

Acts 2:22-24: Who is Responsible for the Death of Christ?

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

'Blood Libel,' is a term that has come to be associated with Anti-Semitism. Throughout Western history the Jews have regularly been persecuted, but Easter was often a time when the persecution was amped up. During the times of the crusades the population of England became very aware of non-Christians in its borders. There were several massacres that would occur around Easter. A famous one is the story behind Clifton Tower. 'One of the worst anti-Semitic massacres of the Middle Ages took place in York in 1190. The city's entire Jewish community was trapped by an angry mob inside the tower of York Castle. Many members of the community chose to commit suicide rather than be murdered or forcibly baptised by the attackers.'¹ It is estimated that 40-50 families died. A common charge was 'Deicide' that the Jews had killed the Christian's God. Easter time seems to be a time when the question of who is responsible for the death of Jesus comes up again and needs to be answered.

This is an important question not only because of the recent irrational resurgence of anti-Semitism, but because we ourselves talk about our sins putting Him there. We often sing it in one of our favorite hymns, 'It was my sin that held Him there Until it was accomplished.' And another, 'I saw my sins His blood had spilt And helped to nail Him there.' As we interrogate the bible on this matter a number of candidates are put forward for being responsible for the death of Christ.

Firstly, God, Is. 53:10, 'Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief.'

Secondly, Jesus Christ, John 10:17-18a, 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.'

Thirdly, there are grounds to see ourselves as reason for Christ's death, Is. 53:5, 'But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.'

But we can add to this list.

Fourthly, there is the devil, John 13:2, 'During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him.'

Fifthly, of course Judas himself set ball rolling that would result in the death of Jesus though he sought to back out when Jesus was condemned, Matt. 27:3-10.

Sixthly, there were the Jewish leaders who conspired to have Jesus put to death, Matt. 27:1-2, 'When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ² And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.'

Seventhly, we must not leave out Pilate himself, the present Roman authority that administered the death penalty, something we confess in the Apostle's Creed, 'He suffered under Pontius Pilate.'

¹ <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/cliffords-tower-york/history-and-stories/massacre-of-the-jews/> accessed 2/4/2026.

Eighth, there is the crowd of Jerusalem who called for His crucifixion, Matt. 27:23, when they asked for the release of Barabbas.

Ninth, there were the actual Roman soldiers who drove the nails into His hands and carried out the order of execution, the Centurion who oversaw and the soldiers carrying out the orders.

Who is responsible for the death of Christ? In differing ways all of the above.

As we think through this matter we want to look at the question of Jewish guilt in response to the charge of deicide; secondly we want to look at God's sovereignty over these events and how God is not the author of sin and in seeing this we want to see the part that yours and my sin play in this.

Jewish guilt

Several times I have been asked, is the nation of Israel still guilty for the death of Jesus? This question usually comes up because of what the Jews said in Matt. 27:25 when they chose Barabbas over Jesus before Pilate, v24-25, 'So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." ²⁵ And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" The language of the guilt of the Jews continues when Peter says to them on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:22-23, 'Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.' So then, is the whole nation of Israel under a curse for the death of Christ, are all Jews being held accountable for the blood of Christ being the children of the original offenders? Are the anti-semitic slurs of the Nazis that all the Jews are under the blood curse true? The answer we will see is no.

It has been made clear by many that the book of Acts teaches a personal rather than corporate responsibility for those who were present and involved in the death of Christ. Firstly, we would have to clarify that not all Jews were actively for the crucifixion of Christ. We know that the disciples did not participate and bear the guilt, and others like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were not party to the act. Secondly, we see a distinction between Peter's 'you' in Acts 2:22-23, as he is speaking to the same crowd that would have welcomed Christ on Palm Sunday and then cried out for His crucifixion on Good Friday. And then compare this with Paul speaking to Jews in the Jewish synagogue in Antioch Pisidia, Acts 13:27 where after directly addressing the Jews as sons of Abraham he distinguishes them from those who were in Jerusalem and guilty by their personal participation in the deed, 'For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.' Peter speaks in the same way in Acts 10:39. What we see is a clear distinction between the guilt of those who were present and participated in the act whether it was a first order participation like the leaders who conspired to kill Jesus, to the second order involvement of the crowds who allowed themselves to be swayed and used. If you are a Christian you cannot get on the band wagon of antisemitic blood libel thinking. It is not substantiated by scripture. The Jews who were personally present and personally participated would have had a personal responsibility not all Jewish people.

God's sovereignty

One of the most striking truths that we see when we come to look at questions of agency and participation is how God is involved in this event. To put a point on it, the cross of Christ is the worst case of injustice that has been or ever can be committed in human history. It is the greatest sin human beings have ever committed. There has never been or can be a more innocent and righteous man than Jesus Christ. Holier than Adam because not only was He sinless He was also perfectly obedient to every law of God for His whole human life. And He was put to death. The wages of sin is death but He was no sinner. He was wrongly convicted under false charges, He was murdered. He who was their King, was the Prophet, and their Priest and yet was rejected on all counts. He who fulfilled all the promises, prophecies and types had come and attested to the truth of His message and identity with miracles was called a liar, and was killed for calling Himself the Son of God. The horror of the act is immense, the people of God influenced by the devil, in alliance with Gentile rulers, in cahoots with a false Jewish King Herod, put Jesus to death. But the text that we are focusing on, Acts 2:22-24 also tells us that 'this Jesus [was], delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.' This is the worst injustice in human history and the greatest display of God's perfect justice at the same time. Here upon the cross, for the first time in human history sin gets all that it deserves. Here God Himself provides the payment so that all that is necessary for a perfect satisfaction of His righteousness is paid in full. All previous outpourings of justice were restrained not giving sin its full payment, until Christ. As Paul says in Romans 3:25-26 Jesus Christ was a sacrifice 'whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' Prior sacrifices for sin were only token payments, an IOU, until the coming of Christ as payment for our sins.

So which is it, is this the greatest injustice in human history or the greatest act of justice in human history? And the answer is yes! It is both. This is not something we have made up but what the apostles understood as well, remember their prayer for boldness in Acts 4:27-28, 'for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.' This emphasis on God being sovereign over these events and responsible for His perfect will coming to pass; and yet sinful human beings realizing their own sinfulness without interference is echoed in 2:23, 'this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.'

Although we say as scripture does that both God and sinful man are responsible for the death of Christ, we must make a very important qualification. God is not the author of sin, all that He does is holy, He cannot sin. He is not a 'murderer' though these men who committed the crime are. We affirm what the 1689 chap 3 para 1 says, 'God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather

established; in which appears his wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing his decree.'

We make two very important points here, firstly, that Jesus died according to the will of God. It was not a mistake; it was not plan B. it was not a sign of God's plan derailing and an unwanted and unexpected side effect took place. The cross was a necessity because God planned it. Why did He need to plan it? Because of our sin. God because of His love for us, because He is gracious to us as sinners, and because He is just planned and executed His plan that a sinless substitute would be born, live a perfect life and die in order to make sinners righteous. Jesus Christ died on Easter as a payment for our criminal violation of God's holy law, a law all human beings are obligated to obey. We rejected God as God, as our Lord; as our Creator and Lawgiver, committing the highest acts of treason against the highest of beings. Christ is the only provision God has made for sin to be fully paid for. We cannot pay for sins ourselves; we are not qualified to be our own savior, there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, so God provided all that we need because of His gracious love in Christ. I said earlier that our sin is part of the reason why Christ died. Here we can see this is true. God did not have to solve our sin problem, He could have just decided to act according to His perfect justice and rightly punish us giving our sin all that it deserves. An eternal punishment as eternal souls commit an act against an infinitely holy being. But hear again that verse from Is. 53:5, 'But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.' Because of His goodness He seeks our healing; He seeks our peace. As John 3:16 underlines, God because of His love for us gave His Son as the payment of our sins, not so that we could save ourselves by working but by the act of believing and trusting in Jesus we could receive the undeserved gift of eternal life. These great statements about God causing His plan to come to pass help us to see all the power and planning of God to satisfy His great love for sinners. We shout about the cross as a great demonstration of the justice of God as He makes sure a sufficient payment is made, but do not miss how it is the gracious love of God that is also put on display. To see God's involvement is to see His power, yes, and His justice, yes, but see His love. Eph. 3:14-19, 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

The second point to make is not only do we see the perfect love and justice of God; but the killing of Jesus Christ shows us the horror of human sinfulness. Here we see the Jews, God's own people, who practice biblical religion, who have the word of God, who have the highest and best moral code of all the peoples of that time as they follow the Mosaic law. This is the cream of humanity in terms of religious privilege and holiness, and it is they who have rejected their Savior, turned from the truth of God, and rejected God's gift of righteousness for their own. They collude with the King they rejected—Herod, the religious leaders they hated, and the Roman authorities they despised to commit the greatest sin. Within one week of declaring Jesus the Son of David, they say they have no king but Caesar; the one they welcomed with palm branches they dispatch for

crucifixion with spitting and mocking. It was one of the Puritans who said that if we could pull God down from heaven, kill Him, and rob Him of all His things we would do it. Our sinful hearts if they could avoid the consequences of their actions by doing so would happily rebel against God Himself. The cross is a demonstration of the sinfulness of our human hearts. We do not believe the worst about ourselves, the infinite capacity for sin and self-deception that lies within us, the pointed rebellion against God Himself that we are willing to join in with. The cross lays bare the truth of what our sinful hearts are capable of. And yet God is still willing to save us. It is one thing to walk into a room of people who want to kill you hoping that you can change their minds, it is another going into the same room knowing that they will kill you and you still go willingly because of your desire to save them.

Let us conclude. Who is responsible for killing Jesus? Ultimately God is responsible, Father, Son and Spirit willed to save us; but this because of our sins, so you can think of God as the primary cause and our sin as the indirect cause. But He accomplished this act of Jesus dying by sinner's hands not by doing the act Himself being the author of sin, but the direct means of the free choices of the devil, Judas, Pilate, the Jewish leaders, Herod, the Jewish crowds. This God did through His passive judicial hardening where by leaving sinners to themselves they freely will the sin that is in their own hearts. And all this fulfilling God's perfect will for justice and to satisfy His love for sinners; while the sinners involved put on display the sinfulness of their own hearts. We can say in one sense that the Jews caused it, but not in an anti-semitic way saying that all Jews are responsible but only those who participated. In a sense we can say that our sins were the reason He was there, but not because we twisted God's arm or forced His hand, ultimately we recognize that God because of His love, by His power, as He exercised His sovereignty even over sin has made a way for the impossible to happen, for hell deserving sinners to be saved through Him providing the sufficient payment to pay for our sins. We stand before the cross every Easter with amazement as we affirm that it is the greatest act of injustice and hatred human beings have ever committed, and at the same time it is the greatest act of justice and love God has ever displayed in human history.