

Why does Jesus (have to) die (on the Cross)?

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A. Theological Reasons

1 Because he is human, and all humans are mortal

This is given a theological framing by Rm 5:17 - all humans are mortal through sin. It is not a trivial reason for the death of Jesus. He could have died like Moses (at the end of Deuteronomy) in another world; as it is his death increasingly obtrudes on his life, and his attitude to death increasingly appears as the heart of his life as revealing the Father.

- (a) it was essential that he should be like us in all things, Heb 2:17, so that by his death he could set aside the one who held the power over death, Heb 2:14
- (b) so that he could be *Lord of the dead* as well as of the living (implications for Purgatory?) Rm 14:9
- (c) "When I am lifted up I will draw *all people* to myself" (Jn 12:32): his death is said to be "the gathering together of all the scattered children of God": cf the Lukan "Light to enlighten the gentiles"

2 So that God's prophecies might be fulfilled

This raises the question of the intentions of God/the Father.

- (a) Christian kerygma says that the OT predicts the Passion of the Messiah (Lk 24:25ff, Acts *passim*, etc). This lays the whole of "the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms" open to Christian significance. The discernment of the divine plan is clear.
- (b) Jesus' own prediction of his death long predates the final crisis, and his specific foreknowledge of *the Cross* is writ large in his predictions (Jn 12:33).
- (c) Especial attention should be given to the Isaianic Servant Songs, and their precise influence on Jesus' thoughts and actions before and during the Passion, and on the formation of the kerygma. Our own inability to ascribe the Servant-Songs an interpretative location leaves unanswered the question of Isaian intentions.
- (d) The Petrine confession of Jesus as "the Christ/the Son of the Living God" (Mk 8 &par) is saluted in Mt as divinely-inspired. It is followed by the revelation of the Cross - rejected by Peter. Jesus' rebuke of his response says that Peter is thinking human rather than divine thoughts (cf God's rebuke of Samuel at the anointing of David, which also concerns the discerning of a Messiah; also the treatment of Joseph in the birth-narrative of Mt, where the thinking of a just man is set aside in favour of a divine revelation). Here is the clear statement that the Cross is obedient to the mind of God rather than the intentions of men.
- (e) The Agony in the Garden dramatises Jesus' apprehension of the coming Cross as the will of the Father for him. His surrender actually refers to the distance between the divine will and his humanity ("Not my will, but your will").

3 To prove that God loved us

- (a) What proves that God loved us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Rm 5:7ff). To see the death of Jesus as a demonstration of the love of the Father in degree (the magnitude of the sacrifice) and in kind (the character of the one offered) is sharpened by the contrasting qualities in the ones saved. This paradox is fully exploited in the Passion narratives, where the active participants in the process demonstrate

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their clear need for salvation by their fear, venality, and infidelity; it is of these materials that the crucifixion, in human terms, is made. This direct relation between the hatred of men and the love of God is entirely conscious and intended.

(b) The *innocence* of Jesus is vital to the sign. If he is crucified for blasphemy, he is still “on the side of truth”, since his divine claims are the truth. If he is crucified for “making himself king” and “defying Caesar” it is because “my kingdom is not of this kind”. That the perpetrators of his death “do not know what they are doing” is in fact contributory to the transcendence of his death, by which God reveals the mystery of his love. This whole enquiry is an attempt to become better informed on this very point.

B. Religious Reasons

1 As the only possible punishment for his “blasphemy”

This is more than an analysis of the eventual verdict passed by the Sanhedrin in the Synoptics. It lies behind the Johannine Gospel throughout.

(a) The moment *God becomes human* it is inevitable, logically and ontologically, that his self-revelation will attract the accusation of blasphemy. This means that his condemnation to death is already written *in his being* (Mt 26:66)

(b) The tailoring of this Jewish verdict, in order to bring about the *Roman* penalty (the Cross) involves a series of stratagems which cost the Jewish priests their fidelity to the Scriptures and the ancestral faith (*We have no king except Caesar*).

(c) Thus the priests’ abandonment of their own Jewish orthodoxy becomes necessary for the engineering of his death. This adds further significance particularly to the deeds of Caiaphas (Jn 11:47ff).

C. Political Reasons

1 Because the Jewish Authorities wanted him silenced

(a) Jn 11:47ff describes a meeting of priests and Pharisees to discuss the right way to “deal with” Jesus. The irony is extreme, esp. in the question: “Here is this man working all these signs; and what action are we taking?” This is a *religious* question Jesus himself could not have asked any more pointedly. The principle is evinced among them that they cannot allow him to continue because his activity imperils the whole religious polity which has been established with the Romans for the preservation of the Temple and the very nation.

(b) The link between the preservation of the Temple and the decision to destroy Jesus is a complex and sustained one across the tradition. The incident of *the cleansing of the Temple* is followed (Jn 2:18) by the questioning of Jesus’ authority; his only response is to refer to the Cross and Resurrection (Jn 2:19, 22). The incident is framed in Mk by the cursing and withering of the fruitless fig-tree, which evokes the parable of the worthless tenants, who will *lose the vineyard* through their murderous treachery; the terminal significance of Jerusalem’s refusal of her Messiah is prophetically evoked (Lk 19:41ff) and eventually symbolised by the *tearing of the Temple*

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Veil in the Synoptics, which carries the (in Mt, seismic) impact of Christ's death into the heart of Jewish religion.

(c) Caiaphas' ironic announcement that Jesus will die *for the nation* is amplified by Jn: he will die "to gather together into one the scattered children of God". The priests in NT times are the only inheritors of the royal mandate described in Ezekiel, of shepherding Israel; God's excoriation of the kings arraigns them for failing to gather the lost, bandage the wounded, guard the flock, etc. Jesus claims this royal role for himself across the tradition, by the Synoptic parables of the Lost Sheep, and by the Johannine meditation on the good shepherd. In this last, Jesus says specifically that the true shepherd *lays down his life for the sheep*.

2 Because one of his disciples betrayed him

(a) The act of Judas is given some prominence in the NT, which is paradoxical; Jesus is not said either to be in hiding, or to resist arrest (the seclusion of Mk 1:45 is in function of the vast crowds, a sustained Markan motif; that of Jn 12:56 is theological, in that Jesus has finished his public work and is preparing for the Book of Glory, which is set in the intimacy of the Last Supper. In some sense Judas' betrayal could be seen as hardly necessary (Lk 22:52par). In the early Church, however, betrayal was a real danger (Mk 13:12f, Lk 21:16, Jn 16:2ff)

(b) The lack of understanding and eventual dispersal of the other disciples, epitomised by Peter's denial, is contributory to the human suffering of Jesus (Mk 14:37) but can also be read as providential (Lk 22:61, Jn 13:36, 18:9)

Judas' betrayal is also a fulfilment of prophecy - both classical and Jesuanic; it is powerfully ethical in implication. John reiterates Judas' dishonesty with money (Jn 12:6: cf Lk 16:11) and the Gospel ascribes part of his treacherous motivation to greed, in contrast to modern conjectures that Judas had some political or even some apocalyptic religious motive to "precipitate" the crisis which would inaugurate the Kingdom - none of which, I believe, finds any supporting evidence in Scripture or tradition.

3 Because the crowd in Jerusalem demanded his death

Why did they do this?

(a) Because the priests had incited them to demand his death (Mt 27:20)

Although the priests also say *not at the Festival, lest they riot*, John amplifies in great detail the theme of Jesus' death fulfilling the precepts for the Passover (Jn 19:36 &c)

(b) Because they did not believe in him

(Lk4:28ff) The refusal of acceptance, far from leaving the crowds neutral, involves Jesus' condemnation and potential death: the fourth Gospel particularly shows a tendency of the crowd to stone Jesus (Jn 5:18, 7:25, 8:59, 10:31).

The connection between religious rejection of Jesus and murderous intent is a sustained one across the tradition, but in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 8) we are shown that there is no middle ground between total acceptance of Jesus and complicity in his death; after all, the life or death of those addressed by the Word is at stake: *If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins*. There is little justice in that statement unless those whose lives are at stake have taken a proportionate decision about Jesus. Therefore Jesus must force them to decide whether or not they believe in him, accept him as the ultimate Word of God. But this decision is not imposed on everyone until Jesus dies: *When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He* (Jn

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8:28). Jesus' death is his own ultimate testimony to the truth the people must follow, and in this verdict they will pass final

of his claim; the verdict of judgment on themselves.