

Who Killed Jesus, and Why?

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Crucifixion served as a means of waging war and securing peace, of wearing down rebellious cities under siege, of breaking the will of conquered peoples and of bringing mutinous troops or unruly provinces under control. —Martin Hengel

*It appears that Jerusalem elites collaborating with their Roman overlords executed Jesus because he was a threat to their economic and political interests.
—William Herzog*

Ancient Witness: Mark 15:1-15

This is an anti-Palm Sunday sermon—at least the way Palm Sunday is typically observed in the Christian tradition.

And so first, let's set the scene: Jesus had started his ministry in Galilee which was to the north of Jerusalem. And even in Galilee he encountered stiff opposition. Powerful men—Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians plotted against him, for whatever reason. It is written that Jesus called them “a brood of vipers.” And if Jesus encountered opposition and conflict in the north, you can bet that he would encounter hostility in Jerusalem 100-fold.

The gospel writer had Jesus constantly reminding his disciples that “the Son of Man (or “the Human One) must suffer many things, that he must be delivered into the hands of men to be killed.” Probably he wrote this after Jesus died as a way of making sense of what happened. But the point is Jesus, himself, seemed to understand all along that his journey into Jerusalem was a dangerous and life threatening journey, according to Mark.

The mood is dreamlike. The crowd is festive. They are shouting praises and “hosanna,” which means “save us.” As the story goes, there was a whole multitude in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, and a lot of them came out to greet Jesus as he came. The disciples laid their garments on the donkey as a saddle, and the people of the crowd laid their garments on the road with palm branches which served as a carpet on the road.

Why did they do this thing with the palm branches? What is the significance of this strange ritual? How can a progressive Christian understand this?

Well, the people did the same type of ritual when Judas Maccabeus re-established the Temple of Jerusalem in 164 BCE. And they did it again when his brother Simon took possession of Jerusalem in 142 BCE. And at that time, they thought that Israel had won the fight for independence and was rising to power again. And they were proud that their country was gaining independence and respect. Israel was on the move again! Make Israel great again!

So this scene of a new leader coming into that same town, Jerusalem, with a huge crowd around him shouting, “King! Jesus is king of Israel!” the scene of them processing while carrying palm

branches is strangely reminiscent of the Maccabean rebellion. “Yes,” they said, “Jesus is king.” And by “king” they meant “national liberator.”

This is very close to the major Hebrew view of kingship. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the king had duties of upholding justice and providing a strong military defense. In the Hebrew Scriptures, a good king was often powerful and warlike.

For example, in the book of Numbers, it is predicted that Israel would defeat the other neighboring tribes, and Balaam said,

*It shall crush the forehead of Moab,
and break down all the sons of Sheth...
By Jacob shall dominion be exercised,
and the survivors of cities be destroyed!* (Numbers 24:17,19)

And when Jacob made his predictions to his sons, he said that the tribe of Judah would reign supreme. “Judah,” he said, “your hand shall be *on the neck* of your enemies.” (Genesis 49:8)

So *this* is what they were all waiting for. They were waiting for a leader, a king that would make their tribe, their country, like a lion which no one dares to rouse. David was such a leader.

David was the ideal king: powerful, violent, strong, and established by an all-powerful and violent God. He was the religious, political and military leader, all rolled into one. The people said, “Ahhh. Now *there’s* a king. Here’s someone who can defeat our enemies and establish a great kingdom for the chosen people of God.”

And what is the very first thing that this mighty King David does? He marches his strong army, defeats the Jebusites and marches triumphantly into—you guessed it—into Jerusalem, thereafter called “the city of David.”

And now here comes Jesus, about 1,000 years later, making *his* triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the city of David, and center of the Jewish people. And as he came in, the crowd shouted, “Hosanna to the king of Israel.” And in Matthew’s account it even says, “Hosanna to the *Son of David.*”

If you used your imagination, you can sense the excitement and expectation in the air. “This is it! Perhaps *he’s* the one, another David to set us free and kill our enemy, who is Rome. Look, there he is, the next king of Israel! He has come to reclaim the capitol and the Temple.”

But here’s the thing—

The crowd misunderstood.

The crowd in the story did not understand. Jesus was engaging in *satire*! And the crowd didn’t get it.

The Romans celebrated victories by marching into cities they had conquered in a military parade—with horses, chariots, and soldiers. A display of force and power. And before the Romans, the Greeks. Three centuries before Jesus, Alexander the Great enters a surrendered Jerusalem, riding his famous stallion and war horse, Bucephalus. But now, Jesus enters on a donkey, contrasting the ways of a gentle, non-violent God with the power and violence of the imperial order.

This episode places Jesus clearly within the prophetic tradition and in *opposition* to military and political power. The prophet wrote, “Your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey... He will *cut off the chariot* from Ephraim and *the war horse* from Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 9:9)

So this scene was a pastiche, street theater. It was a farce, making fun of the domination system.

And I wonder if the church ever really “got it,” as for generations it has laid down the palm leaves to triumphal music. Now, it’s O.K., perhaps, to reenact a misunderstanding. After all, our expectations are often wrong, too. But we need to have our tongue planted firmly in our cheek. We can’t play this one straight.

But that is exactly what the church has done—uncritically using the palms, the symbol of the violent-god tradition. Many of these liturgical practices, while not in the Bible, evolved generations after Jesus. And they can sometimes take the form of a “liturgical fundamentalism.”

The church has also called today, “Passion Sunday,” and this, in my view, is the better emphasis for a modern, progressive worldview. Most people never hear about the circumstances of Jesus’ death. They will hear about the upbeat, triumphal entry into Jerusalem on one Sunday, and then the happiness of Easter the next Sunday, but nothing of the essential story in between!

The crowd had no earthly idea of what was really happening. If they did, no doubt, they would *not* have been there. They had their national hopes revived and memories of those good old days of a powerful Israel. Buried in our passage we see that there was a violent insurrection going on. And they thought that this is what Jesus was about. But when they found out that this was *not* what Jesus was all about, they were disappointed and disillusioned with him. And their cheers turned to jeers. Shouts of praise and “hosanna” changed to “crucify him!” Same people.

But the crowd’s disappointment does not totally explain why Jesus was put to death. *And unless we understand who killed Jesus and why, we cannot fully understand the meaning of his life, his teaching and his faith.*

There is a telling scene early in Jesus’ ministry when we hear of a conspiracy to kill Jesus. In the third chapter of Mark, Jesus heals the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath and it says, “The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” This conspiracy is mentioned several times afterwards. And who were these co-conspirators? They were the client king, his officials and the religious leaders, each playing a part in an oppressive system, which, according to Jesus, worked against God’s reign of love.

After Octavius became emperor of Rome, he wanted to do something about this troublesome territory of his empire. This is where Herod comes on the scene. With the help of Roman soldiers, Herod crushed all resistance among the rival Jewish homeland. And Herod was rewarded by being declared king of Judea. So although he was a Jewish king, Herod directly served the Roman emperor.

According to Richard Horsley, Herod was perfect client-king material: ambitious, young, opportunistic and brutal. He set up “an intensely repressive regime” complete with mercenary soldiers and secret police that made serious opposition nearly impossible.

For the average Jewish peasant, Herod's reign was disastrous. Herod did his job of extracting wealth from the people for the Roman government. The people were quite literally, taxed to death. Some who were unable to pay lost their land; others who fell into debt became slave laborers. Herod took his own cut, enriched himself and built up an extremely lavish court with his repressive practices. He knew how it was important to have control of the religion, so he replaced the priestly families who had held hereditary power with his own people.

Now, the Romans continued their system of indirect rule after Herod died by dividing up the territory in two and appointing his sons. Antipas was given Galilee, and Archelaus received Judah and Samaria.

There's a story that before Herod died, a group of nonviolent protesters pulled down a statue of the Roman Eagle from the temple portal. The Golden Eagle was a powerful symbol of Roman arrogance and power and the Temple's subservient position under Roman rule. Although Herod was sick, he was well enough to order that the protesters be burned alive. When Herod finally died, the people appealed to Archelaus to reduce the yearly tribute, repeal Herod's special taxes and release political prisoners. When Archelaus refused to consider their demands, there were more protests, and the new ruler responded by killing 3,000 people. Chip off the old block.

This was the situation in which Jesus lived. Four years before Jesus was born, near his hometown of Nazareth, armed Jews took control of the arsenal of the royal palace at Sepphoris. After Roman troops eventually put down this protest, the Roman general Varus hunted down the leaders of the rebellion, and he crucified 2,000 people and lined the roadways into Sepphoris with occupied crosses as a deterrent to future protesters.

Archelaus failed to please the Romans and was replaced with someone named Pontius Pilate as governor. Antipas remained in charge in Galilee, however, for four more decades. And so when Mark wrote about a conspiracy that involved the Herodians, this is who he was talking about—Herod and his sons and their henchmen. And they represented a system of violent oppression that involved the brutal Roman empire.

Now, supporting this domination system that produced great wealth and power for a tiny elite and poverty and despair for the overwhelming majority were the *Temple leaders*. Rome allowed them to operate their religion *if* they helped collect tribute and maintain order.

And so what they had was a form of religion that focused on personal purity and holiness, individual forgiveness and atonement, but it did not include defending widows and orphans, breaking the cycle of debt and insuring fair distribution of God's land. In short, emphasizing personal piety and teaching about a private relationship with God *helped keep order for Rome*. But talk about justice did not.

And so the temple leaders—the Pharisees and the chief priests—were collaborators with the Romans and the Herodians against the people. And it is no wonder, then, that they would be the two groups conspiring to kill Jesus. Because Jesus was a direct challenge to this system of exploitation.

He stressed that a religion that focuses only on Sabbath laws, purity rituals, and holiness codes is actually an obstacle to practicing the kind of compassion that that God requires. He challenged his own religion that had become an obstacle to compassion and a tool of an oppressive system.

This is what Jesus stood for, and this is why he could not be tolerated. He had to go.

We should not overlook the fact that Jesus was crucified on a cross. In his classic study, Martin Hengel points out that crucifixion was a *political tool for social control*. Roman citizens who committed acts of treason were sometimes crucified. More commonly, crucifixion, wrote Hengel,

served as a means of waging war and securing peace, of wearing down rebellious cities under siege, of breaking the will of conquered peoples and of bringing mutinous troops or unruly provinces under control.

Crucifixion was primarily an instrument of *public terrorism* that is somewhat analogous to lynchings of African American men in this country as little as a generation ago, or the more recent atrocities in Central America.

These cases, as well as the crucifixions at the time of Jesus were public displays calculated to terrify and coerce submission. They were like neon signs which proclaimed: “You’re next! If you get too uppity!”

Yet Jesus would not be deterred. As N.T. scholar John Dominic Crossan said,

Jesus called for nonviolent resistance to Rome and just distribution of land and food. He was crucified because he threatened Roman stability—not as a sacrifice to God for humanity’s sins.

Jesus died because he would not back down. He would not quit until justice was established in the earth.

Jesus was a courageous, non-violent warrior for justice and was killed—as countless others have been killed—as a political subversive—by those who had wealth and power. The crowd got this part right, at least. And so did the Romans and the religious power brokers. But he was much more than that. Jesus *was* a revolutionary; the Jewish nationalists as well as those in power got that part right.

But what they failed to see that in this man the very way of the Divine, the spirit of God. In Jesus we see a life guided by a God who is *not violent* or powerful in the conventional sense, in the sense we often expect and hope for.

Jesus challenged the violence and oppression of empire and proclaimed a very different kind of empire—the empire of God—one marked by justice and nonviolence. And the way that we get there is through nonviolence. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, we achieve peaceful ends through peaceful means. In Jesus, the means and the ends cohere.

The life of Jesus reveals the nature of God as one who we often abandon, but who will never abandon us,
 who will stand up for all humanity,
 who calls forth justice,
 who courageously loves and suffers when any of God’s children suffer, a God in whom there is no violence.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of *this* God!