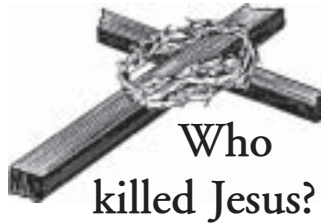




Who killed Jesus?

Dr. Glenn Parkinson



Who killed Jesus?

Brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you that Christ died ... 1 Corinthians 15:1,3

The account of the life, death and resurrection of Christ has moved more people than any other story every told. Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, retells part of that story to a new generation, while enabling their parents to reconnect with it as well.

There is little doubt about the fact that Jesus of Nazareth died a strikingly horrible death. But the question most asked in connection with this film is, "Who killed Jesus?" It is a profound question that searches both the complexity and the meaning of the event itself.

The only existing eyewitness accounts of Christ's crucifixion were included in the Bible and called *Gospels*. The Old Testament records prophecies that the New Testament Apostles teach were fulfilled by Christ. Together, the Bible as a whole gives us the answer we are looking for. The answer is actually in four parts, and piecing all four parts together lays out the principle message of the Bible itself.

So, who killed Jesus? ...



The Romans killed Jesus

*He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and
was buried.* The Apostles' Creed

This universal confession of the Christian church states that Jesus was killed by the Romans under Pontius Pilate. The Romans are the most obvious cause of Jesus' death. Crucifixion was a Roman means of executing criminals (the Jews preferred stoning). Crucifixion was designed to discourage rebellion and other crimes. It was cruel in the extreme, and its public display provided an education about the consequences of breaking Roman law.

Herod the Great (the King ruling when Jesus was born) was not fully Jewish, but he had backed the Romans in a regional war and as a result had been given military authority to rule Israel as a Roman province. His son, Archelaus, succeeded him but was replaced by a series of Roman procurators, or governors.

The fifth such governor was Pontius Pilate, an ambitious military politician with a reputation for being insensitive and occasionally merciless. Luke recalls how *some ... told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.* (Luke 13:1) Pilate lived in Herod's former palace at Caesarea. The 3,000 strong Roman garrison stationed there would travel down to Jerusalem during the great pilgrim feasts in order maintain order and discourage rebellion.

There was a constant tension between Pilate and the Israelite ruling class. While the Jewish leaders enjoyed a measure of local government, Rome was in control. In particular, the Jews of this period were forbidden to exercise capital punishment. Only Pontius Pilate had the authority to execute a criminal. Therefore, any execution that would take place would be by Roman crucifixion.

The Jewish leaders brought Jesus before Pilate for the sole purpose of securing His execution.

Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," the Jews objected. John 18:31

Pilate had no interest in getting involved in internal matters of Jewish religion. He had no love for the Jewish High Priests and other leaders. On top of that,

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." Matthew 27:19

After personally questioning Jesus,

Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." Luke 23:4

The Roman governor tried to dodge the issue by sending Jesus to Herod Antipas, who ruled over the region where Jesus was from, but that led to nothing. He also tried to get off the hook by offering to release Jesus as an act of clemency, but the gathered crowd preferred freedom for the criminal, Barrabas. Then Pilate tried to appease the crowd by having Jesus scourged, or flogged, but even that was not satisfactory.

Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." John 19:12

This was the sort of threat that Pilate could not ignore.

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. John 19:16

"The soldiers" were, of course, Roman soldiers. Even though Pilate publicly washed his hands and claimed innocence in the matter, the fact is that he allowed a man he deemed innocent to be crucified. It was the most notorious travesty of justice in history.

In one of His sessions with Pilate, Christ acknowledged the governor's responsibility, since God had given him authority to

judge. But Jesus also recognized how the man had been out-manuevered.

“Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”
John 19:11

Which leads us to the next section.

But before we go there, we have our first answer to the question “Who killed Jesus?” Clearly, the Romans killed Him. This fact grounds the death of Christ in real history. Before the gospel of Christ became a theology, philosophy or way of life, it was an historical event – a crucifixion by people who had no interest in the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies.

The Romans were responsible for Jesus’ death. But that is only the first answer to our question.

Who else killed Jesus?



The Jews killed Jesus

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.

Matthew 26:65-66

Pilate would never have thought to crucify Jesus if the Jewish leaders had not pressed him to do so. Under Rome, Israel was governed by its own ruling council. The Sanhedrin (*sun*, "together" and *hedra*, "seat") was made up of the acting High Priest (who served as president), former high priests, and members of the privileged families from whom high priests were appointed. Alongside these social aristocrats were elder tribal heads and legal scribes. The aristocratic priests were mostly of a more liberal party called the Sadducees. By the time of Christ, however, the Sanhedrin was predominantly ruled by the more conservative Pharisees.

While Jesus became hugely popular with the people, He became the enemy of both Sadducean priests and Pharisaic teachers. The Sadducees were shocked by the way Jesus had attacked their money changers in the Temple precincts. Christ charged the Temple leaders with forgetting the real meaning of the Old Testament covenant. And, while Jesus acknowledged that the Pharisees had a better theology, He bluntly exposed how they failed to "practice what they preached."

Both groups were embarrassed, then angered, and finally threatened by Jesus' growing popularity. Their fears were two-fold. The wave of support behind Jesus would either lead the people to rise up and cast them out of power, or any such uprising would be crushed by the Romans, who would get rid of the leaders afterwards

to avoid future trouble. Either way, their privileged position was in serious jeopardy. The infighting Pharisees and Sadducees joined together to face a common enemy.

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people." Matthew 26:3-5

Indeed, how to arrest and eliminate a man who was always surrounded by a multitude of admirers? Just a few days before, a huge crowd of pilgrims to the Feast of Passover had greeted Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem as that of a new King. Any public move could initiate a riot, which in turn could provoke a radical response from the Roman garrison in town to maintain order.

Here is where the disciple named Judas comes into the picture.

Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present. Luke 22:4-6

Why did Judas do this? In retrospect, the other disciples remembered how Judas had always had problems with money. The Apostle John tells us that Satan filled his heart. More than that we do not know, because Judas in remorse took his own life the next day.

The important thing to note here is the need these Jewish leaders felt for stealth and speed. There is a very common misconception that the whole city of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus as a King, and then five days later demanded that He be crucified. The Bible does not bear this out. The Biblical account is that Jesus was extremely popular. Why not? His teaching was inspiring. He was known far and wide for freely healing any who came to Him. He opposed the aristocracy and pompous teachers of His day. While only a smaller number were prepared to follow Him as disciples at that point, He was almost universally enjoyed by the population at large.

Movies often portray Jesus dragging His cross through town with everyone cursing Him. The truth is, however, that Jesus was arrested before dawn, tried by a hastily (and selectively) called meeting of the Sanhedrin, brought before Pilate, before Herod, before Pilate again, flogged, condemned and crucified – all before 9:00 in the morning. The whole idea was to get it done before the city knew what was going on. Whoever happened to be on the street watching Jesus carry His cross would have been bewildered and shocked.

What about that crowd who demanded that Pilate crucify Christ? The Bible specifically tells us that it was a contrived mob.

With [Judas] was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

Matthew 26:47

The New Testament also mentions that false witnesses were prepared at His trial before the Sanhedrin. This was the crowd that confronted Pilate. Think of how demonstrators today are often brought in from out of town to make it look like there is local support or opposition to this or that. This was a similar ploy. Pilate, of course, could not know that – or at least, he could not afford to guess wrong.

The point is – and it is an important point – that when we say that “the Jews killed Jesus”, what we really mean is that the Jewish *leaders* at the time of Christ engineered His execution. The Jewish people did no such thing. The same leaders went on to persecute the infant Christian church, and over time the Jews who believed Jesus to be their Messiah gradually separated from those who did not. But to imply that Christians should be angry at “the Jews” for killing Christ is nonsense.

Nonsense because ... First, as we have seen, the Jewish *people* did not reject or kill Jesus. Second, the Christian religion is based upon Jesus’ forgiveness (He is even remembered for forgiving His killers from the cross as He died). There is also a third reason why Christians have no business being angry at Jews for the death of Christ, and that will be the subject of the next chapter.

Nevertheless, it remains true the Jews killed Jesus. Any people bears some responsibility for the decisions of its leaders. And this

decision was crucial in the development of biblical religion.

When Abraham was originally called by God, he was told

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12:2

It was God’s declared intent to give Israel an important role in communicating His salvation to all the nations of the world. Jesus has been the one and only fulfillment of that intent. In God’s providence, Christ’s rejection by the Jewish leaders was the catalyst that brought biblical religion to the Gentiles (nations) of the world. Jesus anticipated this historic change in several parables, one of which He summarized by saying to His Jewish hearers,

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

Matthew 21:43

While the Jewish people as a whole did not reject Jesus personally, He saw that they *had* turned away from the original promises and commitments of their covenant with God. Jesus realized that when the leaders of His people rejected Him, the promises of the covenant (called the *gospel*) would move out of Israel to extend biblical salvation to all mankind.

Fortunately, many Jews over the years have also rediscovered Abraham’s faith through Christ. They join with believing Gentiles to make Abraham “the father of many nations.”

Yet, it remains true that the Jews, along with the Romans, killed Christ. It is this combination of accountability between Jew and Gentile that leads to the next part of our answer. The Romans were responsible for Jesus’ death, and so were the Jews.

Who else killed Jesus?



We all killed Jesus

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Isaiah 53:2-3

To say “we all” killed Jesus appears on the surface to be a preposterous claim. Did we all kill President Kennedy? Did we all kill Julius Caesar? How far can you take our responsibility for the sins that our ancestors committed?

The claim that we all killed Jesus is really an observation about two things: human nature on the one hand, and Jesus’ own intentions on the other.

More than any other well known tragedy, the crucifixion of Jesus testifies to the moral failure of the human race as a whole. It’s not as if Jesus were just another nice guy. He is the most fondly remembered individual in history. When Peter tried to summarize who He was to a God-fearing Gentile, he spoke of ...

how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

Acts 10:38

Of course, Peter and the others said a great deal more about who Jesus was and what He came to do. But the least that people remember about Him was that He preached love and helped a lot of people – especially people no one else cared about. He stood up to an unfeeling religious establishment and was willing to pay the price.

Non-Christians of every kind remember Jesus fondly. The various churches which bear His name can make people weep at times, but Jesus Himself remains a role model for everyone.

This man was betrayed by a friend, falsely accused, beaten, mocked, striped, flogged almost to death, humiliated and finally crucified. The Roman governor did it out of fear, convenience, and a lack of will to do the right thing. The Jewish leaders did it out of fear, selfishness, and the decision to do a wrong thing that would benefit themselves. It is this mixture of convincing oneself to do a wrong thing along with convincing oneself not to do a right thing that makes Jesus' crucifixion a perfect mirror of human failings.

Peter lumped both flavors of sin together when he preached to a Jewish audience:

This man was handed over to you ... and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.
Acts 2:23

Both Gentiles and Jews killed Jesus. People with God's Ten Commandments acted alongside people who benefited from the best philosophies of the Western world. Each of us can look at the scene of Christ's cross and find a face that looks something like our own.

Artists, poets and holy men from every tradition reflect and lament upon the imperfections of humanity. At our worst, people can be so disgusting that they make us ashamed to share the same species with them. But even at our best, there are chinks in our shining armor. Pontius Pilate embodied the glorious rule of Rome. The High Priest of Israel modeled the sublime revelation of our Creator reaching out to turn enemies into friends. Yet look at the cross and see what they were capable of.

Indeed, look at the cross and see what *we* are capable of. If our leaders are capable of such a thing ... ? It is naïve to think that the moral frailties that afflict others are absent in ourselves. Surely, we think we would never hurt anybody – through an affair, or by enslaving another human being, or looking the other way as millions of people are gassed to death. And yet, what if our jobs, our prosperity or our own freedom were on the line? What if temptation

hit us like a ton of bricks when we are suffering depression or discouragement?

The Bible does not mince words about it:

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. Ecclesiastes 7:20

Those who have the Bible can illuminate their failings with Ten Commandments. Those without the Bible sense theirs with the inner compass called the conscience. Down deep, people from vastly different backgrounds and advantages share similar cracks in their moral foundations. In Biblical terms, our hearts are similar.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9

The Bible testifies that something happened at the dawn of civilization that pulled humanity away from our Creator. We made a choice to set aside the divine design etched into our conscience and instead pursue a course to define our own glory. No book ever written holds up a higher concept of mankind than the Bible. We were made in the image of God. But we have chosen to live like the Devil, as if he were the rightful ruler of the earth. According to the Scriptures, this alienation from God is the root of human suffering, human cruelty and even human death.

That is why the Bible depicts Christ as rejected by the whole world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. John 1:10

Jesus, Himself, was very clear about this.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” John 15:18

Many, many people have received Christ, loved Him, believed in Him and followed Him. But society in general will never do so. We will remember Him fondly at a distance. But if any of us – apart from God’s grace – had to deal with His perfection up close, we would find it so threatening to our guilty consciences and selfish priorities that we would hate Him.

We would hate Him. We would want to get rid of Him. We would kill Him.

Perhaps others see it differently, but Christians feel a personal connection with the atrocity of the crucifixion. We feel as if we share responsibility in His death, because we see the same sins that killed Him in ourselves. I mentioned in the previous chapter that there was yet another reason why it is nonsense for Christians to blame the Jews for Christ's death. This is it; we cannot point the finger at others if we share the same responsibility ourselves.

The idea that “we all” killed Jesus, simply acknowledges the fact that the cross reveals what human beings like us are capable of.

And the idea that we all killed Jesus also stems from something else – from Jesus' own sense of mission. Jesus said that He was sent by God for a special purpose.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Mark 10:45

He said that He came for the purpose of giving His life to free us, just as a ransom might free a captured slave. Or just as a faithful shepherd would risk his life to protect the flock entrusted to him.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep ... The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

John 10:11-18

It is abundantly clear from the Apostles' memoirs in the four Gospels that Jesus fully intended to die in order to accomplish something for mankind – or at least that portion of mankind who would listen to Him and trust Him. Jesus spoke of His death long before it occurred. He sent Judas out early, knowing what was in his mind to do. He waited at the Mount of Olives for Judas to bring the

soldiers to arrest Him. Eloquent enough to turn aside threats again and again, He refused to speak in His own defense before either the Sanhedrin or Pilate. One of the reasons He believed He was born was so that He might die for others. It was part of His purpose.

One of the eerie impressions you get when you read the Gospel narratives or see them enacted in a movie is the sense of who is in charge – who is moving things along. Jesus is bound, whipped, spat upon, pushed around and nailed to wood. And yet it becomes shockingly clear that He is the one in control. Pilate is completely out of control. The Jewish leaders are blundering about with bribes, contradictory witnesses and an uncooperative governor. At every point, Jesus is in control of His own destiny, and instead of avoiding the cross, He embraces it. This does not lessen the crime against Him, but it does underscore that it was His own purpose to allow Himself to be unjustly executed.

It was Jesus' purpose to use His own death to deal with the sins of humanity.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:2

For these reasons – that the cross reflects the moral brokenness of all mankind, and that Jesus purposefully died to do something wonderful for all mankind – we say that we all killed Christ.

But for Jesus' death to actually accomplish anything good, there had to actually be a divine plan at work. This brings us to the final piece of the puzzle. The Romans, the Jews – all of us are responsible for His death.

But who else killed Jesus?

the abusive words, all the lust and greed and all the rest ... there is simply nothing we can do to make things right.

So God, in His goodness, made a way.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

John 3:16-17

The Bible calls Jesus God's *Son*. Jesus Himself claimed to be God in the flesh, God come down to earth as a human being. As both divine Lord and perfect Man, Christ is able to bridge the gap and reconcile people with God.

He did this by doing the unthinkable. He bore in His own body the divine punishment due to every morally fallen human being.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

Isaiah 53:4

Jesus died an innocent man. A thief dying next to Him on another cross remarked that he and others deserved such a fate, but Jesus did not. He deserved none of the punishment He received – suffering that stretched to the limit the amount of punishment a human being could endure. As God in the flesh, Jesus died an innocent man, and that is exactly what enabled Him to do something wonderful.

Because Jesus was wholly innocent, He was the perfect vehicle to take criminal punishment – voluntarily – on behalf of others who do deserve it. In Christ, God absorbed His own wrath, He received the punishment appropriate for millions of human crimes. God used the *unjust* condemnation of the Romans and Jews – the injustice and pain that typifies all human sin – to express His *just* condemnation of sinners everywhere.

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

If this was God's design and plan long before it happened (Isaiah prophesied these things 700 years before Christ), then it is fair to say that *God* killed Jesus, and He did so to accomplish a great salvation.

It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied ; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Isaiah 53:10-11

This is an explicit declaration that it was the Lord's will to crush Jesus in order to make Him a "guilt offering" (suffering for the sins other people commit). This was done so that God's purpose of salvation would prosper. After His suffering, Jesus saw the light of life in resurrection, and now "justifies many" by cleansing them of guilt and offering them eternal life. The New Testament sums it up this way:

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. 2 Corinthians 5:19

This is the last part of the answer to our question. Who killed Jesus? The Romans did, The Jews did. In a sense, we all did. But most important of all, God did. He used the worst thing that ever happened to accomplish the best thing that ever happened.

If it was not clear before, it certainly is by now: the question of who killed Jesus is very important. Answering it takes us back to the turning point of history. It takes us into the inner structure and purpose of Biblical religion. It takes us deep into our souls to face the ugly side of human nature. And it takes us to a heavenly plan of salvation powerful enough to reconcile us forever with God, and big enough to embrace the whole world.

Who killed Jesus? Thanks for pursuing the answer with me. I pray it was worth the effort.



SEVERNA PARK
evangelical presbyterian^{usa}

110 Ritchie Highway ~ Pasadena, MD 21146
410-544-5013 ~ www.spepchurch.org