

“Who Killed Jesus?”

In all the excitement leading up to the 2004 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 appeared on television, denouncing Gibson’s movie as nothing less than an instrument of hate. The cover of *Newsweek* magazine even featured the question “Who Killed Jesus?”¹ This question 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 know little 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.

Now he [Judas] said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer 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 thirty 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 he who was betraying Him had given them a signal, saying, “Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him and lead Him away under guard.” After coming, Judas immediately went to Him, saying, “Rabbi!” and kissed Him. They laid hands on Him and seized 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,

What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation (John 11:47b, 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 then turned him over to Pilate, the Roman governor, to be executed.

Their charges against Jesus were varied, and they changed as the stages of the trial progressed.

¹Jon Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?” *Newsweek* (16 February, 2004): 42–51.

The Jews answered him [“insisted”; NIV], “We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God” (John 19:7).

And they began to accuse Him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King” (Luke 23:2).

. . . the Jews cried out saying, “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out 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, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom *you crucified*” (Acts 2:36; emphasis mine).

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. It is fair to say, though, that the Jewish leaders who insisted 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, he attempted to 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 he [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him” (Matthew 27:19).

Pilate tried desperately to escape his dilemma. He had Jesus cruelly beaten, hoping that this act 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 persisted in their demand for Jesus to be crucified. Finally, fearing a riot, Pilate publicly 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

Many people are obviously to blame for the death of Jesus, but the ultimate “conspirator” has not been named to this point. Jesus exposed the truth during His encounter with Pilate, when He told the Roman governor, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11a). God the Father and God the Son were the great co-conspirators in the death of Jesus on the cross! The nineteenth-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!”²

A special word appears throughout the story of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion; it is *παραδίδωμι* (*paradidomi*), 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] who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over [*παραδίδωμι*] for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32).

²Octavius Winslow, *No Condemnation in Christ Jesus* (London: John Farquhar Shaw, 1853), 361.

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up [παρὰδίδωμι] for me" (Galatians 2:20).

The events surrounding the cross of Christ make up a terribly painful story, full of injustice, evil, hatred, cowardice, and greed. A righteous man died at the hands of sinful people, leading to centuries of finger-pointing and blaming. However, the Scriptures teach that the story of the cross is primarily one 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 . . ." (John 3:16)!

Jesus died for us all. Our 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 also unchristian. All of us, as sinners, are responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus—yet no one is more responsible than God, who gave His Son, or the Son, who gave Himself for us all.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
 And our sorrows He carried;
 Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
 Smitten of God, and afflicted.
 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
 He was crushed for our iniquities;
 The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
 And by His scourging we are healed.
 All of us like sheep have gone astray,
 Each of us has turned to his own way;
 But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
 To fall on Him (Isaiah 53:4–6).

Bruce McLarty

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