Eleanor Catterall Philosophy and World Religions

**The statement, "Jesus of Nazareth was killed by the Romans" and "Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Romans", imply very different theological and political subtexts. With reference to the canonical Gospels, outline why this is the case.**

To the ordinary person, to those not observing such words in this sort of depth, and for those who perhaps have not viewed such words through the lens of the Easter story, there seems to be no apparent difference between *killed* and *crucified;* both verbs connote death and the unnatural, involuntary form of end of life. It is only when we view such words through the execution of Jesus, and more specifically, through the response to this incident of three significant congregations – the Jewish religious elite, the Romans, and the disciples and the crowds – that a considerable contrast is noted. Each of their interpretations, ambitions and motives all play a role in our understanding of what lead to the death of Jesus in such a horrific way. By comparing Jewish Scriptures to New Testament readings, we will explore the character of Jesus of Nazareth, and discover the potential causes of His death.

Before beginning to explore these elements, it is vital we fathom why crucifixion was used during the time of the Roman Empire. Crucifixion is deemed to be the most painful way to die (Retief & Cilliers, 2003). Not only does it inflict torture physically, but also mentally and emotionally, with public humiliation. The Romans used crucifixion specifically for those who were seen as threats to the state. Subsequently, to use the word ‘killed’ is an understatement of the humility and torture experienced, as well as the political uproar which caused it. Similarly, to say ‘Martin Luther King Jr. was killed’ and ‘Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated’ offer very different interpretations, with the first possibly implying death by road collision or an illness, yet the latter indicates a political unrest and revenge filled feud.

Theologically motivated, Jesus was seen as a threat by the Jewish religious elite: the Sadducees, Pharisees and the scribes. These people were considered to be ‘experts in the law’, having studied the Jewish scriptures. As *‘a huge crowd kept following him wherever He went because they saw His miraculous signs as He healed the sick’* (John6:2, NLT), the Jewish religious elite grew ever concerned upon the upheaval this man was creating, claiming to be the Saviour promised in the Hebrew Bible. Yet, Jesus did not match their views of what the longed Messiah was to be like, according to the law. Within 1Corinthians, St. Paul writes *‘And we publicly declare the Messiah who was crucified, who is on the one hand a scandal to the Jews, and on the other, nonsense to Gentiles; but to those who have been called out, both Jewish and Greek, the Messiah is the power and wisdom of God’* (1:23-24). Translated from Greek, the word σκάνδαλο means ‘scandal’, meaning ‘an action or circumstance that leads one to act contrary to a proper course of action or set of beliefs’ (Discovery Bible, 2021). As Paul states, this is how the Jewish religious elite viewed the person of Jesus.

William Barclay suggested in his book, ‘The Letters to the Corinthians’ that four characteristics of Jesus supposedly proved to the Jews that Jesus was not who they had been waiting for (Barclay, 1975).

1. In Jesus they saw one who was meek and lowly. Through the Holy Scriptures, it was believed the Messiah would be strong, having authority over everyone. Yet, in Jesus they saw an individual with a contrasting personality, forgiving all people, and even socialising with them.
2. In Jesus they saw one who deliberately avoided the spectacular. How could such a ‘praise-worthy’ Saviour also humble Himself and His power? Surely the true King would not ride on a donkey, wash the feet of sinners and call the sick and lame to Him to be healed? As Jesus did such things, the religious elite doubted his authenticity to be the so-called King.
3. In Jesus they saw the one who served, rather than being served, even to the point of disobeying the Law. Not only did He heal, comfort, and help the poor, but He did so on the Sabbath, for which He was confronted by the Jewish religious elite and criticised (Luke13:10-17).
4. Ultimately, with Jesus’ life ending on the cross, it was incredible that He could possibly be God’s Chosen One. How could the Messiah, sent by God to save His people, deemed in the religious scriptures to be ‘perfect and holy’, be caught up in the law of the land and as a punishment, die? Deuteronomy21:22-23 tells of how the one who is punishable by death and hung on a tree is ‘cursed by God’. Evidently, the Jewish religious elite were adamant Jesus was not holy, but in fact, cursed.

Supporting Barclay’s points, there are an array of examples in the canonical gospels. Throughout the life of Jesus, we witness times when interpretations of the prophecies of the Messiah did not fit His character (Matt.23, Luke20:1-8, Mark2:13-17). Through Old Testament reading, the teachers of the law expected the Chosen One, to *‘rule over the works of [God’s] hands’* (Ps.8:6)[[1]](#footnote-1), to *‘be a stone that makes people stumble, a rock that makes them fall…a trap and a snare’* (Isa.8:14, NLT), and would be *‘given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and people of every language [would worship] Him’* (Dan.7:14). Yet, they only saw Jesus as a meek and mild individual, who was accepting of all, healed those who were sick, but above-all, He did not recognise these scholars’ authority and how blessed they were.

With the popularity of Jesus growing and many believing this was the Messiah, the religious teachers believed something had to be done; Jesus had to go. Even to this day, believers of the Jewish law see it as impossible that the Messiah would be killed, and in fact proves Jesus of Nazareth is not the Saviour.

The antagonistic attitude of the Jewish religious elite towards Jesus of Nazareth may seem like a mere reaction in comparison to that of the Romans: to end this threat once and for all by crucifying Him. When observing His death through this Roman perspective, we come to realise that theological reasons were not the only cause of His death, but rather there are a multitude of motivations. Although it was through the theology aspect the Jewish religious elite primarily viewed Jesus as a heretical threat, the Romans did not share the same concern. However, the theological concerns of the Jewish elite gave them the impetus to present Jesus to the Romans as a problem politically, which they knew would trouble the Romans greatly. As we have already discovered, the punishment of Roman crucifixion was only used for those seen as a threat to the state, proving that Jesus had unnerved this group by supposedly prompting political unrest within the land of Israel.

Collectively, parts of the four gospels build a scene where Jesus caused political uproar, claiming to be the King and attracting huge crowds. The Jewish religious elite listed their reasons for why Jesus was a threat, which we can learn through Luke: “This man has been leading our people astray telling them not to pay their taxes to the Roman government and by claiming He is the Messiah, a king”’ (Luke23:2, NLT).

So, why crucifixion? Surely there would have been other ways to terminate this man’s life. John19:2-3 offers a possible solution to this grappling issue: ‘The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to Him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!”’. The Romans didn’t just want to hurt, punish or even kill Jesus, but rather (evident by dressing Him as a ‘king’) they wanted to inflict humiliation and mock Him (Did the Romans Keep Records of Crucifixions?, n.d.). In Hebrew6:8, we are able to learn a bit of historical context. ‘But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burnt’. Once again, by being given a crown of thorns, Jesus is portrayed as being cursed, possibly to detract followers. The Roman crucifixion was easily one of the ‘most brutal and shameful’ ways to die (Retief & Cilliers, 2003), and as the scholar Bart Ehrman points out, it was ‘a symbolic statement that WE are Roman power and YOU are nothing’ (Ehrman, 2014).

In the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, we see increasingly a growing number of followers. This group did not share the concerns that motivated the Jewish religious elite or the Romans, but rather they witnessed His power and love in equal measure. Jesus demonstrated His strength (Matt.14:22-33), His mercy (Mark5:1-20) and ‘[these] people were amazed at His teaching because He taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law’ (Mark1:22). To those that had witnessed such characteristics within Jesus, His killing was believed to be unlawful because He was innocent; why should a perfect Saviour be punished for doing no wrong? Jesus had brought these people hope, acceptance and healing. But, above all, Jesus heard and saw each individual who were in those crowds – something which they had never experienced before, so often being used to being dismissed by the highly educated Jewish religious elite; they felt loved and valued.

Upon dying on the cross, it would be an obvious reaction for such followers to be distraught and feel bereft. It is written in Mark15:39, ‘And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”. The same incident in Matthew27:54 is accounted slightly differently, broadening those affected by the experience, explaining it was ‘the centurion and those who were guarding Jesus’. It is evident that the effects of witnessing such an event of Jesus’ crucifixion reached the hearts of many, leading not only His followers, but other witnesses, to conclude that He is the Messiah.

The interpretation of the Bible to a believer today is vastly different to the Jewish religious leaders of the day. ‘At first, His disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise that these things had been written about Him and that these things had been done to Him’ (John12:16). Through theological study and reasoning, it is evident to a Christian believer today that Jesus is the fulfilment of the law. The life of Jesus told within the gospels affirms the view that the Jewish scriptures prophesised the life, the death and the purpose of Jesus: He was sent by God, not only to save the Jewish people, but the world. Whilst the Jewish religious elite and the Romans viewed and portrayed crucifixion as a curse, Christians see Jesus’ crucifixion as an act of grace, redeeming mankind from sin, and restoring their relationship with God. Isaiah53 prophesises the Messiah to be a ‘suffering servant’, and St. Paul, an early Christian and former Pharisee, writes in his letter to the Romans, ‘You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Romans5:6-8).

As stipulated in my introduction, to say ‘Jesus of Nazareth was killed by the Romans’ is inadequate as it does not convey the extent of physical pain, as well as emotional pain through humiliation, that would have accompanied His death. Rather, replacing the verb with ‘crucified’ infers a politic upheaval, wrong-doing and a threat to the state: an intricate story which led to the death of Christ. Upon exploring such history involved with this unique case, we can conclude that there was a vast array of beliefs concerning the person of Jesus and how His teaching was to be dealt with. Yet, one thing that remains common throughout is the certainty that Jesus was crucified for a reason, whether that be theologically, politically, or socially motivated.

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced from here on employ the New International Version (Biblica: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)