

Death of Jesus Christ

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The death of Jesus is a historical event to which a theological significance has been assigned that still provokes new reflection. A reconstruction of the historical events surrounding Jesus' death is fraught with questions and debates. The theological significance of his death has been variously articulated in the Christian tradition. Contemporary reflections engage with tradition and question it, in part offering new and critical perspectives.

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1. The course of events surrounding Jesus' death

Jesus' death on the cross is hardly questioned historically and, according to James Dunn ^{GND}, belongs to the surest facts of his life. ^[1] However, the course of events surrounding his death is difficult to reconstruct. ^[2] The first question is whether the gospels contain sufficient memories of the events to allow for their reconstruction. According to critical researchers such as John Dominic Crossan ^{GND} and Helmut Koester ^{GND}, the gospels do not take the events as their starting point, but passages and prophecies from the Old Testament. The events are told in such a way that they constitute a fulfilment of those passages. The garments divided from Psalm 22:18, the darkness at noon from Amos 8:9, and the vinegar drink from Psalm 69:21 are examples in case, which do not refer to what actually occurred but are mentioned as events because Jesus' death took place according to the Scriptures. ^[3]

If a historical reconstruction of Jesus' last days is considered possible, this requires a critical study of the gospels, which raises important questions. ^[4] Crucial to the question of Jesus' death is the question of who condemned him to death and why. Possibly the Sanhedrin, the highest administrative and judicial court that dealt with Jewish affairs, imposed the death penalty on Jesus. However, it is questionable whether the Sanhedrin had legal authority to do so. It is possible that Jesus was merely interrogated. Several political and theological reasons are given for any condemnation of Jesus by the Sanhedrin. He was possibly considered a political danger; his prophecy about the

temple may have been considered blasphemy, or conflicts over the Sabbath and his claim to be the Messiah were the reason. [Hans Lietzmann](#) ^{GND} defended the influential and controversial thesis that although the Sanhedrin imposed death sentences, Jesus' interrogation and condemnation by the Sanhedrin never took place and were fictitious because he was not actually executed by the Sanhedrin but by Roman authorities. ^[5]

The execution of Jesus was eventually carried out under the responsibility of Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, but the question is whether he did so because he saw Jesus as a political insurgent posing as king of the Jews, or because he only wanted to give effect to a condemnation by the Sanhedrin, or because he was influenced by the people who wanted the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus. The extent to which the gospels attribute responsibility for Jesus' death to the Jewish authorities, the Romans, or the people is strongly coloured by their theological views and the changing historical situation in which the evangelists and their sources find themselves, before or after the destruction of the temple, with more or less emphasis on distance from other Jewish groups, and with more or less rapprochement with Hellenistic converts. The accusation that the Jews crucified Christ constituted a Christian anti-Semitic archetypal myth, which has been used for millennia to justify anti-Jewish violence (cf. art. Antisemitism/Antijudaism [Philosophy of Religion]).

2. The theological significance of Jesus' death

Theologically, Jesus' death is variously interpreted already in the New Testament. ^[6] His death can be considered the fatal consequence of his preaching about the coming Kingdom of God. It is also perceived as an act of God abandoning his Son to suffering. In communion with God, Jesus takes on that suffering for the salvation of human beings.

Jesus' death can be seen as an end point and completion of his mission to bring humans to live in the presence of God and in obedience to God's commandment. It counts as a dying for his friends in the sphere of personal communion (John 15:13). Jesus' death can also be seen as the death of a martyr or a suffering righteous one. As the last of the prophets (cf. art. Prophecy) and God's servant par excellence, he completes the sufferings of his people (Mt 23:30–31). It can also be described as a ransom (Mark 10:45), referring to the release of prisoners or slaves, and it can be seen as a sacrifice in the sphere of cult. As a sacrifice, Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), establishing a new covenant through his blood (Mark 14:24).

[Gustav Aulén](#) ^{GND} distinguished three main types of theories in church history that elaborate on salvation through Jesus' death. ^[7] In the early church, the ransom theory predominated, saying that Christ overcame the powers of sin, death, and the devil. This theory is often developed narratively. Because of their sin, humans fell into the power of the devil, but Jesus offers himself as a ransom in return for which humans are set free. In the resurrection, the devil is left empty-handed because he is defeated or tricked out by Jesus. In the Latin West, the satisfaction theory (cf. art. Atonement Theory) became dominant, based on the work of Anselm of Canterbury. Because of their sin, people are guilty towards God, whom they have robbed of his honour. They must return what was robbed, plus a surplus as a means to satisfaction. Since everything they have belongs to God, they cannot provide for satisfaction. It is given by Christ, who in death offers his life to God, without owing that death because of his divinity and sinlessness. Whereas the ransom price was paid to the devil, satisfaction must be given to God.

In Calvinist theology, satisfaction is interpreted to mean that through his suffering, Jesus bears the punishment of God that people had earned. ^[8] His punitive suffering suffices for God to forgive humans (cf. art. Forgiveness [Systematic Theology]). Against satisfaction theories, the moral-example theory of [Peter Abelard](#) ^{GND} applies as an alternative. God does not ask for satisfaction but is full of love (cf. art. Love of God/ Love for God). Jesus dies as the demonstration of God's love, intended to change humans' attitude, turning them back to God. Satisfaction theories emphasise the objective meaning of Jesus' death for the restoration of good relations, whereas Abelard stresses its subjective importance for the conversion of human beings. According to [Aulén](#) ^{GND}, [Luther's](#) ^{GND} views fit neither

objective nor subjective views but rather align with the classical type of ransom theory. Typical for Luther is the idea that God in Christ undergoes death and overcomes what God undergoes. In faith, we are so united to Christ that a joyful exchange takes place in which Christ's righteousness becomes ours and our sins are Christ's. ^[9]

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, under the influence of enlightenment, the meaning of Jesus' death is largely stripped of mythical or narrative imagery. According to Kant ^{GND}, Christ represents the ideal of morally perfect humanity. A God-pleasing human being fulfils its duties (cf. art. Duty), will spread goodness as far as possible, and even take on a humiliating death for the sake of the world. ^[10] According to Schleiermacher ^{GND}, Christ, through his God-consciousness, is the archetype of human piety. His death has no special function but shows that even suffering and death do not affect his God-consciousness. ^[11] Hegel ^{GND} links the death of Jesus via a speculative Good Friday to the death of God, who is thereby no longer thought of as God outside and above us, but as spirit in its congregation. ^[12]

In twentieth-century theology, the meaning of the cross and Jesus' death was taken up again. The question was debated whether the event of the crucifixion has meaning in itself and can be taken as an act of salvation, or whether it needs the resurrection to be interpreted as meaningful and salvific. Bultmann ^{GND} argued that the resurrection is a mythological event that, as an objective fact, is inconceivable and meaningless. It should not be taken as an additional event but as an expression of the meaning of the cross. The message of the cross challenges human beings to die with Christ and give up their old selves and their inauthentic existence in order to live authentically and be open to God's future. In this, believers rise up, and their faith expresses itself in the story of the resurrection to explain itself. ^[13]

Opposed to Bultmann, Barth ^{GND} argued that the resurrection is a real additional event, albeit not a describable or verifiable one in the historical sense. ^[14] The resurrection was a wholly unique event that was exclusively an act of God without human witnesses reporting the facts. According to Barth, the resurrection is God's great yes to humans. In Christ, God took up the cause of humanity and established it, thereby reconciling the world to Godself (cf. art. Reconciliation [Systematic Theology]). Christ is God, humbling himself to humanity in obedience to God, judging humanity by judging himself, taking death upon him in their place. The resurrection denotes God's recognition of Christ's death as a means of reconciliation and God's acceptance of humanity in Christ. ^[15]

Pannenberg ^{GND} interpreted the resurrection as a real historical event, anticipating the end of history, which allows us to grasp reality as a whole. Jesus' death was the result of the conflict between his message and the existing religious and political powers. In the resurrection, God vindicated Jesus, thereby disclosing Godself. ^[16]

These interpretations clearly distance themselves from the tendency toward the misconception that God is a bloodthirsty deity who requires an atoning sacrifice for reconciliation. A contrasting interpretation was put forward, especially by Moltmann ^{GND}, who argued that Jesus, in solidarity with suffering human beings, asks why God has forsaken him. Consequently, God is not the one demanding death and suffering, but in Christ, God is the one who takes death and suffering upon Godself. The resurrection, which must be understood as God's promise of hope to the world, constitutes a contradiction to the world in its present state. According to Moltmann, what happened on the cross must be understood as a Trinitarian event (cf. art. Trinity) between God and the Son of God, in which the opposition of humans to God leads to a contradiction in God, which is overcome by love. ^[17]

3. New and critical perspectives

In contemporary theology, there are very divergent views on Jesus' death. Traditions are both continued and criticised. Critical interpretations can be illustrated by a number of authors with impact.

In feminist theology, patriarchal prejudices of classical theology are exposed, criticised, and corrected. Jesus' death on the cross can be considered a critique of patriarchy because his death testifies to the opposite of dominant male

power, of which he became a victim. However, his surrender and self-denial to the point of death can be taken as a damaging example as well, encouraging women to self-denial. From this perspective, Delores S. Williams ^{GND} sharply criticises the idea of substitution.^[18] The death of Jesus for us or in our place, as implied in many atonement theories, legitimised the subjugation of Black women, who often had to serve as surrogates: as mammies in the upbringing of white children, as objects of lust of their masters, and as women who had to take over the empty place of disappeared or lynched fathers, brothers, and husbands. For these women, the slave Hagar is the biblical symbol par excellence. As a slave, she replaces Sarah to provide Abraham with offspring, but she is sent into the wilderness as a single mother because of Sarah's jealousy. The wilderness experience, in which Black women are left to fend for themselves, can lead to a reassertion of one's own dignity in the struggle for survival and the formation of new relationships to sustain family and community. From this experience, Williams reimagines Jesus as the one sent by the Spirit of God (cf. art. Holy Spirit) so that people may have life and abundance.

René Girard ^{GND} elaborated a cultural-historical theory centred on mimetic desire and the scapegoat theory.^[19] Mimetic desire assumes that humans are empathetic beings who can sympathise with others. Therefore, they can also imitate them and covet what they desire. From this arises a competition that may lead to social conflicts, culminating in a mimetic crisis. In such a crisis, humans unite by identifying and victimising a scapegoat, causing the upheaval. The scapegoat becomes the object both of contempt, for creating unrest, and of veneration, since peace comes from his death. According to Girard, in biblical literature, the scapegoat mechanism is unmasked and broken because the victim, Abel for example and Jesus par excellence, is explicitly innocent, revealing to humans that their culture rests on the murder of the scapegoat. Jesus' resurrection reveals that God identifies with the victim. Girard's conceptions consequently deny sacrifice as a necessity for atonement. According to Luke 10:18, Jesus sees Satan (cf. art. Devil) falling like a flash of lightning. According to Girard's theory, Satan falls when humans understand that Satan incites them to see Satan in innocent scapegoats. Girard's conceptions thus imply a reinterpretation of Jesus sacrificial death by criticising sacrificial theories.

John D. Caputo ^{GND} argues that Jesus' dying is often presented in theology as a victory.^[20] In hidden ways, a master plan of God behind the cross leads to victory and glory. Caputo, on the contrary, sees the cross as a suitable symbol for the cosmos, which is finite and will disappear. From the cosmos, and especially from Jesus' death, emanates a call for more and better life. This call cannot be deconstructed or relativised, but has no sovereignty or power. It neither exists but insists. The call, insistent in the finite cosmos, can be named God, without God being identifiable. As God insists in the cosmos, God will disappear with the cosmos, as symbolised by the death of Christ. However, cross and cosmos contain a difficult glory, which is the glory of life itself, in which we entrust ourselves to the powerless power of a story of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. Jesus preached and embodied this story in his life and death.

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