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## How much history is in the Passion Narratives? Violence, ideology, historicity, and the seditious Jesus hypothesis

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**HOW MUCH HISTORY IS IN THE PASSION NARRATIVES?  
VIOLENCE, IDEOLOGY, HISTORICITY, AND THE SEDITIOUS JESUS**

**HYPOTHESIS**

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**Abstract**

This article reviews Fernando Bermejo-Rubio's monograph, *They Suffered Under Pontius Pilate: Jewish Anti-Roman Resistance and the Crosses at Golgotha* (2023). This book is the latest publication arguing for the 'seditious Jesus' hypothesis, the idea that Jesus was an armed revolutionary. It is argued that the volume rightly critiques some theological tendency in New Testament scholarship to downplay or ignore violence inherent in the Jesus tradition, but the argument that the men crucified with Jesus were either some of his disciples or sympathetic to his violent cause fails to convince. Despite arguing for historical minimalism in relation to the Gospel material, Bermejo-Rubio builds his case on the material he judges to be historical, but that is better explained by the imagination of the evangelists.

**Keywords:** seditious Jesus; violence; New Testament; historicity; historical Jesus

**Introduction**

I am grateful to the editors of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* for the opportunity to offer this response to Fernando Bermejo-Rubio's stimulating monograph, *They Suffered under Pontius Pilate*,<sup>1</sup> the latest iteration of his thesis that Jesus was an armed

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered Under Pontius Pilate: Jewish Anti-Roman Resistance and the Crosses at Golgotha* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023).

revolutionary. While I have not previously published on the Historical Jesus, I did coincidentally make brief reference to the Seditious Jesus hypothesis in my contribution on ‘Early Christianity and War’ in the recently published *Cambridge Companion to Religion and War*.<sup>2</sup> The relatively short essay deals with early Christianity from the New Testament to Constantine, so it is mentioned only in passing. Nonetheless, I begin here because one clear point of connection I share with advocates of the seditious Jesus hypothesis is the view that the role of violence in the thought-world of early Christianity has been largely suppressed or sanitised. Having argued those who see Jesus as a predominantly non-violent figure overlook the violent eschatological tradition, I turn briefly to those who conceive of Jesus as a sort of revolutionary.

At the other end of the spectrum, some reconstructions of the historical figure of Jesus have placed him in the tradition of the zealots in seeking to overthrow the Romans.... In support of a more apocalyptic version of this thesis, Martin (2014)<sup>3</sup> notes the fact that the assault by one of Jesus’ followers on the arresting party in Gethsemane clearly demonstrates at least some of Jesus’ followers were armed, an incident the early Church is unlikely to have created. Martin argues that this combined with the anti-Temple gospel tradition suggest that Jesus expected his followers to participate in a revolt against the Romans and Temple authorities, accompanied by a heavenly army. However, if this were the case, it is not clear why there were not more arrests. In any case, it is not impossible to explain why the incident could have been created; it demonstrated that the Jesus movement was not a threat to Roman peace and security. Furthermore, this theory leads to the opposite

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Middleton, ‘Early Christianity and War’, in Margo Kitts (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and War* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 52–75.

<sup>3</sup> Dale B. Martin, ‘Jesus in Jerusalem: Armed and Not Dangerous,’ *JSNT* 37/1 (2014), pp. 3–24.

problem from pacifist readers: how to account for the strong non-retaliation tradition.<sup>4</sup>

This article provides me with an opportunity to deal with the revolutionary hypothesis far more adequately than the paragraph above. Nonetheless, the point that Jesus alone was arrested seems to me to represent a significant challenge for those who see Jesus as an armed revolutionary. Surely had his followers constituted any kind of threat they would also have been arrested in the garden. This is precisely the challenge Fernando Bermejo-Rubio answers in his latest book.

Bermejo-Rubio draws attention to the fact that Jesus was *not* crucified alone. The other crucified men, mentioned largely in passing in much of the gospel tradition, are central to his case. He judges it significant that Jesus was executed as a bandit (*lēstēs*) in between two other bandits (*lēstai*). In fact, he suggests the crucifixion party may have numbered far more than three. Regardless of the precise number of men who were crucified that day, Bermejo-Rubio argues that the fact they were crucified together is evidence that the victims were somehow ideologically connected, claiming the eventual distinction between Jesus and the co-crucified represents ‘gospel apologetics’.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Jesus was executed as an anti-Roman revolutionary along with others who were sympathetic to his aims. Similarly, that he was crucified *between* his followers is significant, and for Bermejo-Rubio represents deliberate Roman mockery of his pretence to be king of the Jews, confirmed by the titular charge on the cross.

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<sup>4</sup> Middleton, ‘Early Christianity and War’, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Bermejo-Rubio briefly outlines what he sees as problematic scholarly approaches to the gospel texts (*They Suffered*, pp. 31–39), including a conservatism that delegitimises research on the grounds it can never say anything about the ‘real’ Jesus of ‘faith’ (e.g. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), historical maximalists (in which he includes Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1994), and mythicists. Instead, Bermejo-Rubio advocates ‘Historical Minimalism’ (*They Suffered*, pp. 40–53), having already laid out areas of historical implausibility in accounts of the arrest, the Jewish trial, trial before Pilate, and the crucifixion scenes (*They Suffered*, pp. 7–23). I am in almost full agreement with Bermejo-Rubio’s critique of these positions. As I will explain, my issue with his thesis is that it is not minimalist enough.

In the first section of my response, I begin with an important point of agreement with advocates of a violent Jesus. In considering the place of violence in early Christianity more generally, I share with Bermejo-Rubio the view that contemporary theological concerns exert too much influence over accounts of early Christianity, particularly in relation to questions of peace and violence.<sup>6</sup> The clear presence of violence in the early Christian imagination tends to be sanitised and reduced to harmless metaphor but regrettably actualised in the post-Constantinian church *against* the pacifistic principles of Jesus and his followers. I find this narrative unconvincing, and I am, therefore, sympathetic to Bermejo-Rubio's complaint that many scholars simply dismiss the possibility of a revolutionary Jesus because of a prior theological commitment to the non-violent nature of early Christianity, and the pacifism of Jesus.

Next, I turn to the substance of Bermejo-Rubio's thesis. To anticipate my conclusion, while the seditious Jesus theory does offer a solution to the vexed historical question why Jesus was crucified, I find it ultimately unpersuasive as a historical reconstruction. Bermejo-Rubio once again rightly criticises a tendency among some New Testament scholars to be 'over-generous' when assessing the historicity of the gospel narratives. This hermeneutic of trust was classically criticised by John Dominic Crossan, who quipped 'It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a safe place to do theology and call it history'.<sup>7</sup> However, this criticism of theological commitment could also be applied to ideological conviction, and one might wonder the extent to which Crossan's own reconstruction of Jesus as a suspiciously modern-looking non-apocalyptic sage ushering in a 'brokerless kingdom' escapes his own charge! Nonetheless, his point stands that many theological or ideological beliefs are perhaps more determinative than they ought to be in

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<sup>6</sup> See Paul Middleton, *The Violence of the Lamb: Martyrs as Agents of Divine Judgement in the Book of Revelation* (LNTS 586; London: T & T Clark, 2018), pp. 1–8.

<sup>7</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), p. xxviii.

judging the historicity of the Jesus material. As I will discuss below, to make his case, the material Bermejo-Rubio judges historical is at least strangely inconsistent. He insists on the historicity of very minor details of the Passion narrative which are almost certainly the result of creative storytelling on the part of the evangelists.

For my own part, I am not convinced there is very much reliable historical data in the Passion Narrative. With the demise of the pre-Markan Passion Narrative theory,<sup>8</sup> it is open to question if indeed there is anything based on historical information between the two events ‘received’ by Paul—the Last Supper and the Crucifixion (1 Cor. 11.23–27; 1 Cor 15.3). There is little in Mark’s Passion Narrative that could not have been created *de novo* out of the dramatic necessity of getting Jesus from the upper room to the cross. Perhaps the strongest case could be made for the traditions surrounding Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denial, and Simon of Cyrene.<sup>9</sup> Yet even these narratives serve a clear theological function. While the Simon of Cyrene story looks like a dramatization of Mark 8.34–38—a test Peter fails, perhaps too precisely<sup>10</sup>—the fact his sons, Rufus and Alexander, are mentioned (Mk 15.21) suggests some historical basis. There is nothing in any of the other gospel Passion Narratives that cannot be explained by redaction of Mark. Aside from the three traditions mentioned above, the other events in the Passion look theologically constructed or run into the problem of how the tradition could have been observed or recorded. This includes the arrest scene in Gethsemane,

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<sup>8</sup> Brandon Massey, *The Birth and Death of the PreMarkan Passion Narrative: A History of Form Criticism’s Most Assured Result*. (WUNT II/608; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024); Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), pp. 110–113.

<sup>9</sup> Paul appears to be unaware of the Judas betrayal narrative, repeating early tradition that Jesus appeared to ‘the twelve’ (1 Cor. 15.5). The ‘intact twelve’ tradition is also found in Q (Mt. 19.28//Lk. 22.28–30) and Revelation (21.14). I suspect Judas’ betrayal is an invented tradition as a result of turning the death of Jesus into a biographical narrative, requiring choreography to get Jesus from the upper room to the cross.

<sup>10</sup> For the view Peter’s denial was invented, see Maurice Goguel, ‘Did Peter Deny His Lord? A Conjecture’, *HTR* 25/1 (1932), pp. 1–27, and for extensive discussion, Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, pp. I.610–626. Assuming its historicity, as I have previously argued, Mark ‘has either shaped the tradition or redacted the cross sayings (8.34–38) in such a way as to render Peter’s denial in the most damning possible light’ (Paul Middleton, ‘Suffering and the Creation of Christian Identity in the Gospel of Mark’ in J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker [eds], *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* [London: Bloomsbury, 2014] pp. 173–189, here pp. 185–186.

beyond the fact Jesus was arrested, and the trial narratives. Similarly, there is nothing in Mark's crucifixion scene that could not have been composed from knowledge of the fact of crucifixion and creative use of the Hebrew Bible. Crucially, my historical scepticism covers virtually every aspect of the narrative Bermejo-Rubio requires for his thesis that the men crucified with Jesus can tell us anything about Jesus' own mission. However, it seems to me that Bermejo-Rubio and I agree the burden of proof should be placed on claims to historicity, and I will outline below the areas where his case is made on historical claims which I judge to be questionable.

### **The 'Problem' of Violence in Early Christianity**

The level of violence in the Bible presents many commentators with a hermeneutical challenge. Many books on the Bible, and particularly the New Testament and violence designate violence a 'problem' that must be 'overcome', 'encountered' or 'dealt with'.<sup>11</sup> For many authors, this is a *theological* rather than a *historical* task. It is worth pausing on this point, for if one is committed to a purely historical description, then analysing the level and purpose of violence in a set of ancient texts should not be controversial. The 'problem' only arises because of their 'scriptural' status, and there is a generally unspoken conviction that the academic historical interpretation of these texts is somehow determinative for modern Christians. This, of course, is not self-evident. This theological agenda is more obvious in those who advocate for a 'canonical' approach, insisting violent texts can only be read in light of further biblical revelation that emphasise non-violence.<sup>12</sup> Critics of these approaches

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<sup>11</sup> For example, generally or explicitly apologetic essays are found in Markus Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia (eds), *Encountering Violence in the Bible* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013); Pieter G. R. de Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten (eds), *Coping with Violence in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Helen Paynter and Michael Spalione (eds), *The Bible on Violence: A Thick Description* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Classically, Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1988). Childs stresses the need for 'canonical control' in relation to the violence of Revelation (*New Testament*, p. 502).

suggest the *theological* task of sanitising the Bible's violence for contemporary religious use exerts undue influence on the *exegetical* task of giving an account of the composition, formation, and both the hypothetical first reception, but also the actual early reception of these texts.<sup>13</sup>

This is an approach found as early as the second century figure Marcion, and this Marcionite tendency has persisted in those who insist on a marked difference in the level of violence in the New Testament compared to the Hebrew Bible. This is found explicitly in the work of Richard Hays, who writes that 'the greatest intra-canonical challenge to the witness of the Sermon on the Mount concerning nonviolence and love of enemies comes not from any New Testament text but from the Old Testament, particularly the holy war texts'.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, Hays concedes that 'the Old Testament obviously validates the legitimacy of armed violence by the people of God under some circumstances', but for Christians, 'the New Testament's witness is finally normative ... The New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament'.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus, held up as a model of pacifism and non-violent resistance in both word—especially the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7)—and deed, exemplified by his acceptance, even embrace, of suffering and death. However, alongside synoptic teaching on the blessedness of the peacemakers (Mt 5.9), non-retaliation (Mt. 5.38–39a), and love of enemies (Mt. 5.43–45//Lk. 6.27–29) are threats of violent eschatological judgement against those who reject Jesus (Lk. 10.13–16) and vengeance upon his 'evil generation' (Lk 11.49–52), as well as graphic depictions of eternal torment (e.g. Mk 9.48; Lk. 19.23–28; Mt. 25.41). Moreover, the Jesus of the gospels imagines himself as the eschatological Son of Man who will come from heaven with an army of angels to unleash apocalyptic judgement and separate the elect

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<sup>13</sup> For a robust criticism of canonical criticism, see Robert P. Carroll, 'Canonical Criticism: A recent Trend in Biblical Studies?' *Expository Times* 92 (1981), pp. 73–78.

<sup>14</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 336.

<sup>15</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 337.

for salvation from those destined for destruction (Mk 13.24–27//Mt. 24.29–31; cf. Lk. 21.25–28). Some scholars see an intolerable and irreconcilable tension between Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies while at the same time appearing to wish violent eschatological destruction upon them, and so they dismiss the apocalyptic material as a later, non-authentic tradition in favour of a sapiential non-apocalyptic Jesus who eschewed the violence of his day, whether Roman imperial violence or Jewish Davidic militaristic messianism.

Historical reconstructions of Jesus which do not take account of the violent apocalyptic traditions slide into a long-wearing theological tendency towards imagining Jesus to be an exceptional figure against the backdrop of his first-century Judaism. Joseph goes so far as to suggest Jesus’ non-violence ‘scandalized his contemporaries’ who were still committed to Davidic revolt against the Romans.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Wright argues Jesus called Israel to repent of her ‘militaristic nationalism’.<sup>17</sup> These readings run the risk of what has been recently labelled ‘Judeophobia’, caricaturing first century Judaism in order for a more ‘Christian’ Jesus to emerge.<sup>18</sup> Bermejo-Rubio is scathing about this tendency:

The view of Jesus as a matchless being coming from outer space as the Prince of Peace is just a theological construct, but it looms large in the consciousness of humankind, and the scholarly realm is no exception; it is so deeply entrenched that it may be impossible to dislodge. Hosts of scholars will presumably never remove the theological wax from their ears, and they will go on producing volumes that, besides some historical insights, will be dictated by traditional faith assumptions.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Simon J. Joseph, *The Nonviolent Messiah: Jesus, Q, and the Enochic Tradition* (Augsburg: Fortress, 2014), pp. 229–230.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp.446–450.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah E. Rollens, Eric M. Vanden Eykel, Meredith J. C. Warren (eds), *Judeophobia and the New Testament: Texts and Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025). See especially the contribution by Sarah E, Rollens, ‘Historical Jesus Research and Judeophobia’.

<sup>19</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 255.

Clearly, scholars who believe Jesus to be a model of pacifistic nonviolence resistance would *a priori* rule out any thesis that depicted him as an armed revolutionary. While there could hardly be much objection to a *hermeneutical* preference toward readings of Jesus and the gospels that promote justice and peace in today's world, this impulse does not depend on a *historical* claim that Jesus and the early Church were what we would call today pacifist, any more than Jesus' sayings about loving enemy did not prevent the Crusades, wars of the Reformation or a myriad of violent atrocities carried out in Jesus' name. Nonetheless, as I will argue, there are good historical grounds for finding the seditious Jesus hypothesis unconvincing, and to those I now turn.

### **The Seditious Jesus Hypothesis**

While the proposal that Jesus was a zealot or another form of armed revolutionary can be found as far back as Reimarus,<sup>20</sup> it has lacked sticking power. As Martin notes in his own revival of the hypothesis, 'That Jesus was a "revolutionary" has been suggested and rejected many times.'<sup>21</sup> The best-seller status of Reza Aslan's recent iteration demonstrates that the theory is more likely to fire the imagination of popular rather than scholarly audiences.<sup>22</sup> However, in the last decade, the so-called 'seditious Jesus theory' has become more sophisticated. Rather than confronting the temple authorities as earlier versions of the thesis suggested, Martin argues Jesus was arrested and executed because he and his followers were armed, which would have been against Roman law.<sup>23</sup> This is, of course, consistent with all the

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<sup>20</sup> Charles H. Talbert (ed.) and Ralph S. Fraser (trans.) *Reimarus, Fragments* (SCM Press Lives of Jesus; London: SCM 1971), 150.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, 'Jesus in Jerusalem', pp. 3–4. The main advocates of the thesis are Robert Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* (New York: Dial, 1931), and S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Stein and Day, 1967). What was at the time regarded as the most comprehensive rebuttal of the theory is E. Bammel, 'The Revolutionary Theory from Reimarus to Brandon', in E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (eds), *Jesus and the Politics of his Day* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 11–68.

<sup>22</sup> Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Random House, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Martin, 'Jesus in Jerusalem'.

gospel narratives of Jesus' arrest, in which at least one of his followers had a sword, and attacked one of the arresting party (Mk 14.47). However, while the Gethsemane swords were the lynchpin of previous versions of the thesis, there was no convincing explanation how Jesus and his followers could possibly have expected to confront the Romans with a small group of inexperienced inadequately armed fisherman and tax collectors. Martin argued Jesus never expected to play a decisive role in the following battle, but was 'expecting an angelic army to break through the sky, engage the Romans and their Jewish clients in battle, overthrow the Jewish leaders and Roman overlords, and establish the kingdom of God on earth, all under his own leadership as God's Anointed.'<sup>24</sup>

The other gospels replicate this incident from Mark's arrest scene, although they work hard to distance Jesus from the action. Matthew instructs the assailant to put away his sword (Mt. 27.51–54), while Luke has Jesus heal the victim (Lk. 22.50–51). This apologetic impulse is in fact already present in Mark, when Jesus asks: 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?' (Mk 14.49). Given one of his followers has just assaulted the High Priest's slave, this response is somewhat jarring. While it is not impossible Mark imagines the assailant to have been one of the bystanders—Mark does not say it was a disciple<sup>25</sup>—this is not how it is understood by the other evangelists (Mt. 26.51; Lk. 22.49–50; Jn 18.10).

In the synoptic gospels, the arresting crowd are from the Jewish authorities, and Jesus is taken to the High Priest. However, Bermejo-Rubio suggests the evangelists are concealing the fact that the Romans took the lead in arresting Jesus, and that John's large cohort of soldiers is more historically plausible.<sup>26</sup> The allegedly improbably large size of the number of arresting soldiers is countered by questioning the assumption Jesus and his followers were

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<sup>24</sup> Martin, 'Jesus in Jerusalem', pp.6–7.

<sup>25</sup> The view taken by Brown, *Death*, p. 1.266.

<sup>26</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, pp.203–211.

innocuous. He argues that since the evangelists play up the role of the Jews in the plot against Jesus, there would have been earlier tradition in which the Romans were responsible for the arrest.<sup>27</sup> However, it is doubtful John is preserving an earlier tradition the synoptic gospels have suppressed. John's Passion Narrative has Jesus supremely in control of events, and his alterations to the arrest scene creates some continuity problems. Despite reproducing the tradition that Judas led the arresting party to Jesus, in John's narrative Judas does not actually do anything (Jn 18.2–3);<sup>28</sup> Jesus identifies himself with divine self-disclosure 'I am he' (Jn 18.4–5). At Jesus' words the whole cohort fall back, so that Jesus can only be arrested once he consents and negotiates the release of his disciples, who in the Fourth Gospel do not flee (Jn 18.8–9). This makes Peter's assault on Malchus all the more jarring (Jn 18.10–11). Therefore, that John augments the number of those who came out to arrest Jesus to is better explained by redaction of Mark than the rediscovery of a suppressed tradition. Moreover, if the incident of the ear-cutting were historical, had this attack been against a group containing Roman soldiers, it is highly unlikely any of the party would have left alive, let alone being allowed to leave unmolested.

Bermajo-Rubio does address this point, but remarkably, having put so much store in the incident for establishing the disciples were armed, he suggests believing there was such a sword fight 'naively assumes the reliability of the Gospel accounts'. He states: 'the sword fight in the garden is almost certainly not a concoction, although it might indeed be a distorted memory of a more serious confrontation'!<sup>29</sup> This to me seems to run the danger of attempting to have it both ways: the gospels are reliable enough to be confident there was a

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<sup>27</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, pp. 203–207.

<sup>28</sup> Although John creates this narrative problem, he fixes a continuity error in the synoptic gospels by having Judas leave the supper (Jn 13.30). In the other gospels Judas appears in the Garden with the arresting party with no indication he ever left the company of Jesus and the other disciples.

<sup>29</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p.178.

violent confrontation, but not reliable enough to determine just how violent that confrontation was. This is a tendency to which I will return.

Nonetheless, in addition to the sword incident being reproduced in the four gospels, Luke also has the curious saying about Jesus suggesting they have come to a time where those who have no sword should buy one, so that scripture should be fulfilled ‘he will be counted among the lawless’ (Lk. 22.35–38; Isa. 52.12). This saying does lend weight to the historical claim that at least some of Jesus’ party were armed, with Brandon arguing Jesus was preparing for his disciples to resist his arrest.<sup>30</sup> Despite only two swords being mentioned, Bermajo-Rubio suggests all Jesus’ disciples were armed on the basis that those around later ask ‘Lord should we strike with the sword’ (Lk. 22.49).<sup>31</sup>

In response, Paula Fredriksen<sup>32</sup> and Justin Meggitt,<sup>33</sup> both argue in different ways that the swords mentioned are not necessarily primarily weapons. Fredriksen questions the argument made by Martin that carrying arms was banned in Jerusalem,<sup>34</sup> arguing that the ‘swords’ (*machairai*) carried by the disciples would have been the kind of sacrificial knives carried by most Jewish males at Passover for slaughtering their sacrificial lambs.<sup>35</sup> This is clearly the implement translated by the term in Gen 22.6<sup>LXX</sup>. Fredriksen argues that only when the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin, that the instrument became a *gladius* (unambiguously, a sword).<sup>36</sup> Bermajo-Rubio, with good reason, protests that while a

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<sup>30</sup> Reimarus, *Fragments*, p.150; Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*, p. 342.

<sup>31</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 10; Martin, ‘Jesus in Jerusalem’, pp.4–5; see also Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*, p.341.

<sup>32</sup> Paula Fredriksen, ‘Arms and the Man: A Response to Dale Martin’, *JSNT* 37/3 (2015), pp. 312–325.

<sup>33</sup> Justin Meggitt, ‘Putting the Apocalyptic Jesus to the Sword: Why were Jesus’ Disciples Armed? *JSNT* 45/4 (2023), pp. 371–404.

<sup>34</sup> Fredriksen ‘Arms’, pp. 314–315.

<sup>35</sup> Fredriksen ‘Arms’, pp. 323–324.

<sup>36</sup> Fredriksen ‘Arms’, p. 324.

sacrificial knife is appropriate in Genesis 22, in most other contexts in the Hebrew Bible, the term refers to swords in battle.<sup>37</sup>

However, more persuasive is Meggitt's argument that *machaira* can refer to a whole range of sharp objects from a small knife to a military sword that could stand for any cutting instrument used in construction, agriculture or fishing, or for general blades used in preparing food, slaughtering animals or cutting firewood.<sup>38</sup> Meggitt's central point is that while a *gladius* was a *machaira*, a *machaira* was by no means always a *gladius*. Therefore, it is a far stretch to imagine that possessing two *machairai* would be taken to mean the disciples would have revolutionary intent.<sup>39</sup> Meggitt also questions whether a sword for battle really could be bought for the price of a peasant's cloak, as in the saying.<sup>40</sup> The sword-purchasing logion appears only in Luke, and it should be noted that no swords are actually bought, as the disciples already have two. It is highly unlikely Jesus would have considered two swords sufficient to avoid arrest were that the intent (Nikel 2021, 144).<sup>41</sup> It may well be that Luke is putting the props in place to make sense of the episode in which one of the disciples attacks the high priest's slave (Lk. 22.50).

Even granting that at least some of the disciples were armed with blades that could plausibly be interpreted as aggressive weapons, previous versions of the seditious Jesus hypothesis have run aground on the sheer implausibility of considering Jesus could have imagined taking on the might of Rome with a few swords wielded by a bunch of fishermen and other untrained peasants. However, taking their cue from the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QM), as

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<sup>37</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, pp. 173–175. See also Dale Martin 'Response to Downing and Fredriksen' (*JSNT* 37/3 [2015], pp. 334–345), pp.336–337.

<sup>38</sup> Meggitt, 'Apocalyptic Jesus', pp. 384–390.

<sup>39</sup> Meggitt, with Fredriksen, questions Martin's assertion that carrying such implements were outlawed by the Romans ('Apocalyptic Jesus', p. 387, especially n. 83). See also F. Gerald Downing, 'Dale Martin's Swords for Jesus: Shaky Evidence?', *JSNT* 37/3 (2015), pp. 326–333.

<sup>40</sup> Meggitt, 'Apocalyptic Jesus', p. 383.

<sup>41</sup> Jesse P. Nickel, *The Things that Make for Peace: Jesus and Eschatological Violence* (BZBW 244; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), p. 144.

previously noted, both Bermajo-Rubio and Martin argue Jesus would have imagined God initiating the battle, in which Jesus and his followers would have participated.<sup>42</sup> This reconstruction solves the problem that besets previous iterations of the revolutionary Jesus, who would have to be insane to imagine he could have had any prospect of success against the military might of Rome. Nonetheless, if despite the problems outlined, the arresting party did think the group had seditious intent, then we are still left with the problem why they were content to arrest Jesus alone.

Martin's explanation is unconvincing. He claims that the Romans did not exert any more violence than they needed to; they were pragmatists. 'The Romans typically exerted themselves only enough to squash any rebellion. They felt no need to exert themselves more than was necessary'.<sup>43</sup> He cites the examples of the Samaritan uprising, in which he claims the Romans were content to execute only the principal leaders, and the example of John the Baptist. Fredriksen counters that the response to the Samaritan uprising was so brutal that Pilate was recalled to Rome (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.85–89). Similarly, she notes it is difficult to make a convincing comparison with John the Baptist since he was arrested by Herod, and spent time in prison before his execution.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, we do not have to look hard for other examples of Roman 'excess': Theudas and his unarmed followers are slaughtered (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97–98; cf. Acts 5.12); the Egyptian's followers are massacred even though the leader escapes (*Ant.* 20.169; cf. *War* 2.261), and even allowing for Josephus exaggerating the numbers, many were killed in various Jewish protests (e.g. *Ant.* 18.55–59; *War* 2.224–227; cf. *Ant.* 20.108–112), and in the destruction of Rome (e.g. *War* 6.407).

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<sup>42</sup> Martin, 'Armed'; Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, pp.188–190. However, Meggitt ('Apocalyptic Jesus', pp. 381–384) cautions against imagining the apocalyptic expectations of the Qumran community were widely shared. Moreover, he demonstrates what the Qumran texts say is not precisely how Martin deploys them in his argument.

<sup>43</sup> Martin, 'Armed', p.18.

<sup>44</sup> Fredricksen, 'Arms' p. 322.

*'They' Suffered under Pontius Pilate*

This is the point at which Bermejo-Rubio offers a new angle that seeks to confront this problem. He argues Jesus was *not* the only one arrested; it was not only he who 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. For Bermejo-Rubio, recovering the story of those crucified with Jesus is far more than a question of historical reconstruction; he declares it a *moral* quest. To fail to tell their story also, Bermejo-Rubio insists, is a moral flaw. It is to ignore and set aside the suffering of the men other than Jesus; the beating and flogging, the pain as they carried their crossbeams, had nails driven into their hands, and their final agony as they gasped for air, dying next to Jesus. He complains:

Turned into insignificant shadows, those men are reduced to mere narrative furniture. The fact that a religious tradition that presents itself (and vaunts itself) as being all about humaneness and love has taken such an insensitive and unloving stance toward them speaks volumes. It gives pause for serious reflection.<sup>45</sup>

It is more obvious to Bermejo-Rubio than it is to me what 'serious reflection' is demanded, or that it can be seriously maintained that anyone has deliberately excluded these men from consideration (especially as the words of the Lukan crucified are specifically remembered in the Christian Good Friday liturgy). It is certainly the case that few have attempted Bermejo-Rubio's ambitious historical reconstruction, but this is surely a legitimate enough historical endeavour, rather than the moral task he imagines.<sup>46</sup> History that is driven by an explicit desire to discredit Christianity runs the risk of being no less suspect than the New Testament scholarship that strays too far into apologetics.

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<sup>45</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. xvii

<sup>46</sup> I am in full agreement with Bermejo-Rubio when he elsewhere states, 'As a historian, I am concerned to understand past events, not to pass a moral judgement on the evangelists' (*They Suffered*, p.25).

However, despite legitimate theological and moral misgivings, it is hard to deny that the two crucified men *are* precisely part of the gospel furniture. The evangelists use the men crucified with Jesus in different ways. This is most striking in Luke, who rewrites the narrative in Mark and creates the character of the so-called ‘good thief’ (Luke 23.40–43). There is no need to imagine Luke has a source for this story; it is far more likely to be his own composition. He takes the opportunity to use one of the men to declare Jesus to be innocent, as Pilate and Herod have done before (Lk. 23.4; 23.14; 23.15; 23.22), and the centurion will do later (Lk. 23.47). For Luke, each of these characters, including the two bandits on the cross, are little more than literary props whose primary purpose is to reinforce his theological drama.

Yet, for Bermejo-Rubio, these men, *and their words*, become an integral part of his case.<sup>47</sup> While he rightly criticised those with theological investment in the text for taking the gospels’ historical claims at face value, his case almost entirely hangs on particular details of the narratives having a solid historical basis, even if the evangelists have tried to disguise them. The gospel writers are, of course, prone to adjusting their sources to smooth over theological problems. However, it is questionable that the presence of two crucified malefactors is evidence of any particular historical tradition. There is nothing in Mark’s crucifixion scene that could not have been created *de novo* from Psalm 22, Isaiah 52–53, and Mark’s enthronement-through-suffering theology. Similarly, there is no evidence of any additional sources for the Passion in general, or the co-crucified in particular, when it comes to Matthew, Luke, or John. Their narratives can be entirely explained by redaction of Mark and free composition. It seems to me likely that Mark had no idea how many men were crucified with Jesus that day, and he did not have any written or oral sources which addressed that question. It is probably the case that Mark chose two precisely to put one on either side

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<sup>47</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, pp. 222–225.

of Jesus to highlight his conviction that it was through suffering that Jesus fulfilled his kingly messianic identity. By suggesting Mark created the other condemned men, I am not claiming Jesus was crucified alone. Rather the historical presence or otherwise of two, nine, or forty-three other crucifixion victims that day is not the reason there are two in Mark's narrative.

Yet, Bermejo-Rubio deems it significant that Jesus was crucified between two *lēstai*. He says, 'it is *a priori* highly improbable that Rome crucified together a group of men without any connection among them'.<sup>48</sup> Yet as he acknowledges, they are an afterthought in Mark's narrative. In Mark, only Jesus is led out to the place of crucifixion, adding 'and with him they crucified two bandits' (Mk 15.27) followed by both Matthew (27.38) and John (19.18). I agree with Bermejo-Rubio's interpretation: 'these men are introduced into the narrative in a most abrupt way, without any previous story or context, and wholly unconnected to the main character';<sup>49</sup> this seems to me evidence of invention. On the other hand, Luke does mention that the two others 'were led away to be put to death with him', adding that 'they were both criminals' (Lk. 23.32). Again, there is no reason to suppose Luke has access to the scene other than through Mark. As with the sword-purchasing saying that established the presence of swords, one of which would be wielded in Gethsemane, Luke tidies up Mark's choreography, not least because the co-crucified will play a more prominent role in Luke's crucifixion scene. Bermejo-Rubio correctly notes that all the evangelists differentiate Jesus from the other two, which is reinforced by the criminals taunting him in Mark and Matthew (Mk 15.32//Mt. 27.44). However, there is no evidence Mark thought Jesus had an *actual* relationship to the two bandits which he is consciously suppressing. I suspect he had absolutely no knowledge of what happened that day other than the fact that Jesus was crucified.

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<sup>48</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p.222.

<sup>49</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p.223.

The wholly invented conversation between the three crucified men in Luke becomes important for Bermejo-Rubio's case that the men had a previous relationship, and had been arrested together. He argues that the first bandit's taunt—that if he is the Messiah he should save himself and the others (Lk. 23.39)—makes no sense unless the men previously knew each other. Moreover, he takes this as evidence the men had taken part in Jesus' seditious activity, and would have been disappointed to be hanging on a Roman cross.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, he claims, the good thief's words only make sense if he believed Jesus was a king able to bestow heavenly gifts. To put the case in Bermejo-Rubio's own words:

This...means that the man not only knows that Jesus claimed to be a king, but also that he accepts the truthfulness of such a claim. But this claim is the political charge on which Jesus had been accused and sentenced...and despite the evangelist's aim, this man's last words (v.42), however indirectly, confirms that Jesus had been rightly condemned by Rome.<sup>51</sup>

Bermejo-Rubio claims that a close reading of Luke shows that the evangelist failed in his attempts to cover-up a relationship between the three men.

However, given Luke's source is Mark, who already distances Jesus from the others, it is highly unlikely Luke really saw what Bermejo-Rubio sees in his gospel. He claims:

Although [Luke's] statements seem to underpin the Gospel version of a lack of relationship between those men and Jesus (along with his political harmlessness), what they imply is quite different;...there existed some relationship between the men crucified at Golgotha, since all of them had taken part in some rebellious move.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p.224.

<sup>51</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p.225.

<sup>52</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p.225.

This crucial element of Bermejo-Rubio's case depends on the two men saying something like words recorded in Luke. However, this is highly unlikely. Luke simply reproduces the taunting found in Mark's gospel on the lips of the passers-by, the chief priests and scribes, and those crucified with him (Mk 15.29–32), in a scene created from Psalm 22.6–8. Luke has the leaders repeat the words found in Mark: 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one' (Lk. 23.35); and the soldiers mocking him, saying 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself' (23.37). Therefore, the first bandit's taunt contains nothing that has not already been said by the others around the cross. The words put into the mouth of the 'good thief' is a declaration of what *Luke* believes to be true; Jesus *is* saving others by not saving himself. The declaration of innocence is similar to the way in which Luke changes the centurion's words found in Mark acknowledging Jesus to be the Son of God (Mark 15.39)—almost certainly invented by Mark—to the equally invented further declaration of innocence (Lk 23.47). If the evangelists really were covering up the relationship between Jesus and the other crucified, of which Luke's account of the conversations is evidence, we would have to imagine a tortuous chain of events. First, the conversation between the crucified men (which just happened to have close verbal parallels to Ps. 22) must have been overheard and passed on. At some point, it would have been written down and found its way into Mark's hands. Mark suppressed this conversation in order to disguise the fact the men were all co-conspirators by putting some of the conversation on the mouths of the passers-by and chief priests, only for Luke to continue the cover-up, but carelessly put the words back into the mouths of the crucifixion victims! It is far more likely that most of the details were invented by Mark based on the Hebrew Bible, which Luke then redacts. Luke then invents a further conversation between the men to impress on the reader his belief that Jesus is innocent.

Bermejo-Rubio considers the placement of Jesus between the co-crucified as *historically* significant. In fairness, he does acknowledge its historicity could be questioned given its clear kingship motif; one on the right and the other on the left, echoing James and John's request to be at either side of Jesus when he comes into his kingdom (Mk 10.35–37). Nonetheless, Bermejo-Rubio regards the suggestion the scene has been concocted as 'extremely unlikely'.<sup>53</sup> He argues that Jesus being only one of a number of victims 'runs the risk of relativizing Jesus' isolation', claiming the scene would have been more effective had Jesus been executed alone.<sup>54</sup> Instead, Bermejo-Rubio suggests the Romans would have known what they were doing, and mockingly reflected Jesus' kingly ambitions by the choreography of the crucifixion. This seems to me to seriously underplay the evangelists' creative stage direction. The fact there are precisely three victims is surely Markan's kingship theology at play, which would have been difficult to have achieved had Jesus been crucified alone, or for that matter, alongside an odd number of other victims.

Bermejo-Rubio's reconstruction is that some of Jesus' party in Gethsemane *were* in fact taken with Jesus. On Mark's insistence that *all* Jesus' disciples fled (Mk 14.50–51), he counters: 'We cannot know if the report about that general flight is reliable, and *it is in fact* highly suspect'.<sup>55</sup> To be sure, the fact that all his disciples deserted Jesus may fit into Mark's general anti-disciple schema, but it certainly fits the criterion of embarrassment. Moreover, to support his case, Bermejo-Rubio turns to the very precise wording of the servant girl's confrontation of Peter, when she tells those around 'This man is one of *them*' (Mk 14.69, repeated in 14.70). This is almost certainly Mark pointing outside the text to his readers' experience, and looks constructed to make Peter fit the role of an apostate (cf. Mk 8.34–38). Furthermore, Bermejo-Rubio maintains Peter's and the disciples' earlier insistence that they

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<sup>53</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 226.

<sup>54</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 226.

<sup>55</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 229 (emphasis added).

were ready to die with Jesus (Mk 14.31) rather than Mark setting the disciples up to fail is taken as evidence that ‘the possibility that some of his close followers actually died with him should not be hastily ruled out’.<sup>56</sup>

As it happens, Bermejo-Rubio does draw back from those crucified with Jesus being part of the assembled Gethsemane crowd, and that although there would likely have existed a relationship between the co-crucified, it may only have been ‘on the ideological level’.<sup>57</sup> However, his claim that this is so likely that the burden of proof lies with those who think otherwise seems to me to be somewhat of a stretch. However, Bermejo-Rubio anticipates objections to his thesis, and comes pre-armed with the ‘ideological defence’. He writes:

The fact that we do not hear of any of the Galilean’s followers being imprisoned and sentenced with him will make many readers (particularly those prone to trust the Gospels as generally reliable historical sources) rule out the possibility that the co-crucified men were Jesus’ close disciples.<sup>58</sup>

While I share a frustration with theologically driven exegetical decisions, it is far from clear that everyone who disagrees with Bermejo-Rubio’s conclusions are those ‘prone to trust the Gospels as generally reliable historical sources’, or who ‘gullibly trust the Gospel stories as they stand’.<sup>59</sup> As I think I have demonstrated, it is perhaps ironic that Bermejo-Rubio’s own reconstruction is based on putting an inordinate amount of historical trust in textual details that are far better explained by the evangelists’ theological imagination.

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<sup>56</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 229.

<sup>57</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 231.

<sup>58</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 228.

<sup>59</sup> Bermejo-Rubio, *They Suffered*, p. 251. Bermejo-Rubio almost goes so far as to imagine there is a conspiracy in mainstream scholarship against the kind of thesis he advances. ‘There seems to be little hope that the approach taken in the book at hand would ever be accepted by mainline exegetes and theologians...everything conspires against changing a paradigm.’ He speaks of his own ‘lucid, insightful, and honest regard’ for the evidence against the ‘narrow parochialism, strange oblivion and blatantly distorting biases’ of mainstream New Testament scholarship (p. 256). This is in an epilogue (pp.251–257) titled (presumably without irony) ‘How (Not) to Change a Paradigm’.

## Conclusion

Various manifestations of the revolutionary Jesus hypothesis have been proposed since the rise of critical Biblical Studies. It is fair to say that none of them have been successful. The rejection of the thesis is not primarily down to theological intransigence, as at least some of its proponents suggest. However, Bermejo-Rubio and Dale Martin have arguably put the strongest case yet for its consideration. As well as those outlined above, there are other problems with the hypothesis that could be mentioned. For example, it is difficult to explain the way in which the Jesus movement understood itself after the ‘resurrection event’, including Paul’s relationship with Jesus’ disciples, and his lack of concern with the seditious nature of the crucifixion. If the disciples saw the resurrection event (however they experienced or understood it) as vindication of Jesus’ mission, why was there a radical break with the seditious element of his mission if it were so significant? One might have expected Jesus followers to have been active in Jewish anti-Roman activity.

Finally, it seems to me that the seditious Jesus theory has two main lessons for more mainstream accounts of Jesus and the movement that followed him. The first is to highlight the lack of a totally convincing account of why Jesus was crucified. While Vermes may be right that Jesus was just ‘in the wrong place at the wrong time’<sup>60</sup> this is, nonetheless, an important lacuna in historical Jesus work, and at the very least, the seditious Jesus hypothesis offers a clear answer.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the seditious Jesus hypothesis reminds us that there is ample violence in early Christian tradition, much of it associated with Jesus. We should avoid the temptation to see Jesus as a unique non-violent figure that stands out from his first century Jewish background mimicking a hopelessly implausible Ghandi figure. Jesus

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<sup>60</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 45. The more concrete version of the wrong place, wrong time theory is there was something about Jesus’ action in the Temple that provoked his arrest, so for example, Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985), pp. 61–76; Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 355–360.

in all probably believed in violence. The fact that he probably thought God would be responsible for inflicting violent judgment (whether or not he saw himself as an agent of that violence, either as a seditious revolutionary, or the eschatological Son of Man) should not make his confidence in the power of violence any less troubling.

To trumpet the fact that the early Christians did not take up arms against Rome as anything like a significant commitment to non-violence is to set the bar extremely and insignificantly low.<sup>61</sup> The reason many accounts of early Christianity seems to be equally disappointed and surprised by Constantine's appropriation of violence in the name of Christianity is because they have failed to notice the violence embedded in the Jesus and early Christian tradition. So, while I ultimately do not find the latest incarnation of the seditious Jesus hypothesis persuasive, at least it treats violence in the Jesus tradition—too often ignored—with the seriousness it deserves.

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<sup>61</sup> Middleton 'Early Christianity and War', p. 62.