

“FOR GOOD WORK DO THEY WISH TO KILL HIM?”:  
NARRATIVE CRITIQUE OF THE ACTS OF PILATE

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Abstract

The Acts of Pilate, preserved today in two Greek versions, a Latin version, a Coptic, an Armenian, and an Old Slavic version, is regarded as one of the most popular and widely circulated apocrypha from late antiquity and medieval literature. Previous generations of scholars have believed this narrative to be a product of the literary trend from early Christian writings vilifying ethnic Jews for the trial and death of Jesus.

However, this text is more complex and more nuanced than previously recognized by scholars. Although this text is suggestive of a literary trend popular among Christian writers slandering Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, it is distinctive in this tradition because this narrative offers the high priests, the antagonist held accountable for the death of Jesus in other literary sources, as the narrative's main characters. Furthermore, the narrative's plot is to convince this protagonist of the miracles and ascension of Jesus, and the narrative's conflict is the high priests' resistance and inability to refute these testimonials.

This evidence is offered by characters of indisputable integrity, which are also Jewish. Through actors such as Nicodemus, three teachers from the Galilee, a council member named Levi, and even the miracle of Joseph's disappearance from his imprisonment, the narrative's protagonists remain unmoved regardless of the seemingly undeniable evidence. Finally, the choice of these figures as the narrative's obstinate protagonist in light of testimonials from Jewish characters suggests a possible social situation related to the composition of this form of the text and offers an insight into a possible date for the origin of this text.