That Jesus was “crucified under Pontius Pilate,” as the Creed affirms, is historically the most stable datum we have concerning Jesus, but questions remain. Over the last three decades, scholarly study of Jesus’ crucifixion shifted from concern over who killed Jesus, to the question why Jesus was put to death on a Roman cross. How does the crucifixion of Jesus make sense within the story of his life, and within the world in which he lived? Today, the litmus test for any representation of the historical Jesus is whether such an account can make sense of why Jesus was executed on a Roman cross as “King of the Jews.” That is, contemporary attempts to tell the story of Jesus’ life must weave together as a single cloth the manner of his life and the character of his death. After reviewing evidence supporting the historicity of Jesus’ crucifixion, I will situate the crucifixion of Jesus within three interwoven stories: the story of imperial Rome, the story of Israel, and the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, to which we have access primarily by means of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

1. “Crucified under Pontius Pilate”

Multiple strands of evidence—from Christian, Jewish, and Roman sources—undergird the claim that among the data available to us regarding Jesus of Nazareth, none is more incontrovertible than his execution on a Roman cross by order of Pontius Pilate.

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1.1. New Testament Evidence

The New Testament materials testify to Jesus’ crucifixion with passion narratives noted for their length and detail, with references to the crucifixion especially in the speeches in Acts, and through snippets of information scattered throughout the letters and the Apocalypse. Although some scholars today take the second-century Gospel of Peter as an independent witness to the death of Jesus, most have concluded that this Gospel was dependent on one or more of the New Testament gospels as sources and thus provides little if anything by way of independent witness.

Scholars who have explored the origin of the passion narrative in recent decades have tended to posit a very early account or accounts that were expanded into the narratives of Jesus’ suffering and death known to us in the New Testament gospels. Most analysis has focused on the traditional quality of the material shared by the Gospels of Mark and John, which are taken to be independent of one another as literary sources, or has simply argued in favor of a pre-Markan passion narrative; other study has suggested that the passion account in Luke 22–23 builds both on Mark 14–15 and on a non-Markan passion tradition. Such research does not prove the historicity of Jesus’ crucifi-