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Who Really Killed Jesus?

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The four Gospels present a historical account of the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. However, when these accounts are misunderstood and misapplied, they have in the past led to anti-Semitism. “The treatment of the Jews is one of the most discouraging chapters in Christian history. The record of persecution from the Crusades through the expulsions from Western and Central Europe is a dismal one.”¹ However, a careful reading of the New Testament record points to a universal responsibility for Jesus’ death. Everyone, regardless of race, is responsible for the death of Jesus Christ because everyone has sinned against God. Jesus died in order to pay for the sins of all humankind.

Jewish Culpability

There can be no question that some, not all, Jews in the first century were actively responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Relatively early in Jesus’ ministry, possibly as much as two years before the crucifixion, certain Pharisees began to plot Jesus’ death (Mark 3:6). Jesus knew that these plans were accelerating, and He warned His disciples that He would be crucified (Mark 9:31-32; 10:33-34). During the Passion Week, the Jewish leaders intensified their efforts to bring about Jesus’ death (Mark 11:18; 12:12; 14:1-2,

10-11). Eventually the Sanhedrin, the official Jewish ruling council, arrested, tried, and condemned Jesus to die (Mark 14:43, 53-56; 15:1). When Pontius Pilate reluctantly agreed to crucify Jesus, he symbolically washed his hands of the matter in an attempt to lay the blame on the Jews. The Jewish people present at this sentencing, under the influence of their leaders, cried out, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25). While these actions on the part of a number of Jews and the official ruling council seem to encompass all Jews, there really is no justification in applying these actions to the Jewish race as a whole. Not all Jews were actively responsible for the death of Jesus.

Moreover it is not at all clear that Matthew sees 27:24 as an effective absolution for Pilate; Matthew frequently records denunciations of hypocrisy and expects persecution from Gentile “governors and kings” (10:18-19). Equally it is not at all clear that 27:25 should be interpreted to mean that all Jews remain under a continuing curse.²

The fact that the New Testament doesn’t view every Jew as directly responsible for the death of Jesus is underscored by the emphasis on Jewish conversions to faith in Jesus Christ in the early church. For the first several years of its existence, the Christian church was composed almost exclusively of Jews. Even “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” as the early church grew in Jerusalem (Acts 6:7). While some Jewish leaders were directly responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, the Jewish people as a whole are no more responsible for the death of Jesus than are Gentiles.

Gentile Culpability

The New Testament account likewise reveals that some, not all, Gentiles in the first century were actively responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus Himself referred to the Gentiles as necessary agents in His impending death (Mark 10:33-34). It would be at the hands of the Gentiles that Jesus would endure His greatest torture followed by His crucifixion. The Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, sent Jesus to His death. Pilate appears to have been a reluctant player in this event. However, the Jews at this time didn’t

have the freedom to inflict the death penalty without Roman approval. Therefore, the Jewish leaders took Jesus before Pilate. Regardless of Pilate's opinion regarding Jesus' guilt or innocence, regardless of Pilate's reluctance in sentencing Jesus, and regardless of Pilate's symbolic attempt to wash his hands of responsibility in the matter of Jesus' death (Matthew 27:24), Pilate was guilty of condemning an innocent man to die on a Roman cross. The soldiers under Pilate's command were also responsible in this matter. Peter refers to the Gentiles involved in Jesus' crucifixion as "wicked men" (Acts 2:23). While some Gentiles were actively responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, not every Gentile was present to voice an opinion about Jesus at that time. Therefore, Gentiles as a whole share only in the general guilt for Jesus' death.

The Divine Plan

In attempting to assign responsibility for the death of Jesus Christ, it's essential that we consider the divine plan of redemption. The human instruments of Jesus' death, those Jewish and Gentile authorities who condemned Jesus, do carry guilt for their unjust actions. However, God's plan for our redemption necessitated Jesus' death. Several hundred years before Jesus' crucifixion, God declared through the prophet Isaiah, "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Isaiah 53:10). Romans 8:32 says that God the Father "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all." Furthermore, Jesus willingly surrendered His life for us. In John 10:17-18 Jesus said, "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." Of course, this was no act of suicide. Jesus' died at the hands of His enemies. But in the divine plan, God the Father and God the Son (as well as God the Holy Spirit) agreed together that it was necessary for Jesus to die for the sins of lost humanity.

The ultimate answer to the question, Who crucified Jesus? is: God did. It's a staggering thought. Jesus was his Son. And the suffering was unsurpassed. But the whole message of the Bible leads to this conclusion.³

God sent His Son, Jesus, into this world to redeem us from our sins. He planned for our salvation. We are both the reason for Jesus' death and the recipients of the blessings of His death.

Personal Culpability

Paul, in Romans 3:9, states, "We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin." For this reason, "the whole world" is held accountable to God for the death of His Son (Romans 3:19). This is not a matter of race, nor a matter of anti-Semitism.

Matthew and the other evangelists certainly blame some Jews for Jesus' death. They also blame some Romans. But the reasons for the blame are historical, theological, spiritual—not racial. . . . The NT writers assess people by their response to Jesus, whom they have come to know as King Messiah and Son of God, not by their race.⁴

The question regarding who killed Jesus Christ isn't a racial question. It's a personal question. It carries individual, personal responsibility. When we recognize that Jesus died for us, that our sins drove Him to the cross, then we will begin to answer the question of Jesus' death as the New Testament answers it. With the apostle Paul, we'll be able to honestly say, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."

¹ Clouse, Robert G.; Pierard, Richard V.; Yamauchi, Edwin M. *Two Kingdoms: The Church and Culture through the Ages*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1993, p. 311.

² Carson, D. A. "Matthew" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8. Frank E. Gabelein, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, p. 551.

³ Piper, John. *The Passion of Jesus Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004, p. 11.

⁴ Carson, p. 552.