

NOTE

1. The Gospel accounts don't make it entirely clear in what order the bread, the cup, the footwashing, and the lecture occurred. This is one possible reconstruction. In general, the Gospel writers seem less concerned about including precise chronology than a modern historian might wish.

The Death of Death

*Matthew 26:57–28:20, Mark 14:53–16:20,
Luke 22:54–24:53, John 18:12–21:25*

Jewish Trials

The trial, too, was a charade. Roman soldiers had shared in Jesus' arrest on the grounds that He was a political revolutionary. Because such revolutionaries were a severe threat to order in the province, the governor's mandate was to maintain order even if it meant ruthless suppression. The Sanhedrin – the Jewish leaders – honestly feared Jesus might spark an uprising, perhaps unintentionally, but they knew perfectly well He was no guerrilla leader.

The trouble was that they needed Rome to believe otherwise. Their real motive for getting rid of Jesus was that, like every prophet before Him, He was a pain in the neck for men like them. He was making them laughingstocks among the people and jeopardizing their lucrative businesses. But they couldn't execute Him for being a prophet. They might possibly convict Him for blasphemy – claiming to be the Son of God. But if they had Him stoned for blasphemy, He might become something even worse than a live prophet: a martyred one. His disciples might launch a whole movement around Him.

No, the only sensible move was to have Rome execute Jesus

on political grounds. They had to convince the governor that He was a threat to public peace, an insurrectionist claiming to be the rightful Jewish king.

So around 3:00 a.m. on Friday, Jesus was marched into the home of the godfather of the chief-priestly families: Annas. Annas had been high priest many years earlier, and since then Rome had appointed five of his sons to that office, probably on his advice. The current high priest was Caiaphas, Annas's son-in-law.

Annas intended to conduct a preliminary interrogation to gather evidence for the real trial. But Jewish legal procedure declared the accused innocent and not even on trial until at least two independent witnesses had given testimony that agreed. Accused people could not be asked to incriminate themselves. Knowing that Annas had no right to interrogate Him, Jesus coolly refused to answer his questions. He politely directed Annas to any of the dozens of people who had heard His teaching in the temple. Had anyone heard Him say anything that could prove He was a false prophet?

An official finally lost his temper and slapped Jesus across the face. But the man who had said, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also," put His own preaching into practice. Neither cringing nor spiteful, Jesus simply pointed out that this was one more illegality that Annas and company really ought to face up to.

Exasperated, Annas summoned the entire Sanhedrin out of bed to give this upstart His trial. Unfortunately, it wasn't legal to hold a capital trial in the middle of the night. Even after coaching the witnesses, the priests couldn't get them to agree except on a vague story that Jesus had said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days." Jesus didn't bother to explain that He'd really said, "Destroy this temple [my body], and I will raise it again in three days." The trial was a show anyway.

Finally Caiaphas asked Him point blank if He was the Messiah. Jesus responded with an orientalism that implied, "Yes, but you haven't a clue what that means." To really shake up His audience, He added an allusion to Daniel's prophecy about the divine Son of Man coming from Heaven.

That was the last straw for the Sanhedrin. It never occurred

to any of them that Jesus' claim might be true, so the outrageous apparent blasphemy disgusted them. Some began to hit and spit on Him. As soon as dawn broke they held a quick official trial in which they got Jesus to repeat His claim to be the King, and promptly shuffled Him off to the governor.

Roman Trials

Lucky for them, the Roman workday began at dawn. But the governor, Pontius Pilate, was less than thrilled to have this case on his morning docket. He knew his Jewish subjects detested him for his record of extortion, murder, atrocities, and social blunders. He had recently provoked a riot by parading his soldiers with a portrait of the emperor on a Jewish holy day (the Jews regarded the portrait as an idol). Rome had disciplined Pilate for endangering public order, and he knew Rome would fire him if there were riots about a supposed Messiah.

Pilate's first dodge was to invite the Sanhedrin to execute Jesus on religious grounds, such as blasphemy. Roman subjects weren't really allowed to inflict the death penalty, but Pilate promised to look the other way. But this offer wasn't good enough for the priests, so Pilate agreed to question Jesus about His kingship. When it became clear that Jesus' claim had few or no political overtones, however, Pilate wanted to dismiss the whole case.

He almost got out of it when he learned Jesus was a Galilean. Technically, that put Him under the jurisdiction of Herod (son of Herod the Great), who ruled Galilee. But Herod, who was in town for Passover, found Jesus a bore and returned Him to Pilate. Herod had been thrilled by a chance to question the famed wonder-worker, but Jesus ignored Herod completely. He wasn't interested in performing for an effete, pompous kinglet.

So back came Jesus to Pilate's office, dressed by Herod in a mock imperial robe. The governor's next sidestep was to have Jesus beaten within an inch of His life. Pilate hoped that would satisfy the Sanhedrin without getting him into serious trouble with this god Jesus claimed to serve. Jesus' serenity in the face of His accusers was getting under Pilate's skin. The man was too lucid to be a madman, and there was something decidedly unnerving about His confidence.

It was customary for the governor to demonstrate his benevolence by freeing one Jewish prisoner at the Passover. When Pilate led Jesus out to the crowd, he expected them to beg mercy for this teacher they so adored. But the sight of Him dripping blood in a royal robe and wearing a crown of thorns changed their infatuation to contempt. The Sanhedrin had already coached the people to request another prisoner's release — Barabbas, a *real* guerrilla captain. Ironically, his name meant "son of the father." For Jesus, the Sanhedrin led the cry, "Crucify!" and the people echoed it. This was the Roman execution for slaves and scum — to Romans it was a disgrace, and to Jews it fulfilled Deuteronomy 21:23, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." Such a death would silence any notion that Jesus was a prophet of God.

Pilate was beside himself. It terrified him to think of lifting his hand against one who might be divine (Romans were incredibly superstitious). He confronted Jesus:

"Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"

Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." (John 19:9-12)

This was too much for Pilate. He feared the gods, but he feared Caesar more. He wanted this god to know that the man's blood was on the Jews' heads, though.

"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.

"We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. (John 19:15)

It was true. The Snake laughed.

Crucifixion

It was a grisly way to kill, even by the standards of the day. The law forbade crucifying a Roman citizen. The victim was nailed (or tied) by hands and feet to wooden crosspieces shaped like a T, a Y, an I, or a †. He straddled a hornlike projection, which took some of the weight and kept the flesh from tearing away from the nails. It usually took hours for the blood loss from beating, exposure to sun, and restricted circulation and breathing to produce heart failure.

Jesus was half-dead from flogging before He reached the site. But He was aware enough to deliver a mournful prophecy to the women who followed His escort. He felt no bitterness, not even toward those who had plotted His death and now mocked Him as He hung nailed to a pole. It had always been so since the first rebellion; these men were only carrying out what humans had ever longed to do: kill God so that they could rule their lives themselves. Jesus felt only compassion. He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

As Isaiah had foreseen, He was executed among criminals. The two thieves crucified with Him provided an object lesson on the choice being offered an entire planet. One cared only for self and let himself be devoured by his hatred of God and man. The other saw past Jesus' humiliation and acknowledged His kingship. Hatred or humility. Bitterness or faith.

Of the Twelve, only John dared attend the execution. Proud Peter had said he was willing to die for Jesus, but something broke inside him when Jesus refused to let him fight. He didn't understand why his Master had just turned Himself in. Despair clutched him, and outside Annas's house he denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Then he remembered that Jesus had actually predicted this betrayal, and Peter could hardly believe he was capable of stooping so low. Too late, he knew himself.

So while John stood watch at the cross, Peter wept in hiding, one inch from despair and suicide. Judas had already killed himself in too-tardy remorse for his treachery. Believing himself beyond forgiveness, he fulfilled his belief. But Jesus had prayed that Peter's faith would not utterly fail, and in the desperate hours a thread held.

On the other hand, the women of Jesus' entourage were not afraid to show their faces at the cross. Perhaps it was safer for them; no one paid attention to women anyway. Perhaps they had more faith, or more guts, than the men who were huddling in shock somewhere else. Certainly Jesus' mother didn't care whether the Sanhedrin boiled her in oil now that they were killing her Son. But Jesus cared, so He asked John to take her into his household.

That was His last piece of business. Ever since the previous night He had been carrying in His body the guilt of a worldful of perverted humans. Now the full cost of that burden closed in on Him. Evil dug an impassible gulf between the Evil Person and God. Yet now the Son of God was full to overflowing with the evil of the ages. For the first time in His existence, that dark gulf yawned between Him and His Father. From eternity they had always been intimately one; now the Father was nowhere to be felt.

In the agony of abandonment Jesus found the energy to wail the first verse of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It was a song of despair under persecution and divine rejection, yet it ended in a victory to which Jesus clung fiercely:

Posterity will serve him;
 future generations will be told about the Lord.
 They will proclaim his righteousness
 to a people yet unborn—
 for he has done it. (Psalm 22:30-31)

"For he has done it." The hour had come. It was about 3:00 p.m. on Friday afternoon, and the temple priests were getting ready to slaughter the Passover lambs. That night the Jews of Jerusalem would be feasting on roast lamb to celebrate their deliverance from slavery. A thin column of smoke rose from the temple as a signal that the lambs were about to die. Jesus asked for a sip of wine to rinse His parched mouth. He had one last word to say, and He wanted it to ring.

Tetelestai! Greek accountants scrawled this word across

invoices every day. It literally meant "It is finished," but the point was "Paid in Full."

It was over. Peaceful at last, Jesus prayed Psalm 31:5, a song Jews often sang before going to bed: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

The earth shook when its King died, and the heavy curtain that divided God's throne room from the rest of the temple tore from top to bottom.

Reversal

Although a member of the council, Joseph of Arimathea was conveniently absent from the Sanhedrin meeting that condemned Jesus. Perhaps he was not notified because he was known to be a follower of Jesus. At any rate, he and a Pharisee named Nicodemus risked the chief priests' ire by asking Pilate to let them bury Jesus' body. Joseph was quite well-off and spent a small fortune preparing the body as for a royal burial and interring it in his own rock-hewn tomb. The men had to rush the job because both Passover and the Sabbath started at sunset.

The Sanhedrin remembered Jesus had predicted He would rise from death on the third day, so they asked Pilate to post a guard at the tomb. He did.

It was a bleak Sabbath for the Eleven. They spent it huddled in a house, expecting that at the first moment of sunset they would hear the heavy feet of soldiers at the door. But Saturday night fell, and nothing. They were awakened at dawn, however, by the women disciples wailing that Jesus' body had been stolen. Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it empty except for the burial cloths. This was astounding, since the ointments with which the body was wrapped would have cemented the cloths to the corpse like lead. It would have taken strange robbers to spend the time to painstakingly—and with marginal success—peel the grave clothes off the body and carefully fold them.

The guards were nowhere to be found. They had run to the chief priests with a wild story about an earthquake at the tomb and an angel who rolled the heavy stone from the mouth of the cave. The priest bribed them to say they fell asleep and the disciples stole the body, and the soldiers agreed because they knew

the priests could have them executed for failing in a mission.

Some hours later, one of the women returned to the disciples' hideout claiming she had seen Jesus risen from the dead, and others said they had seen angels. The men ridiculed this nonsense, but then that evening two disciples ran in claiming to have met Jesus on the road northwest of town.

At that very moment Jesus actually walked into their locked apartment. He demonstrated that He was not a ghost by eating in front of them. He also showed them His nail wounds, the evidence He would carry into eternity that He had entered the depths of human pain and triumphed in it. Then He began to explain why He had to be killed and raised from the dead. Finally, He kept the first installment of His promise about the Spirit.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:21-23)

The Spirit had empowered Jesus to do amazing miracles; it was even by the Spirit's power that the Father had raised Jesus from death. But the first power these men needed as ambassadors of the true King was the ability to forgive.

A Movement Explodes

Acts 1:1-8:40, 9:32-11:30

Preparation

During the forty days after His return from death, Jesus appeared frequently to groups of His followers. He also appeared to His brother James; many of His friends and relatives found it difficult to believe He was the King during His former life, but seeing Him back from the dead sure convinced them. He would appear and disappear like a ghost, but He was too solidly physical to seem like anything other than a live person.

He did not do what one might have expected: materialize in the high priest's office or the temple courts and demonstrate His resurrection beyond any doubt. That would have been coercion. If He'd done that, the leaders and people would have been forced to bow to Him even though their inner commitments were unchanged. They still would not love Him. If blatant power displays had not won the generations who saw Moses on Sinai and Elijah on Carmel, they would not win this granite-hearted bunch.

So instead, Jesus trained His followers to present the evidence about Him in such a way that it would invite a change of heart. Like the prophets before them, these apostles would