

Christ our passover, has been sacrificed.

Saint Paul (1 Cor. 57)

He suffered all this on our account, that we might be saved

Saint Ignatius 1.

Christian theology from St. Paul to the present has said that Jesus' death not just the death of a religious or political troublemaker in ancient Palestine, but an event which makes a difference to those who believe. In searching the Synoptic gospels for reasons why Jesus was killed, the ingredients of a belief in an atoning death are found. This is as much as saying that, not surprisingly, you find the theology of the early church within the writings which the early church produced and preserved. The Synoptic gospels originating within a generation or two of the events described and certainly contain a recollection of Jesus' birth, life and death, but it is refracted in the telling since those interested in preserving the tradition were Non-Jewish Christians sensitive to the needs of their church. With their primary purpose theological, these gospels have more success in presenting Jesus as dying as their saviour, than in presenting us with the absolute history of Jesus' execution.

Nonetheless the dual nature of the evangelists' accounts of the killing of Christ requires that both the more "historical" accounts and what appear to be the claims of the church about Jesus be examined. I will explore the trial narratives along with their antecedents as found in Matthew, Mark and Luke and compare them with more accepted reconstructions, look at the fulfillment of prophecy as an explanation of Christ's death, and examine the passages which show the Synoptics' acceptance of the idea of Jesus as a sacrifice, particularly with respect to the portrait of the suffering servant from Isaiah. All biblical quotations are taken from the Jerusalem Bible.

One answer to the question, “Why was Jesus killed?” is that, according to the first three gospels, the Jews simply wanted him dead. They plotted against Jesus apparently offended that he claimed authority above the law and insulted their religious leaders. Typical is the cure of the man with a withered hand done on the Sabbath, after which, “the Pharisees went out at once and began to plot with the Herodians against him discussing how to destroy him.” (Mark 3:6) Matthew and Luke have parallel passages which sensibly remove the Herodians from being offended by Sabbath breaking, Luke for his part adding the scribes. The declaration that, “the Son of Man is master of the Sabbath,” (Luke 6:5) suggests that according to the Synoptics, Jesus was challenging the authority of both the Jewish religious groups and their interpretation of the law.

More openly offensive is the episode in which, as an invited guest, Christ delivers a diatribe against the Pharisees and lawyers, accusing them of being, “filled with extortion and wickedness.” (Luke 11:39) They are fools, hypocrites and responsible for the death of all the prophets. His exit from the meal sounds as chaotic as a kerbside press conference as the Pharisees, “tried to force answers from him.” (Luke 11:53) In the corresponding passage, Matthew, with a neat understatement, has the disciples inform Jesus that, “the Pharisees were shocked” (15:12) by his opinion of their traditions. The Jews in these gospels are more than shocked, they want Christ dead.

Accordingly, it is the Jews who plot to have Jesus tried and executed. Before the Sanhedrin, his words as preserved in John 2:19 are turned against him, but fail to bring a conviction.

We heard him say, “I am going to destroy this temple made by human hands, and in three days build another, not made by human hands.” But even on this

point their evidence was conflicting. (Mark 14:58-59)

The key to convincing the Sanhedrin he should be killed in these accounts is Jesus' self-referential allusion to the messianic motifs of the, "Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of Heaven," (Mark 14:62) from Daniel 7:13 and the Psalms (110:1), earning the charge and conviction of blasphemy. Luke tightens the case by having Jesus also imply he is the son of God. (Luke 22:70) So in the Synoptic gospels it is the Jews who hate Jesus and find him guilty of a capital offense under their law.

With the shift to a Roman court, the Jews accuse Jesus before Pilate, not as a blasphemer, but as a subversive and a zealot.

We found this man inciting our people to revolt, opposing payment of the tribute to Caesar, and claiming to be Christ, a king. (Luke 23:2)

The question of taxes to Rome was the, "usual charge made against Zealots."<sup>1</sup> It is possible to see the act of clearing the moneylenders from the temple court as being in sympathy with the Zealot cause. Incitement to riot and claiming to be King are political charges which the Jews know will interest a Roman court as much as religious charges would not. Pilate however finds no charge to answer and only lets the Jews have him to crucify him because he fears the disruption the locals could cause if they rioted. Again the Synoptics tell us that whatever the method of death that Christ suffered, it was at the instigation of the Jews that it was carried out.

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<sup>1</sup> Drane, J. *Introducing the New Testament*, Lion: Oxford, 1986, p82.

According to Koester however, “all that is certain is Jesus’ death on the cross for which the Roman authorities bear full responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> The fact of the cross, attested independently by Roman and Jewish sources<sup>3</sup>, indicates a Roman execution presumably for a Roman crime. The shift of blame from the Romans to the Jews may explain some odd things in the Synoptics account of Jesus killing. Cohn suggests that the behaviour of Christ would not have inflamed Jewish religious figures, many actions, healing on a Sabbath for example, being the subject of debate rather than fixed opinion.<sup>4</sup> The act of clearing the Temple could be seen as that of a “Jeremiah” attacking unscrupulous vendors, rather than any Zealot inspired revolt.<sup>5</sup> Even if Cohn's idea that the Jews could well have been favourably disposed towards Christ is not correct, the shift of the trial to a Roman court does not make sense if the Jews could deliver their own justice up to and including the death sentence.<sup>6</sup> Once in Pilates' jurisdiction the tendency to whitewash Roman involvement may explain the convoluted process in which Pilate takes advice from the chief priest, Herod, a mob, and his wife and still can't make a decision. A contemporary description of Pilate as being accused of, 'rapacity, outrages, countless and continuing murders,'<sup>7</sup> seems out of character for the man in the Synoptics.

The Synoptics trial narrative is, “theologically necessary and politically convenient.”<sup>8</sup> If Jesus was just another potential troublemaker executed by the Roman procurator in a humiliating execution it would hardly recommend him to new pagan converts. The Synoptic trial accounts with their multiple court scenes, stoic hero and obvious

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<sup>2</sup> Koester, H. *Introduction to the New Testament Vol 2*, Fortress: Philadelphia. 1982, p 84.

<sup>3</sup> Perrin, N. and Duling, D.C. *The New Testament*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch: New York, 1982, p 407.

<sup>4</sup> Cohn, H. *The Trial and Death of Jesus*, KTAV: New York, 1977, p43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p 58.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p 31.

<sup>7</sup> Perrin, op cit p 20.

<sup>8</sup> Brandon, S.G.F *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth*, Skin and Day: New York, 1968, p 141.

miscarriage of justice, make Christ a more attractive focus for belief and explains the shame of the cross. Even the Jews who get scapegoated in these gospels would have seen the cross as a curse and the lead up to Jesus' execution might have eased their problems with accepting Christ.<sup>9</sup>

In one sense at least the witness of the Synoptic gospels is that Jesus died because he said he was going to be killed. He repeatedly tells his disciples that he was going to be killed, not that he was always understood.

The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men; they will put him to death. But they did not understand what he said and were afraid to ask him.  
(Mark 9:31)

There are three such direct prophecies recorded as well as several indirect references. The exhortation for a follower to, "take up his cross," (Mark 8:34) suggests his own tragic death and offers support for followers who face persecution. If the trial is presented in a favourable way for the early church, then a church rocked by the destruction of Jerusalem and Roman persecution has a need of a role model for suffering. With respect to later events, "behind every martyrdom ... lay the self-sacrifice of Jesus himself,"<sup>10</sup> so Jesus in this sense was killed as an example to his followers in their persecution.

Parables are also used to presage Jesus' death in these gospels. It is compared to the

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<sup>9</sup> Perkins, P. *Reading the New Testament*, Paulist: New York, 1987, p 72.

<sup>10</sup> Fox, R.L. *Pagans and Christians*. Viking: Harmondsworth, 1986, p 441.

traditional story of Jonah (Matt 12:10) and more specifically in the parable of the wicked husbandman. (Mark 12:1-12) This story is again theologically convenient as its clear implication is that God has finally rejected the Jews after they had rejected all the prophets and finally God's son himself. In this sense Jesus was killed because it brings about a new world order in which the chosen status is shifted from the Jews to the early Christian church.

Less directly, the Synoptics imply that Jesus fulfills a prophesy from the Jewish scriptures of a suffering messiah. Matthew makes much of Old Testament prophesy to establish Jesus' credentials with the virgin birth and his birthplace, for example, seen as fulfillment of prophesy. While the Jews of Jesus time found nothing in their scriptures to expect anything other than a victorious king as messiah, the gospels in question repeatedly describe Jesus as messiah and emphasize his suffering. Isaiah 53 portrays a suffering servant and is quoted in Matthew, "he took our sicknesses away and carried our diseases for us." (8:17) A Christian exegesis of Isaiah 53 finds many parallels between this passage and the passion of Christ in these gospels. Christ is the "sheep that is dumb before the shearers," (Isaiah 53:7) as "he offered no reply to any of the charges." (Matt 27:14) Jesus crucifixion with two criminals and his burial by Joseph of Arimathea are the, "grave with the wicked, a tomb with the rich." (Isaiah 53:9) Details such as these "irresistibly evoke the trial of Jesus and its sequel."<sup>11</sup> The servant is described a, "lamb that is led to the slaughterhouse" (Isaiah 53:7) and in that this picture is taken by the synoptics as a prophesy of Christ, his death is inevitable.

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<sup>11</sup> Guthrie, D et al (ed.) *New Bible Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, 1970, p 618.

Why Jesus was killed also depends on who he actually was, and what his death could do for others. In the synoptics we are clearly not dealing with an ordinary man. Matthew begins his story with a genealogy stretching back to David and on to Abraham, suggesting a claim to Kingship and ties to the Jewish people back to antiquity. Luke takes this further linking Christ back to Adam and hence God, implying Jesus is God's son. Mark opens his gospel by identifying him as, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (1:1) This relationship with God is reinforced by the involvement of the Holy Spirit in his birth.

As Son of God, Jesus death is an atonement for sins initiating a new covenant. The Synoptics see this as part of a grand design that leads to Jesus' sacrifice. Christ states that his coming death is, "God's way." (Matt 16:23) He is, "to give his life, as a ransom for many." (Matt 20:28) Further the Eucharistic saying, "this is my blood, the blood of the covenant which is to be poured out for many, (Mark 14:24) shows the author understands Jesus' death as a sacrificial atonement for sins. The picture of the suffering servant is also significant here as the servant, "offers his life in atonement." (Isaiah 53:10) While the concept is more fully explored in Paul's theology and in Hebrews, this model for Christ's death as atonement is also a reason for the killing of Jesus in the synoptic gospels.

In the gospels according to Mark, Matthew and Luke we are looking at documents of the early church, so it is not surprising that they contain a view of the killing of Christ which is suited to the needs of the church. The historical information given suits the theological and political purposes of the church. The certainty that Jesus suffered Roman execution is obscured by the story of Jewish plots to kill Jesus. On the broader canvas, his execution is seen as the inevitable outcome of prophesy, especially as seen in the motif of the suffering servant. Ultimately the Synoptics suggest Jesus died as a sacrifice in an

act of atonement to reconcile God and man.

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