

Who Killed Jesus, and Why?

Luke 22:1-23

One of the most sensitive questions in contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue is: Who killed Jesus? The issue is volatile because for upwards of two millennia – including most recently under the Nazi regime – various sick and evil groups have used Jewish involvement in the crucifixion of Christ as justification for inflicting unspeakable abuse on Jews.

Still, if appropriately handled, the question is legitimate, not least because it is one which the Gospel writers address, as Luke does in this week's passage. We will see that the answer is more complex than many people realize.

Day 1: Exodus 12 Answer #1: God decrees Jesus' death, in order to make salvation possible.

Jesus intentionally sets his crucifixion against the background of the exodus from Egypt, along with its slaughter of the Passover lamb. Luke also underscores the connection (22:1,7,8,11,13,15). Clearly the association is important for both of them. Neither explicitly explains why, because the answer was obvious to them, and is to us with just a little thought.

The exodus was the event which defined Israel as a nation. When Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt, they were just a clan. After 400 years, they were a large people, but still, only migrants in a foreign land. Only with the exodus and their entrance into Canaan do they take the step toward nationhood.

Beyond that, the exodus connection is important because it entails two other key features. First, the Passover lamb reveals that God saves through the shedding of blood. Each family sacrificed a lamb, ate the meat, and sprinkled the blood on the doorposts of their homes. That way, when the Lord struck down the first-born child of every Egyptian family, he passed over the Jewish homes. The lamb died so that the people could live. Secondly, in the exodus, God rescues – 'redeems' – his people from captivity. In gratitude for this double blessing, the Israelites are to sacrifice a lamb at Passover and to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, in perpetuity. In so doing, they commemorate their salvation.

In a way which no one then could have anticipated, God's redemption of Israel from Egypt turned out to be paradigmatic for how he saves the world. Jesus – the lamb – dies. We commemorate our deliverance with unleavened bread (and wine, representing his blood). We, like ancient Israel (only more so), have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, and by the mighty hand of God.

This being so, why did Jesus die, and who was responsible? He died for our salvation, at the initiative of God: "The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed" (Luke 22:22). It was God who decided that Jesus would die for our sin. This is not a comprehensive answer, but it is an essential answer: God delivered Israel

through the blood of the lamb; he delivered us through the blood of his Son.

Day 2: Luke 22:1-2 Answer #2: The Jewish leadership seeks Jesus' death for theological and political reasons. Jesus recently faulted the temple sacrificial system (19:45-28), and predicted its destruction (21:5-6). To those overseeing the temple, this smacked of both heresy and treason. Then, Jesus publically criticized those leaders as hostile toward God, petty, egocentric and self-serving (20:9-19,45-47). This was just plain impudent and insulting. Beyond that, his actions and claims raised expectations among the masses that he might be the long-awaited Messiah, who would deliver the nation from Rome, as Moses had delivered Israel from Egypt. These hopes would be at feverish pitch when throngs came to Jerusalem to commemorate the exodus. To head off the threat of rebellion against Rome, to quell the threat of heresy, and to preserve their own position atop the national hierarchy, the Jewish religious and political leadership determined to move against Jesus, but to do so discretely, lest the masses revolt.

Did *the Jews* kill Jesus? No, but the *Jewish leadership* did have a part in his execution. To some extent their motivation had an element of misguided virtue: preserving the ignorant masses from outrageous claims and actions that they could only assume were heretical. But in other respects, their motivation was political expediency and personal ambition (a characterization which the ancient Jewish historian and one-time insurrectionist Josephus himself supports). Do these realities justify insults of 'Christ-killer' or violence? That is absurd. New Testament authors never engaged in such vituperative, nor did they ever celebrate the possibility that Jesus' accusers would be condemned. Instead, following Jesus who prayed for those who crucified him (Luke 23:33-34), Stephen, the first Christian martyr did likewise (Acts 7:60), and the apostle Paul expressed willingness to be cursed so that his countrymen might be saved (Rom 9:1-4). Anyone who uses the participation of the temple leadership in the crucifixion of Christ to justify violence against Jews knows nothing of Christ.

Day 3: Luke 22:3 Answer #3: Satan seeks Jesus' death in the hopes of destroying God's plan of salvation. From the very beginning of life in Eden, Satan opposed both God and the people of God (Gen 3:1-15). From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, Satan opposed his efforts to save the world, seeking to ruin his career before it got underway (Luke 4:2-13). Satan afflicts people with illness (Luke 13:16), and tempts them to sin (Luke 22:31). It is no surprise to read that he was also active, behind the scenes, in the crucifixion of Christ, with the hope of preventing salvation.

We, though, can take hope as we encounter his malice. By dying on the cross, Jesus defeated Satan through the very mechanism by which Satan hoped to

destroy God's salvation plan. So whether we face the manipulations of temptation, or the frontal attacks of oppression, Christ fights for us, and has already won the decisive battle. We are saved, and we are safe.

Day 4: Luke 22:4-6,22-23 Answer #4: Judas seeks Jesus' death for reasons

unknown. Judas played a crucial role in the plot to kill Jesus. The Jewish leadership had the motive, but lacked opportunity to act. Hordes – hundreds of thousands – of fervent religious pilgrims flocked the city during Passover, one of the most important festivals of the annual religious calendar. The city strained under the crowds, and the police struggled to keep order. Zeal and hope typically ran wild: no better time for God to deliver his people again than during the festival which celebrates his first deliverance. So the Jewish leadership fear acting against publically against Jesus, lest they pour fuel on those smoldering passions and create an uncontrollable conflagration. This is where Judas fits in. As an intimate of Jesus, he will know the details of their schedule, and can identify a discrete time and place for the arrest.

None of the Gospels gives any attention to Judas' underlying motives. Unlike their modern counterparts, first-century authors and readers were little concerned with psychological or emotional states; they focused instead on actions. So we can only speculate, and speculation is of little actual use. What Luke, along with the other Gospel writers, do tell us is that Judas received money for his treachery, whether or not this was his primary motive. Luke, again with the other Gospel writers, also tell us his destiny: "Woe to that man who betrays him."

Does this seem unfair? After all, Judas is not solely responsible. So far (and more may be said later), God decreed the crucifixion, and Satan instigated it, and stood most to profit from it. Should Judas bear such severe penalty for it? Is there no reduction of sentence for being 'of diminished capacity'?

Contemporary ideas of fairness are conditioned by our concepts of causation. To our mind, one person is ultimately responsible, or together they share culpability. So who bears the blame for the crucifixion? God, Satan, or Judas? Or each in part, commensurate with their individual contributions to the outcome?

Scripture eschews simplistic notions of causation. Instead, each participant is fully – not just partially – responsible. From one angle, Satan is fully responsible: he works behind the scenes, and through the human actors; yet he alone is powerful and egotistical enough to suppose that he can defeat the plan of God. Ironically, though, at his most malevolent, all he manages to do is to ensure the fulfillment of the divine plan. So God is fully responsible: what happens, Luke frequently tells us, is what 'must' happen (i.e., what God decreed to happen) (4:43; 9:22-23; 10:25; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5; 21:9; 22:37; 24:7; 24:44). At the same

time, from a third perspective, Judas bears full responsibility, even though under possession by Satan, and acting in accord with the decree of God. Scripture affirms all three, without finding them to be mutually exclusive.

Day 5: Luke 22:7-18 Answer #5: Jesus is in charge of his own death.

Luke draws special attention to this point, in four ways. First, as Peter and John go off to make preparations for the Passover meal together, Jesus provides them detailed instructions, including specific incidentals. Subsequently, the entire process transpires as he predicted. Secondly, Jesus indicates that it has been his eager desire to share this symbolic meal with his disciples before he is put to death. He knows death awaits; at the same time, he embraces his fate. Thirdly, looking even further ahead, Jesus predicts that he will not celebrate another Passover until the reign of God is fully established. Fourthly, Jesus is fully aware that one of his fellows will betray him. In these four ways, Jesus affirms in substance here what the Fourth Gospel explicitly quotes him to say: "I lay down my life... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:17-18).

Jesus embraces the decree of God; it is not forced upon him. Satan may connive, but Jesus controls. Judas may sneak around in the shadows, but Jesus shines a light on him. The crucifixion does not take Jesus unawares; nor is he dragged kicking and screaming toward death. He is fully in charge at his own execution.

Day 6: Luke 22:19-20 Answer #6: We are responsible for Jesus' death, because our sin makes it necessary. "This is my body given for you ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Were it not for human sin – an evil in which we each participate – there would be no need for the cross. It is for us that his body is given; it is for us that his blood is poured out. So, like a husband who spends the rest of his life remorseful over a tawdry affair, like a driver who spends the rest of her life remorseful over a fatality inflicted while drunk, we come to communion recognizing that it was our sin which prompted God's decree, our sin more than Satan's malevolence or Judas' treachery that necessitated the death of Christ.

All the same, at the communion table, the celebration of forgiveness rightly exceeds our sense of guilt over sin. Nonetheless, it is a celebration tinged with awareness of our responsibility, and motivating a life of love and service in reciprocation for the love and service that redeemed us.