

JESUS' TRIAL ACCUSATION AND THE ROUTE TO THE SKULL

Some may wonder what crime it was that led to Jesus of Nazareth to be killed by the Romans by the horrible means of crucifixion. What was the charge that was brought by the Jews before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, about Jesus? The charge was of the allegation of kingship over the Jews. This was a serious allegation since only Caesar had the authority to make a person a king over any territory within the Empire. Jesus was in the end sentenced to be crucified based on this charge. We will delve into the law that Jesus allegedly broke and also provide some historical context to give readers a better picture of the circumstances under which Jesus was charged and crucified.

Though this tract is focused mainly on the accusation that caused Jesus to be sentenced to death by crucifixion, we will start with a brief discussion of another accusation that was made against Jesus by the Jewish priests in their Sanhedrin. That accusation was of 'blasphemy', an accusation that aroused the Jewish assembly against Jesus who spoke many things against the traditions of the written law of the book of Moses. Read Matthew 26:57, 61 to 66: *"And they that had laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled ... And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days. And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee? But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death."* From the preceding verses, we read that the high priests and elders wanted Jesus to be put to death on the charge of blasphemy because their religious law required death for this offense as can be read in Leviticus 24:15, 16a: *"And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin. And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him..."*

Christians should know that Jesus would never blaspheme God in any way. The Jewish priests, elders and scribes, who did not accept Jesus to be the Christ of God, considered it blasphemous for this man or for any man to say *"I am able to destroy the temple of God."* They did not understand that Jesus was speaking about the temple of his own body. Besides this, it was blasphemous to claim to be the Messiah, or the Christ, the Son of the living God. See Mark 14:61, 62a, 63, 64: *"But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of*

the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am ... Then the high priest rent his clothes, and saith, What need we any further witnesses? Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye? And they all condemned him to be guilty of death." It was a unanimous decision that Jesus should be put to death for blasphemy. However, there was still one obstacle and that was they did not have the authority to put Jesus to death themselves given Israel was under Roman control. The Romans would consider the charge of blasphemy an internal religious problem, that is, it was not in violation of Roman law and would not warrant the death of Jesus. Thus, the Jewish leaders needed to contrive an accusation that would subject Jesus to be put to death by the ruling Romans. Seeing that Jesus claimed to be the Christ, that made him 'King of the Jews' although only in the spiritual sense. Anyone claiming to be a king of any kind without Caesar's authority would violate Roman law and was punishable by death. This was the accusation they could use to condemn Jesus and it was the one brought before Pontius Pilate.

The statement of Jesus' crime was written on a tablet over his head on the cross. The inscription of the words on the tablet was "REX JUDAEORUM", which is Latin for 'King of the Jews'. All the Gospels give evidence of this inscription: ***"And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS."*** Luke 23:38. See also Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26 and John 19:19. To claim to be king of a province or territory that was under Roman rule and law was high treason under the "LEX JULIA MAIESTATIS" which was enacted by Caesar in 46 B.C. and re-enacted by Augustus in 8 B.C. It was a capital offense for such a crime caused injury to the majesty of the emperor, or "CRIMEN LAESAE MAIESTATIS". The tablet that proclaimed the crime of the person being crucified was usually worn dangling from the neck of the prisoner during the procession of the criminal bearing his cross from the place of his imprisonment to the place of his crucifixion. It may appear from the wording of the gospel that Jesus' tablet was not written until he was upon the cross, however, this is not necessarily so. The Romans were very strict about protocol, therefore, Jesus, in all probability, wore the tablet to the place of his execution even though the tablet is not mentioned until it was placed over his head on the cross. As for Pilate, he would not have been at the crucifixion site, nor would he have been in the procession of Jesus that took him to the crucifixion site. John 19:19 may seem to conflict with our previous statement as it reads: ***"And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross, and the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS."*** This verse does not literally mean that Pilate printed the inscription on the wooden or clay tablet himself, nor that he went to the site of crucifixion to nail or tie the tablet to the cross. Being the Roman governor, he would not have carried out these menial chores himself. Pilate would have ordered what accusation remarks were to be written and displayed by a subordinate so that all who passed by may know the crime of which Jesus was being punished, thereby, being a deterrent to others.

The crime described on the tablet was always written in the language of the country of origin, the common language of the empire and the Roman language which was Latin. The gospel verifies this Roman custom. From Luke 23:38: ***"And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew."*** See also John 19:20.

All four gospel writers agree that the written accusation charge against Jesus was for claiming to be 'KING OF THE JEWS'. Jesus spoke little in defense of himself, and he never denied the charges made against him. ***"And Pilate asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answered him and said, Thou sayest it."*** Luke 23:3. See also John 18:33, Mark 15:2 and Matthew 27:11.

After the interrogation, Pilate did not see any wrong in Jesus and wanted to release him: ***"And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him..."*** John 19:12a. But the chief priests and scribes of the Jews knew Roman law and subtly threatened Pontius Pilate: ***"... but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou are not Caesar's friend; whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth..."*** John 19:12b, 13a.

There was no choice for Pilate: if he did not sentence Jesus, the Jews could go to Rome to report this treasonable act allegedly committed by Jesus to Caesar, and could also report that Pilate wanted to release him. Then Pilate himself could be called to Rome to stand accountable for not fulfilling his duties as a Roman governor of a man charged with a treasonable act, of which the accused never denied. ***"Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born..."*** John 18:37a. The scriptures are clear as to what charge was being brought against Jesus under Roman law. Pilate could not ignore that Jesus did not deny being a king, even though Jesus was not referring to being a king over territory.

To provide additional historical background for readers, a group of four Roman legionnaires were picked for escorting each prisoner for a public parading through the town or city where the person was imprisoned to the place of execution outside the city or town walls. Every execution was a process that was carried out meticulously. Each stage of the execution was performed under the authority and oversight of the military, from the scourging of the prisoner, to the guarding of the crucified person upon the cross. The customary number of soldiers detailed as guards were four and that is what the Bible describes for Jesus' own crucifixion. ***"Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part..."*** John 19:23a.

All prisoners were made to carry their cross-piece ('patibulum' in Latin) during the journey to the crucifixion site. The prisoners would be bound by

rope to the cross piece with arms out-stretched or sometimes they were privileged to carry the transverse without binding. In the case of Jesus, it is believed he was allowed to carry his cross-piece without being bound to it and we know he did not carry it the full distance to the crucifixion site, probably because of weakness induced by the severe punishment received – see Matthew 27:30 to 32.

The busiest streets and roads were used by the Roman authorities for the prisoner processions so that the local residents would see the punished prisoner and it may serve as a deterrent to others from committing the crime cited on the tablet worn by the cross-bearing victim. Fabius Quintilian, the famous Spanish-born teacher, orator and writer, praised the public crucifixions of criminals: ***"When we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this fear."*** Quintilian's quote gives confirmation to Luke's account: ***"And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him."*** Luke 23:27. Many people seen Jesus as he was escorted to the crucifixion site.

When the prisoner procession reached the place of execution, the upright timber in most instances would have already been placed in the ground waiting for the arrival of the victim. The contingent of soldiers who escorted the prisoners were permitted the spoils worn by the condemned men. The condemned were disrobed of their garments which would then be divided amongst the attending soldiers – this practice was described in John 19:23, 24. Upon disrobing, the victim would be made to lie down and stretch out his arms on the cross-piece (patibulum). His hands would then be nailed or tied to the patibulum, then the cross-piece would be lifted up and set upon the stake forming the letter "T".

Some historians are of the opinion that a groove would be chiseled out just below the top of the stake, of which the cross piece was lifted into, forming what is referred to as the 'Latin' cross (like a lower case "t"). From our perspective, it is irrelevant whether the patibulum or stake was chiseled out to form a Latin cross or the transverse beam was just set upon the stake to form the "T" cross.

We hope that the reader has a better understanding of the circumstances under which the Lord Jesus was crucified, including his alleged crime and aspects of the Roman process of execution. From our study, we have shown that his crime was for being 'King of the Jews' even though this was no threat to the ruling Caesar since Jesus was only a king in the spiritual sense.