The Death of Jesus: Then and Now

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When we Christians make our profession of faith every Sunday, we say: “For our sake he [Jesus] was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died and was buried.” This statement, so familiar to us, raises questions that are pivotal in our historical portrait of Jesus: 1. What circumstances led to Jesus’ death? 2. Who killed Jesus? 3. Why did Jesus die?

Gospel sources

The accounts of Jesus’ passion and death in the four Gospels agree on many basic points. They tell us that Jesus was arrested, underwent two hearings or trials, was sentenced to death by crucifixion and died on a cross. Mark’s passion narrative seems to have been the earliest; indeed, large blocks of it may have existed even before he completed his Gospel around 70 A.D. Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a source and included material from other traditions as well. John’s Gospel represents a separate tradition, while agreeing with Mark on many points.

None of the four evangelists set out to write a detailed chronicle of the day on which Jesus died, though each of them provides some reliable historical details. Their real interest lay in the theological significance of Jesus’ death for us and for our sins, and how his death took place according to the Old Testament prophecies.

A form of Roman punishment

The best clue toward determining who killed Jesus is found in the way he died—by crucifixion. In Jesus’ time, crucifixion was a Roman punishment inflicted mainly on slaves and revolutionaries. The usual Jewish mode of execution was stoning, as in the case of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). Crucifixion was a cruel and public way to die. It was meant to shame the one being executed and to deter onlookers from doing what he had done.

The official who had the power to execute Jesus by crucifixion was the Roman governor or prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Jesus was put to death “under Pontius Pilate” around the year 30 A.D. Although the Gospels present Pilate as indecisive and somewhat concerned for justice in Jesus’ case, the Alexandrian Jewish writer Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, described Pilate as “inflexible, merciless and obstinate.”

All four Gospels recount a proceeding or hearing in which Jesus appears before Pontius Pilate. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Pilate questions Jesus and offers the crowd a choice between Barabbas, a convicted criminal, and Jesus.

At the urging of the chief priests, the crowd calls for Barabbas to be released and for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate bows to their pressure and has Jesus scourged and handed over to be put to death. John’s elaborate account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate also ends with Pilate handing over Jesus to be executed.
King or rebel?

The official charge leveled against Jesus appears in the inscription placed on the cross: “the King of the Jews.” To Christians, this title ironically expresses the truth that Jesus really was the Messiah of Jewish expectations. To Pilate and the Jewish leaders, however, Jesus was one in a series of Jewish religious-political troublemakers intent on destroying the Roman Empire and the status quo at Jerusalem in the name of the Kingdom of God.

Josephus described some of these Jewish Messiah figures in his *Jewish Antiquities*. They often used religious symbols and traditions to gain a popular following and to begin an uprising. The Roman officials dealt with them swiftly and brutally.

Jesus did not die alone. Rather, he was crucified along with two men described in various translations as “thieves,” “bandits,” “rebels” or “revolutionaries”—the same Greek word Mark applied to Barabbas (15:7). While the evangelists were quick to deny that Jesus was one of them, it is likely that Pilate viewed him as another one of those Jewish religious-political rebels.

So the manner of Jesus’ death (crucifixion), the legal system in force (with Pilate having ultimate authority in capital cases), the official charge against Jesus (“the King of the Jews”) and the type of persons crucified along with him (thieves, bandits, rebels, revolutionaries) all point to the conclusion that the ultimate legal and moral responsibility for Jesus’ death lay with the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

‘…suffered and died under Pontius Pilate’

How Pilate came to be prefect of Judea is important in assessing Jewish responsibility for Jesus’ death. With the success of the Maccabean revolt in the mid-second century B.C., Judea gained political independence as well as a powerful protector in Rome. The Romans were called upon not only to defend the Maccabean dynasty from its foreign enemies but also to resolve internal and even family disputes.

Herod the Great married into the Maccabean priestly/ruling family and served as a king in the service of the Romans from 40 to 4 B.C. Upon Herod’s death, the region of Judea was assigned to one of his sons, Herod Archelaus. After 10 years of turmoil and rebellion, the Romans decided to take direct control of Judea by appointing a Roman prefect or governor in 6 A.D. The most famous of these was Pontius Pilate.

It was Roman policy to work with local peoples. When things got out of hand, the Roman armies would intervene with brutal force. In normal times, however, the Romans relied on local officials to collect taxes and keep the peace. So in Judea it was natural that there would be Jews who were willing to do the Romans’ bidding.

Jerusalem: destination of pilgrims

Jerusalem was a pilgrimage center for Jews living in Jerusalem and beyond. Three times a year—at the feasts of Passover, Weeks/Pentecost and Tabernacles—Jews came in large numbers to worship at the Temple. The pilgrimage trade was a major industry in Jerusalem.

The restoration and expansion of the Temple, begun as part of Herod the Great’s ambitious building program, was likewise a major industry. To a great extent, the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem oversaw this project.

The pilgrimages brought many people to Jerusalem. The themes of the great festivals, especially Passover with its commemoration of ancient Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt, could easily incite nationalistic fervor and rebellion. So it was customary that the Roman prefect, whose official residence was in Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean seacoast, would come to Jerusalem to work with the local Jewish leaders to keep matters under control. They all had the same goal—to keep the peace.

Jesus takes the stand
Each Gospel recounts Jesus appearing at a trial or hearing before the Jewish council presided over by the high priest. The Jews who took the initiative in this proceeding were not the Pharisees, opponents of Jesus during his public ministry, but those who had the most stake in the smooth running of the Temple and the peace of Jerusalem: the chief priests and elders.

According to Mark, there were two charges made against Jesus: He threatened to destroy the Temple and in three days to “build another, not made with hands” (14:58), and he claimed to be “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One” (14:61). There was surely some historical basis for these allegations.

Jesus’ threat against the Temple fits with his symbolic prophetic action in “cleansing” the Temple (Mk 11:15-19) and his prophecy about its destruction (Mk 13:1-2). For the Jewish leaders, merchants and construction workers whose livelihood depended on the smooth running of the Temple, the slightest threat against the Temple—even a symbolic one—would have been taken very seriously.

Talk about Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One” surely would have set off alarms, not only among the Romans but also among the Jewish leaders. Both viewed Jesus as another religious-political messianic pretender who had to be dealt with quickly. The kind of language being used about Jesus in some circles alerted them to the danger that he might pose to their power and to the status quo.

Degree of Jewish responsibility

The Gospels suggest that the Jewish leaders were the prime movers in getting Jesus executed and that the Romans only ratified their decision. At the other end of the spectrum, however, some scholars argue that no Jewish authority was involved in any way. Between these two extremes there are mediating positions. Some scholars say that the Romans were the prime movers and that the Jewish authorities reluctantly gave in to pressure from them. Others state that, even though Jewish leaders were actively involved, the Romans carried out the main legal formalities.

Two important points emerge: Jesus was executed “under Pontius Pilate,” and the Jewish authorities at Jerusalem very likely played some role in getting Jesus killed. Whatever Jewish responsibility there may have been lay with a small group (the chief priests and elders) in a specific place (Jerusalem) and at a specific time (Passover of 30 A.D.). The response in Matthew 27:25—“His blood be on us and on our children!”—is best taken as referring to the crowd (“us”) manipulated by their leaders and to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (“our children”), not to the whole Jewish people for all ages.

The Christian perspective

The official position of the Catholic Church is clearly stated in Vatican II’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate): “Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (see Jn 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion” (#4).

Christians today need to be sensitive to the tendency in the Gospels to emphasize the responsibility of the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ death and to play down the role of the Romans. One can get the impression that the Jewish leaders simply manipulated Pilate to pass sentence on Jesus, and that he turned Jesus over to them to be executed.

The impression grows as one moves from Mark to Matthew and Luke, who both used Mark as their main source. Moreover, John’s Gospel lumps all of Jesus’ opponents under the title “the Jews,” thus apparently extending Jewish responsibility beyond the chief priests and elders.

Such passages need to be read in their late first-century historical context when Jerusalem had been destroyed and Christians were accommodating themselves to life within the Roman Empire. When removed from that historical context, these texts can contribute to anti-Semitism and obscure the Jewishness of Jesus as well as the Jewish character of early Christianity.
Three questions

We began by raising three pivotal questions about the death of Jesus. Now we can better answer them.

1. *What circumstances led to Jesus’ death?* On the historical level, one can point to the sinful social structures in first-century Palestine and the spiral of violence that led Pilate to view Jesus as a dangerous Jewish rebel. On the theological level, one can say that Jesus’ death on the cross was the result of our human sinfulness.

2. *Who killed Jesus?* Pontius Pilate, with cooperation from some Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, killed Jesus.

3. *Why did Jesus die?* The New Testament writers give several profound theological responses: Jesus died in accord with God’s will as expressed in the Scriptures (Matthew). Jesus died a sacrificial death for us and for our sins (Mark, Paul, Hebrews). In his death Jesus gave us an example of fidelity in suffering (Luke). Jesus’ death was part of his work in revealing God, his glorious return to the Father (John) and the pledge of his second coming (Revelation).