

Who Killed Jesus?

WHO'S TO BLAME?

In all the excitement leading up to the release of Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, no question was asked more than "Who Killed Jesus?" Was it the Jews, the Romans, or some other culprit? Fearing an outbreak of anti-Semitic rhetoric and behavior, a number of very vocal Jewish representatives made the talk-show circuit denouncing Gibson's movie as nothing less than an instrument of hate. *Newsweek* magazine even ran the question "Who Really Killed Jesus?" on the cover of their February 16, 2004, issue. It is a matter of tremendous importance for historical, social and religious reasons. Though it is a painful and even dangerous question to ask, it is important that we do so in the interest of truth and salvation. Who did kill Jesus? Who is responsible for his death?

JUDAS WAS RESPONSIBLE

On the night of Jesus' arrest, the person who started the tragic chain of events leading to the Cross was Judas Iscariot. Known to the Gospel writers as the one "who betrayed him" (Matthew 10:4), Judas was one of Jesus' twelve disciples. We don't know much about him before that night except for what John wrote concerning him when Judas criticized Mary's "waste" of expensive perfume when she anointed the feet of Jesus.

He (Judas) did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it (John 12:6).

At least partially motivated by greed, Judas made a deal with the chief priests to hand Jesus over to them for 30 pieces of silver. Since the Jewish leaders wanted to arrest Jesus but were afraid of the crowds, they needed someone who knew his habits and could help them find him at a time when he was alone. Judas was perfect for the job! When the time was right, he led the guards of the Jewish leaders to a place where Jesus could be arrested privately.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him (Mark 14:44-46).

Judas, by his betrayal, was certainly responsible for the death of Jesus.

THE JEWISH LEADERS WERE RESPONSIBLE

Caiaphas was the Jewish high priest from A.D. 18-36, making him the most important and powerful Jewish leader of his day. As the high priest, he was the head of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council that decided religious issues in first century Judea. The Sanhedrin saw in Jesus a popular and dangerous teacher who had tremendous influence on the common people of the land. Following the resurrection of Lazarus, members of this council said,

"Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (John 11:47-48).

Because the Jewish leaders saw Jesus as a threat to their position and their lifestyle, they had him arrested, they put him through the mockery of a trial, and they turned him over to Pilate, the Roman governor, to be executed.

Their charges against Jesus were varied and changed as the "trial" progressed.

And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king" (Luke 23:2).

The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7).

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).

Since the Jewish leaders did not have the authority to carry out the death penalty (John 18:31), they turned him over to Pilate and insisted that he kill Jesus. Later, when Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, he said to the crowd,

*Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, **whom you crucified**, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).*

The Jewish crowd, incited by the chief priests, had called for the death of Jesus. However, it would be unfair to make the general statement that "the Jews killed Jesus." After all, the Jesus they killed, his mother and his eleven remaining disciples were all Jews themselves. Yet, it *is* fair to say that the Jewish leaders, by their insistence that Jesus be killed, were responsible for the death of Jesus.

PILATE WAS RESPONSIBLE

The Roman Empire ruled Judea during the lifetime of Jesus. Pontius Pilate served as the Roman governor of Judea from A.D. 26-36. In those years, he developed a reputation for often being a difficult and even ruthless ruler. The Jewish people had little affection for him, and he had almost no respect for them, their religion or their sensitivities.

When the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, his response was to try and avoid making a decision about the controversial teacher from Nazareth. To Pilate, Jesus was a pesky Jewish problem that the Jews should take care of themselves. After interviewing the Savior, three times he told the Jewish leaders that he could find no cause to kill Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14, 22). Added to his judicial reluctance to execute him was a frightening dream Pilate's wife shared with him.

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).

Pilate tried desperately to escape his dilemma and had Jesus cruelly beaten in hopes that this would satisfy his accusers. He even offered to release Jesus as a gift to the Jews in honor of their Passover festival. However, the crowd instead asked for Barabbas, a convicted murderer, and continued in their demand for Jesus to be crucified. Finally, fearing a riot over this matter, Pilate publically washed his hands of the whole matter and turned Jesus over to be crucified (Matthew 27:24-26).

Though it was never his desire to crucify Jesus, Pilate had the power to prevent this injustice from happening. However, he proved to be a coward, making Pilate, too, responsible for the death of Jesus.

THE GREATEST RESPONSIBILITY

Plenty of people are obviously to blame for the death of Jesus, but the ultimate "conspirator" has not been named to this point. Jesus exposed him during his encounter with Pilate when he told the Roman governor,

"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:11).

God the Father and God the Son were the great co-conspirators in the death of Jesus on the Cross! The 19th century writer Octavius Winslow said it well: "Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy – but the Father, for love!"

There is a special word that appears throughout the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion; it is paradid ōmi, a word meaning "hand over" or

"betray." It is used to describe what Judas, the Jewish leaders and Pilate did to Jesus (Matthew 26:14-16; 27:18, 26). Remarkably, it is also used to describe the role of both the Father and the Son.

He (God) did not spare his own Son, but gave him up (paradidōmi) for us all (Romans 8:32).

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself (paradidōmi) *for me* (Galatians 2:20).

The Cross of Christ is a terribly painful story, full of injustice, evil, hatred, cowardice and greed. A righteous man died at the hands of sinful people, leading to a lot of finger-pointing and blaming. However, scripture clearly teaches that the Cross is primarily a story of love, willing sacrifice and forgiveness. The heart of the gospel is not that people took the life of Jesus but that "God so loved that he gave!"

Jesus died for us all. My sins are as responsible for the death of Jesus as are the sins of Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate or the Roman soldiers who nailed him to the Cross. Blaming others for his death is not only unproductive, but it is unchristian. All of us are responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, but no one is more responsible than God who gave his Son and the Son who gave himself for us all.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But 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. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

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