

QUESTION

WHY ACCORDING TO LUKE, WAS JESUS CRUCIFIED?

INTRODUCTION

In this account, my main concern is to recount how Luke successfully brings into focus the historical reasons that led to the crucifixion of Jesus, and at the same time relating the theological interpretation of the cross he provided. But before that, what seems to me as a starting point is giving a brief information about what was the socio-political situation in and around Palestine during the time of Jesus. Having said that, I would try to give an explanation of what crucifixion itself was all about. Thereafter, I would introduce the book of Luke and then bring out the most popular viewpoints on why Jesus was crucified.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE IN PALESTINE

From the conquest of Pompey in 63 B.C. Rome had assumed a protectorate over Judea and had regarded Herod a vassal king. The Romans then became the ultimate authority in Palestine. Although, the Romans generally gave the province a measure of self-government, but Judea been more turbulent a province was under the direct authority of the emperor who stationed armies in it. Procurators then governed Judea, making Herod and the Priesthood to be puppet rulers. This situation explains why in particular, Pontius Pilate, the then Roman procurator was connected with the trial and death of Jesus (Luke 23).

CRUCIFIXION

Historical data outside the Gospels points clearly to the reality that crucifixion was not a Jewish form of execution. It was exclusive to the Romans, and it was an extreme penalty, generally reserved for cases of runaway slaves or rebellion against Rome. Jesus' crucifixion, according to historical evidence, was typical of Roman executions on the cross. The condemned man was often scourged, or flogged, to leave him weak and bloodied. He would next have to carry the beam of his own cross through the streets. At the place of execution, his arms were tied to the crossbeam. Sometimes, as in Jesus' case, the hands were also nailed in place. Death resulted from hunger, exposure, and loss of blood. Sometimes it was hastened with a blow to the legs, causing the victim's weight to crush the lungs, bringing about suffocation. Other cases show that the victim was lanced to accelerate death, and this was true of Jesus. A Roman soldier pierced Jesus' side and water and blood flowed out.

INTRODUCING THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke gives us the fullest life-story of Jesus we possess. The Gospel is part one of a two-part history of Christian beginnings-Luke/Acts. Both parts are dedicated to the same man, the Roman Theophilus, and both are written with the same purpose. The Gospel is carefully compiled from reliable, first-hand sources. Luke is not simply a biographer. His overriding concern is to get at the truth of what happened in Palestine in the critical years of Jesus' lifetime. His Gospel shows Jesus as the Saviour of all men; his coming, a world-event. He lets us see Jesus the Man. And his selection stories reflect his own warm interest in people, especially the sick and helpless, the poor, women, children, and the social outcasts.

THE MOST POPULAR EXPLANATION FOR JESUS CRUCIFIXION

The Jewish council, or Sanhedrin, questioned Jesus on a number of counts and false witnesses are brought against him. While they don't agree on Jesus' specific crimes, they chiefly accuse him of

plotting to destroy the Temple. When the high priest asks Jesus point-blank if he is the Messiah, Jesus replies, 'You have said so'. That's enough for the high priest, who decides Jesus has committed 'blasphemy', a crime punishable under Jewish Law by stoning. But the actual power of life and death still lay in the hands of Rome's representative. So off they all went to Pontius Pilate for a second trial that conformed with traditions of Roman justice.

The men who brought Jesus to Pilate brought along a laundry list of charges: Jesus is a subversive. He opposes paying taxes to the emperor (Luke 23:2,5) – which was exactly the opposite of what Jesus had said (Luke 22:53). He is stirring up resistance to Rome. Moreover, Jesus' followers were not rounded up along with him at the time of his arrest, as one would have expected had Jesus been leading an insurrectionist movement. In fact, after Jesus' death his disciples were allowed to form a community in Jerusalem, and unthinkable development had they been known as a seditious party.

In all of the Gospels, Pilate is presented as initially reluctant to pass judgement in a case that appears to him to be a local argument among Jews. In Luke, Pilate tries to send Jesus to Herod Antipas, the Jewish ruler of Galilee, but Herod sends Jesus back. He may have been reluctant, not so much out of goodness as disinterest in a Jewish matter. What forced his hand was the threat of political pressure from Rome. When Jesus was accused of treachery toward Rome, Pilate could not simply overlook the charge. Doing so would have endangered his own political neck.

It is ultimately on this charge of claiming kingship, a direct challenge to the emperor, that Pilate sentenced Jesus to death. He was condemned and executed as a nationalistic freedom fighter who threatened Rome, not for claiming to be the Messiah. And though the Gospel report that Pilate turns Jesus over to the Jewish crowd, his execution was clearly carried out by Roman soldiers. Many commentators, Jewish and Christian, have detected an overly regretful tone toward Pilate in the Gospels, shifting the blame for Jesus' execution to both the Jewish authorities and in a larger sense to the Jewish people.

Among these commentators is E. P. Sanders who tries to solve this puzzle with special reference to Jesus' physical demonstration against the Temple (Luke 19:45-46). This act, Sanders insist, was not intended as a cleansing of the Temple, but as a portent of its destruction. This, he argues, was Jesus' last public act, after which was put in motion the decisive plot against his life. Set...within the context of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and his capacity to excite the hopes of the people, this act against the Temple was sufficient to bring Jesus to the attention of the Romans as a political threat. He was executed, then, at the order of the Jewish leadership as a dangerous man, but not as an actual leader of an insurgent party.

Although plausible in its own way, Sanders' reconstruction of the rationale for Jesus' execution overlooks important aspects of the gospel accounts. He is simply unable to come to terms with the role of the Jewish leaders in the process of Jesus' passion. In fact, his hypothesis leaves little room at all for the contribution of the Jews to this action, since, in his mind, the Jesus-Jewish (Pharisaic) conflict recorded in the Gospels is anachronistic. Moreover, his attempt to discount the material recorded in the Gospels, which intervenes between the Temple action and the onset of the passion story fails to convince. Although we can believe the Temple action was a significant causal factor in Jesus' arrest and condemnation, it seems unlikely that it was the immediate cause.

Harvey, on the other hand, argues that the Jewish leaders did hand Jesus over to Roman authority, but only after their failure to cope effectively with this Jew whom they regarded as a threat to general peace and security. In this regard, Harvey is drawn to the Lukan account, according to which Jesus was not found guilty or condemned as deserving death by the Jewish leaders (Lk 22:66-71; Acts 13:27-28; Jhn 18:19-23). Harvey therefore concludes that the Sanhedrin held and

informal hearing, the purpose of which was to decide whether, and on what grounds, to hand Jesus over to Pilate.

What is lacking from Harvey's account is any discussion of why the Sanhedrin might have regarded Jesus as a threat. A hint in this direction is provided in the Gospel. There the Sanhedrin, meeting informally, initiates a plot against Jesus because they fear reprisals from Rome: 'If we allow Jesus to go on like this, everyone will believe in him and Romans will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation' (John 11:48). (Rome's repeated response was to kill both the leaders of such movements and their followers as I have already explained above).

At this point, Sanders is certainly correct: Jesus would have posed no immediate threat had it not been for his following. At the same time, we need not follow Sanders in aborting completely the record of Jesus-Jewish hostility recorded in the Gospels. First-century Judaism was marked by conflict – both internally, among the various forms of Judaism existing at the time, and externally, with Rome. Jesus' mission, construed in broad terms as the restoration of Israel in the context of the coming of God's universal rule, must have posed a threat within the social and power matrix of first-century Judaism. No less, of course, Jesus' proclamation of the eschatological kingdom would have posed a political threat to those most supportive of the present order, including the Roman authorities themselves. Even though Jesus presented no threat of a violent, military take-over, his message of liberation and his growing popularity nevertheless made him a dangerous political risk. This threat, heightened by Jesus' activity subsequent to his arrival in Jerusalem for Passover, led to his execution.

THE REASONS FOR JESUS CRUXIFIXION ACCORDING TO LUKE

Luke leaves his readers in no doubt as to the centrality of Jesus' death for his Gospel. He sets the stage for Jesus' passion above all by highlighting his narrative of Jesus' life as a tale of conflict. In addition, throughout his two books he sounds the rhythm: "the Christ must suffer!"

In Luke, not only does Jesus "set his face to go up to Jerusalem"(9:51), the place of rejection and death (18:31-32), but also, with the onset of his passion, he exercises a surprising prescience regarding the details of his betrayal, arrest and death. More so than in the other Synoptic, here Jesus is in control of the events of his passion. When Jesus predicts his suffering and rejection, he notes their necessity in salvation-historical terms. This characterisation is continued even after the passion account by means of showing how the crucified Jesus could be the Messiah of God. "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into his glory?" (Lk 24:25-27). Phrases of these kinds appear again and again in Luke – Acts.

Luke characterises Jesus' life as a story of conflict and rejection – ominously predicted by Simeon (2:34:35), paradigmatically represented by Jesus' opposition at Nazareth (4:16-30), tragically fulfilled in Pilate's handing Jesus over to the will of the chief priests and Jewish public (23:25). On one level this portrait is nothing more than what one would have expected. For Luke, Jesus is a prophet (4:24; 7:16, 39; 24:19; Acts 3:17-26; 7:37), and rejection and death are the lot of all the prophets (Neh 9:26; Luke 4:24; 6:23; 11:47-51; 13:33-34; Acts 7:42). He attracted opposition especially by his concern for a brand of justice at odds with that practised by the religious leadership and by his concomitant openness to outcasts through table fellowship (e.g., Zacchaeus). According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' primary opponents appear to be the religious leadership in Jerusalem, and among them the chief priests are singled out for special development.

Furthermore, the divine anointing of Jesus for his mission is set within the immediate context of temptation by the devil (3:21-4:13), and the subsequent narrative demonstrates the continual cosmic

dimensions of opposition against him (13:10-17). With the onset of the passion story, supernatural conflict moves again to centre court: Satan enters Judas (22:3; 31) and Jesus' struggle on the Mount of Olives as throughout his mission is coloured in eschatological, cosmic hues (22:53) "struggle," in (4:13; 8:13; 22:28, 40, 46).

In another development, the interpretation of Jesus' death as martyrdom has enjoyed widespread support in this century. This view exploits the connections between the Lukan passion and the literature of martyrdom in late Judaism. Common themes include the presence of supernatural conflict and divine help, the innocence and endurance of the victim and the portrait of the martyr's death as exemplary for the faithful. Although this interpretation attributes positive significance to the death of Jesus in Luke and makes good on a number of important aspects of the Lukan portrayal, it has come under serious scrutiny in recent years.

First, it has been questioned how far Luke actually anticipated Jesus' disciples would be asked to follow in Jesus' steps. Thus, the call to take up the cross (Mk 8:34) has become in Luke a call to a lifestyle marked by the cross ("day by day," 9:23), not a reference to impending persecution. Second, a number of details integral to martyr tales are missing from Luke, most notably the horrific detail in descriptions of the means of death. Moreover, in Luke, Jesus unlike the martyrs of Jewish literature appears as one who struggles with the prospect of death (Luke 22:39-46). Third, as has become clear from continued study of the religious background of the first century, the themes of the martyr-logical literature are not in every case unique to that corpus. Thus, one might assume that Luke and the literature of martyrdom drew from a common world of thought. Finally, it has become evident that the notion of Jesus as martyr fails to do justice to the richness of Luke's picture of Jesus' passion. Although it may be one among other Lukan concerns, by itself it falls short as a summary of Luke's theology of Jesus' death.

Luke's interest in the Suffering Servant is manifested in the passion story itself. In the passion story (1) Jesus cites Isaiah 53:12 as a general allusion to his suffering and death, thus communication that in his passion he fulfils the role of the Suffering Servant. (2) Jesus is repeatedly declared innocent and acclaimed by the centurion as a "righteous man," an allusion to Isaiah 53:11 and Jesus suffering in Acts 3:13-14, where Jesus' passion is described in words borrowed from Isaiah 52:13-53:12. (3) Jesus refuses to speak in his own self-defense (23:9; Isaiah 53:7) and (4) in his mockery, Jesus is called "the Chosen One," a designation for God's Servant (23:35; Isaiah 42:1).

The significance of the identification of Jesus' passion as that of the Suffering Servant for Luke is threefold and by these we can understand the theological interpretation of the cross provided by Luke. First, it indicates how Luke can emphasise the salvation-historical necessity of the cross and spotlight Jesus' exaltation or vindication as the salvific event. The Isaianic portrayal of the Suffering Servant holds together these twin motifs, particularly in Isaiah 53:11, where, following his suffering, God's Righteous One will justify many. In other words, Luke's characterisation of Jesus as the Servant indicates the necessity of his death and the salvific import of his vindication.

Second, Luke's emphasis on the Servant provides a framework for drawing out the universal implications of Jesus' mission. That Jesus would be 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' was predicted by Simeon (2:32; Isaiah 49:6), so it is noteworthy that at Jesus' death he was acclaimed as the Righteous One by a Gentile. However, the importance of Jesus' death is not only for the Gentiles, but also for the Jew (23:34, 48) and the criminal (23:43). That is, in Jesus' death one finds the culmination of a life lived for others, including outsiders.

Third, by portraying Jesus' career, and especially his death and exaltation, as that of the Suffering Servant, Luke demonstrates in the ultimate manner his understanding of the way of salvation. Already in the lives of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Luke shows that God's salvation comes through a pattern of reversal (Luke 1).

For Luke, the in-breaking of the kingdom of God marks a transposition of roles as the God who is faithful vindicates the faithful. The career of Jesus illustrates these themes of reversal for he is the innocent Servant who suffers unto death but is raised up and designated Prince and Saviour. By putting aside thought of self-glorification and obediently adopting the role of the servant (12:37; 22:25-27), Jesus embodies the righteousness, humiliation and lowliness of the Servant. The cross is the consequence, but God overturned this humiliation, vindicating his Servant, exalting him and in so doing opened the way of repentance and forgiveness. For Luke this is the way of salvation, and this is the way of discipleship.