

Why Was Jesus Executed?

The execution of Jesus is a crucial event for Christians. All Christians are well aware that Jesus died to save the sinners, but what was the real reason behind His execution? The source we would usually read to find the answer to this question is the Gospels. After reading the four gospels though, the reader finds out that the story about the events that led to Jesus' crucifixion differ. This is because the Gospels intend to portray the life of Jesus for theological truths rather than the preservation of historical records. Answering this question requires analyzing the parties involved in the execution of Jesus and what were their motives for judging him, trying him and finally killing him. Also, it is imperative to carefully critic the sources available and determine whether they demonstrate viable theories or if the ones they present seem rather unlikely to be true. Based on my prior knowledge of the subject, I would suggest the theory that, the ones who wanted Jesus dead were the members of the Sanhedrin and the High Priest because they perceived Jesus as a threat to both their religion and authority. After accusing him of blasphemy they sent him to Pontius Pilate for him to bear the responsibility of deciding the fate of Jesus.

According to the Markan Priority theory, Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source and another source named "Q". Assuming this theory is true the Gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew can be read as a single source. The purpose of this is to point out that any similarity among these Gospels does not mean that piece of information is more reliable because they are not independent sources. However, we can still analyze how each author differs when writing about the reasons for executing Jesus. According to Mark, the High Priest condemned Jesus because of his blasphemy when admitting to be the Christ. "You have heard

his blasphemy. What is your decision? And they all condemned him as deserving death.” (Mark 15: 64-65). If Mark stated that Jesus was executed because of his blasphemy, it is expected that Luke and Matthew agree with him on this matter, since the other source “Q” contains the sayings and teachings of Jesus, not stories about his life (Cadbury 83). Matthew narrates the confrontation between Jesus and the High Priest in a very similar way as Mark does. “He has uttered blasphemy...what is your judgment? They answered ‘he deserves death’”. (Matthew 27: 65-66). The blasphemy according to both Matthew and Mark was admitting that He was the Christ. Luke on the other hand, makes the reader understand that Jesus was condemned because he admits to being the Son of God (Luke 22: 69-71), but the way he narrates what happened next is very similar to Mark and Luke’s.

As mentioned before, the similarities between Mark, Luke and Matthew regarding why was Jesus executed were expected, since they all used the same source. The discrepancies lie in the narration and the wording of the passage, but the main idea remains intact. In the gospel of John, Jesus is never asked specifically if He was the Christ, nor does he admit directly to being the Christ. From the Gospel of John, we can understand that his blasphemy was elevating Himself to being God while being a man. “I and the Father are one. The Jews took up stones again to stone him” (John 10: 30-31). All four evangelists agree that the motive of the Jews for killing Jesus was blasphemy. It is important to note though, that Jesus’ declaration to the High Priest was only the final reason for His condemnation, since the Jews were already looking to arrest him and punish him prior to that.

Preserving Jewish religious law was a priority for the Jewish authorities of the time. The Sadducees and the Pharisees, both important Jewish sects during the time in which Jesus was executed, were very sensitive to anything that went against their religion. Josephus tells a story to illustrate this. Pilate, when he was appointed Roman Procurator of Judea, placed

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images of the Caesar around Judea. This violated the Jewish law that goes against idolatry. Pilate threatened the Jews who protested with death, to which they responded by “uncovering their necks” to the swords, meaning they rather die than break the law (Josephus 18: 3). The declarations of Jesus were blasphemous according to Jewish laws and traditions. The Talmud and the Midrash outline three types of blasphemy that must be punished with death, among them is “stretching out the hand of God” which includes assuming a divine condition or claiming to be divine (Horvath 175). Based on this, it was rational for the Jewish authorities to punish Jesus with death, since he had violated their mandate. So, what was their argument for accusing him of not being the Christ or the Son of God? The article “The Christology of Early Christian Practice” states that the expectations for the Christ among the Jews rose after the first century; however, the “threefold expectations (prophetic, royal and priestly)”, was supported by early Jewish writings of the Old Testament (Kazen 595). Jesus was prophetic and also a religious/spiritual leader, but He was not the royal leader or liberator the Jewish expected would free them.

It is hard to determine the exact words of Jesus from the sources available, since the Gospels all change them slightly. Therefore, there is a chance that what Jesus spoke was not against Jewish religious law. As mentioned before, according to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ blasphemy was admitting to be the Christ. Based on the three blasphemies punishable by death outlined in the Mishnah and the Talmud, Jesus’ words were not reason enough to condemn him (Horvath 175). The evangelist that shows the theory that is most likely to be true is John. In John’s gospel, the reason the High Priest proclaimed Jesus worthy of death was because He had elevated Himself to God (John 10: 30-31). The reason why I say this is what condemned him and not saying that he was the “Son of God” is because according to the author of “Christology of Early Christian Practice” the term “Son of God” was that given to

In the Synoptics, it is not a matter of Jesus being against the religious law - he engages in arguments about its interpretation & application.

all the people of Israel who were righteous and followed the Law of God (Kazen 596). The context here is different though, because Jesus intended to say that He was God, not that he was merely a man who followed the Law of God. Hence, we can conclude that the reason why Jesus deserved death according to Jewish Law was for claiming to be God.

From the evidence presented, it is clear that the Sanhedrin, the High Priest and other members of the Jewish religion community had valid reasons for going on with the execution of Jesus. Nonetheless, it was the Romans and not the Jews the ones who finally killed him. The question then is why would the High Priest send Jesus to Pontius Pilate, and why would he decide to crucify him? All four evangelists agree on the fact that Jesus was brought to Pilate by the High Priest. John suggests a reason for that through the conversation of Pilate with the Jews: "...Pilate said to them: 'take him yourselves and judge him by your own law'. The Jews said to him: 'It is not lawful for us to put any man to death.'" (John 18:31). According to the Gospels, Pilate judged Jesus because the Jews were not legally allowed to kill him. However, historical evidence suggests this is not true and that the Jews had the authority to put to death anyone who violated Jewish law (Horvath 178). In the Acts of the Apostles appears the story of Stephen, a man who was stoned to death by orders of the Sanhedrin for saying "the son of Man standing at God's right hand" (Acts 7: 56-57). Hence, if the ~~Jewish~~ ^{Jews} were presumably allowed to stone Jesus for blasphemy, what was the need of taking him to Pilate?

To understand why Jesus was killed by the Romans and not by the Jews, it is important to analyze the man who would finally decide the fate of Jesus: Pontius Pilate. Among Pilate's duties were controlling the masses and keep the political stability in the territory appointed to him (Horvath 175). Hence, keeping his people happy while showing his authority was the expected course of action for Pilate. Philo describes Pilate as a cruel,

This is a very contentious claim. You could be projecting a later Christology back onto Jesus.

heartless leader who wouldn't hesitate to kill a man (Philo: Embassy to Gaius). Therefore, the way Pilate behaves according to the Gospels is not very ~~liable~~ ^{likely}. According to John for example, Pilate expressed to the crowd "take him yourselves and crucify him for I find no crime in him" (John 19: 6). Portraying Pilate as hesitant to kill Jesus reveals a theological truth the evangelists wanted to portray about Jesus: that he was being condemned unjustly, and that he was truly accepting his fate to fulfill God's mandate. So, given the circumstances and the kind of man Pilate was, it is very probable that Pilate finally decides to crucify Jesus on the grounds that if Jesus excited the masses, even against himself, he had reason enough to kill him (Horvath 180)

The reason why Pilate kills Jesus does not explain why the High Priest decides that Pilate should judge Jesus. Tivor Horvath proposes the theory that the Jesus was brought to Pilate because the Jews wanted to give him one last chance to prove that he was in fact the Messiah (183). As mentioned previously in this essay, the Jews expected the Messiah to free them from the Romans, so the Messiah's final sign that he was in fact the Christ, was defeating the Romans. When Jesus was in the cross, the Jews yelled him: "If you are the king of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we can believe that you are the Christ" (Mark 15: 32-36). Horvath bases his theory on his studies about the expectations of the Christ and on the fact that the Jews did not kill Jesus themselves. Even though the evidence that supports this theory is not false, it is very likely that it was misinterpreted. First of all, it is possible that some members of the Jewish community wanted to give Jesus a chance to prove he was the Christ, but this was not the case of the High Priest, which was the one who sent him to Pilate. The Romans appointed the High Priest, which means he worked with the Romans, not against them. Therefore it is unlikely that he had any hope Jesus was the Christ.

Throughout this work, it comes to light that the execution of Jesus was preceded by a series of events all available in different points of views. The primary sources available, which are the Gospels, do not portray a clear motive for the final execution of Jesus. The synoptic Gospels suggest Jesus was killed because he claimed to be the Christ, nonetheless sources of Jewish law suggest this was not enough reason to condemn him. The Gospel of John describes a reason that is most likely the one that lead the Jews to believe Jesus was worthy of death which is raising Himself to a Divine level (admitted to be God). The Talmud and the Mishnah, both sources of Jewish Law state that claiming to be God was blasphemy and thus punishable with death. There is an event that makes the death of Jesus more confusing for scholars and is the fact that it was the Romans not the Jews who killed Jesus. The reason for this is that the High Priest sent Jesus to be tried by the Romans in order to follow the laws posed by the Procurator. Another possibility, that even though is not impossible it is less likely than the first, is that the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas did not want Jesus blood in their hands because they knew Jesus had a significant amount of followers.

I think the second is more likely, given that, as you suggest, they might well have had the right to execute Jesus.

G: 5/5
C: 5/5

Sources: 9/10
Understanding: 8/10

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