win.” But is this truly a “game”? Is it really a strategy or gambit of some kind, from Jesus’s point of view? Is he actually “using the crowds” in this way?
21. Once Jesus and his disciples have arrived in the room where the Last Supper will take place, the Nazarene sets about washing the feet of each of his followers. Why does he do this, and how do the twelve men react to it? What is Jesus symbolically or figuratively saying to his disciples with this action?
22. Who was Annas, and what role did he play in the apprehension and crucifixion of Jesus? Also, who was Ananus, and what role did he play some thirty years later in the death of James (who was one of Jesus’s siblings)?
23. “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me,” Jesus tells Pilate in Chapter 17. What does Pilate mean when he asks, in return, “What is truth?” Is he mocking Jesus? Toying with him? Both? Discuss this exchange. Also, later on, in Chapter 18, explain why Caiaphas wants Pilate to change the “KING OF THE JEWS” inscription that Pilate himself has scrawled for Jesus in charcoal.
24. After Jesus was captured by Temple guards, who apprehended him in the garden at Gethsemane with the traitorous aid of Judas Iscariot, the other disciples were said to turn and flee, but then, as we find in the Afterword of *KILLING JESUS*, “after the crucifixion, the disciples of Jesus underwent a radical shift in behavior.” Discuss this shift: what brought it about, and what became of the disciples in the years following Jesus’s death? How did they live out their lives, respectively, and how did they die?
25. What is an “ex cathedra pronouncement” (as per a footnote in this book’s Afterword)? And how does such an edict relate to Mary, the mother of Jesus?