



Latter-day Saint
Reflections
on the
Trial and Death
of Jesus

by John W. Welch

NO SEQUENCE OF EVENTS IN LEGAL HISTORY HAS PROVEN M
ALL THAT TRANSPIRED FROM THE TIME THAT JESUS WAS ARRE
THE TIME HE WAS TAKEN AND CRUCIFIED ON A SMALL OUTC

Of the numerous things that could be said about the so-called trial and the death of Jesus, I want to emphasize 10 personal reflections. These 10 points center around two perplexing questions: Why was Jesus killed? and Who was responsible? As the world marks the 2,000th birthday of Jesus Christ, it would seem especially appropriate to think about his death, since “for this cause came [he] into the world” (John 18:37).

REFLECTION 1 | Latter-day Saints and all people should approach this subject with humility and cautiousness. It will long remain impossible to give a definitive description of the so-called “trial of Jesus.” Too little is known today about the laws and legal procedures that would have been followed in Jerusalem during the second quarter of the first century A.D., and too little is known about all that was done so long ago for any modern person to speak with any degree of certainty about the legal technicalities of this case. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie has written, “There is no divine *ipse dixit*, no voice from an archangel, and as yet no revealed latter-day account of all that transpired when God’s own Son suffered himself to be judged by men so that he could voluntarily give up his life upon the cross” (Bruce

R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981], 4:142). We are usually more glib about this subject than we intellectually or spiritually ought to be.

REFLECTION 2 | What is it that makes it so hard to be definitive about the trial of Jesus? Many things contribute to our perplexities. As just one example, we would like to know more about the legal rules followed by the Sanhedrin in Jesus’ day. Of course, we know much about Rabbinic law from the Talmud, but the Talmud was written later, from the second to the fifth centuries A.D., by the Pharisees or their successors, and so the Talmud presumably reflects the rules preferred by the late Pharisaic movement. Moreover, the Pharisees were not in control of the Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus; the Sadducees were decidedly in the majority. And we know that the Sadducees and Pharisees differed on a number of points of law.

We also wonder: Did they or didn’t they really have the authority to execute someone in a case like that of Jesus? The chief priests said to Pilate, “To us is not allowed to kill no one,” as the Greek reads in John 18:31, but we do not know why they lacked such authorization or why they

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would say this. Many possibilities come to mind. Perhaps they said this because no valid conviction had been reached allowing execution under their own law. Perhaps they were showing voluntary deference to Pilate. Or perhaps they simply needed Pilate's ratification. In any event, it would appear that Jewish people under Roman governance did have power, or at least took the power, to execute people on some occasions, as we see in attempts to kill Jesus in Nazareth or in the case of the woman taken in adultery, or in the deaths of Stephen or John the Baptist, none of which involved Roman authorities.

For reasons like these, it is hard to speak with any degree of certitude about the technicalities, especially any alleged illegalities, in the proceedings involving Jesus. Parenthetically, Protestants in the late 19th century so exaggerated the alleged illegalities that their analyses backfired, and many people concluded that such a fiasco or travesty of justice simply had to be a myth.

More difficulties arise from the significant differences between the four Gospels. John's account is very different from the accounts in the synoptic Gospels, and even between the synoptics significant legal differences exist. For example, did the council meet at night, as Matthew and Mark say (which probably would have been illegal), or did they meet only when day came, as in Luke (where that alleged illegality does not arise)? Or what about John, who mentions the council only before the arrest, never after? Matthew and Mark seem to place the ultimate burden on the Romans,

since it must have been Roman soldiers who led Jesus away into the Praetorium (Mark 15:16); but in John, Pilate gives Jesus back to the Jews "and *they* [the Jews it would seem] took Jesus" (John 19:16) and directed the crucifixion with Pilate's acquiescence.

Harmonizing these four Gospel accounts is possible, but only if one is willing to ignore their different purposes and irreconcilable jurisprudential details. Latter-day Saints are usually not troubled by the technical differences between these four New Testament accounts, but some people are. Jews, especially, are interested in how these texts are interpreted, because the trial of Jesus has been a major cause of antisemitism over the ages. In direct response to that antisemitism, which fueled the Holocaust, Jewish scholars have passionately argued that the Jews had nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus but that the Romans were completely responsible.

Latter-day Saints accept various versions of important events that do not always agree with each other. We live with four accounts of the Creation, three versions of the Sermon on the Mount, and several accounts of the First Vision. Latter-day Saints also appreciate that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each had different purposes and various audiences. For example, when writing to the Greeks, Luke never mentions any accusation of blasphemy, which to a Greek would not be consequential. (Indeed, in Greek, blasphemy can simply mean rude speech, and, thus, interestingly, in Luke it is the captors

who blaspheme, that is, speak insolently to Jesus.) Matthew, whose purpose is often to show how Jesus prevailed over the Pharisees, is the only Gospel writer to tell the story of the chief priests and Pharisees asking Pilate to secure the tomb in which Jesus was buried, but to no avail.

REFLECTION 3 | Even more problematical is the difficulty of determining intent. Why did any of them do it? *Why* was Jesus killed? Even today, the greatest challenge in modern courts of law is trying to prove a person's intent. Scholarly prudence and Christian charity behoove us to withhold casting any aspersions and to follow a more cautious, sensitive approach as we attempt to ferret out the motives of Caiaphas, the chief priests, or Pilate.

Actually, one may scan the four New Testament Gospels and find precious few explicit indications of what actually motivated any of these people. We may guess, of course, but our guesses are speculations. We may attribute to these people a wide range of political, commercial, social, personal, religious, or legalistic motives; but in most cases the motives that seem the most plausible *to us* stem from our own retrojections. Thus, it should not surprise us that scholars of the terrorist-bitten 1970s were quite confident that Jesus was executed as some kind of supposed guerrilla terrorist, while some post-Holocaust Jewish scholars of the 1950s argued that Caiaphas and his temple guards actually took Jesus kindly into protective custody to warn him about the Romans who were out to get him.



The chief priests [sought] Jesus' death after the raising of Lazarus.

Obviously, such theories are in tune with the sources of angst of the people who have propounded them.

Latter-day Saints are not immune from such inclinations. According to Ernest L. Wilkinson in 1966, the cause of the atrocious death of Jesus was none other than the concentration of "legislative, executive and judicial powers . . . in one unit, . . . in the Great Sanhedrin," in which Wilkinson expressly saw the ominous specter of Communism.

More commonly, Latter-day Saints assert that Israel's judges were motivated by hate. In 1915 the work of James E. Talmage portrayed the Sanhedrists as being galvanized against Jesus by "malignant," "inherent and undying hatred" (James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 627, 637). But the word *hate* is not found in any of the trial narratives per se.

Specifically regarding the motives of these Jews, Matthew and Mark only say that Pilate could tell "that the chief priests had delivered [Jesus to him] out of *envy*" (Mark 15:10); but notice that this is hearsay. And how did anyone know what Pilate was thinking? In any event, the word *envy* is not particularly antagonistic. It connotes jealous resentment of someone else's wisdom or good fortune, but scarcely does this common human emotion amount to lethal hatred.

Pilate's motivations are equally obscure. Some people see Pilate as a weak, incompetent, middle-management functionary who had recently lost his power base in Rome, who was easily intimidated, and who was manipulated by his wife. But this same Pilate, who usually resided in Caesarea and may have been cautious in handling Jesus in Jerusalem, still held in his hands the highest legal power of Rome in the area. He had not hesitated on other occasions to assert himself, even with military force. Having tried in several ways to get the chief priests to drop their complaint against Jesus, Pilate saw that nothing was working but "that rather a tumult was made" (Matt. 27:24). Physical violence—a riot—was erupting. When he tried to placate the crowd by giving them Barabbas as a "secure pledge," Pilate may have acted out of desperation, fear for his own safety, or equally out of hope that the crowd would disperse and leave Jesus alone. In fact, in the Joseph Smith Translation, Pilate *tells* the Jews to leave Jesus alone.

Returning to the point about hate, the Gospel of John makes it clear that *the world* (not just Pilate or the chief priests) would misunderstand, reject, and hate Jesus, just as it would also hate all of his true disciples. Jesus said: "But me [the world] hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil" (John 7:7); "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it

hated you" (John 15:18), for "I am not of the world" (John 17:14). In the cosmic conflict presented in the Gospel of John, this worldly hate of truth is the theological opposite of divine love; but that antipathy is too broad to provide a legal motive for killing Jesus, for it applies to all people, both then and now, who reject Jesus in any way, personally as well as legally.

In response to the question Of what crime was Jesus accused? there also is no simple answer. Blasphemy, sedition, encouraging tax protesters, and declaring himself a king are all mentioned, but none of these charges really stuck. But then, we are told that Jesus was arrested as a robber, and such outlaws were given no legal rights, let alone a Miranda warning or a formal arraignment. Even Pilate had to ask, "What is it these men accuse you of?" No one ever gave a straight answer. The Gospels in the end simply say that he was accused of "*many* things" (Matthew 27:13; Mark 15:3-4), leaving the legal issue intentionally vague, reminding us that precise, modern pleading practices were not necessarily followed in the ancient world.

The situation is very complicated. It is no wonder that uncertainty was a common reaction of the people to Jesus. At the conclusion of his temple speech on the Feast of Tabernacles, John says, "There was a division among the people because of him" (John 7:43). "Some said, He is a good man:

others said, Nay; but he deceiveth the people. Howbeit no man spake openly of him for fear of the Jews” (John 7:12–13).

REFLECTION 4 | When people get confused, they often become afraid. When they become afraid, they act irrationally. Although the factor of fear is rarely mentioned by commentators, fear provides the driving undercurrent that best explains the irregularities and vagaries of the so-called trial of Jesus. His trial was not a rational affair. Fear played a much larger role than we have stopped to realize. Sooner or later, *everyone* is afraid.

People who were sympathetic to Jesus were afraid of the Jewish leaders. The disciples fled from the scene of the arrest out of great fear. Even the powerful Joseph of Arimathea kept his loyalty to Jesus secret “for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38).

The chief priests also were deeply afraid. They worried that if Jesus became too popular, the Romans would come and take away “our place [the holy city, the temple, or the land] and nation” (John 11:48). But more than that, they feared Jesus. Mark 11:18 clearly states that after Jesus denounced the temple as a den of robbers, they “sought how they might destroy him: *for they feared him.*”

Their scheme to destroy him, however, seems to have gone quickly awry. After he was arrested, Jesus was treated like a hot potato, being passed spasmodically from one hand to another—hands “of *frightened* subordinates whose plans had gone astray,” as law professor Dallin H. Oaks wrote in 1969—with no one wanting to take the rap for either his death or his release.

They were not the only ones who were frightened of Jesus. When Pilate heard the words “he has made himself the son of God,” his reaction was fear. John states that Pilate “was the more afraid” (John 19:8). Even Herod the fox was said to fear the crowd.

Moreover, Golgotha, that scene of gruesome death, was a theater of fear. The centurion and those with him, when they felt the earth quake, “feared exceedingly” about what they had done. Phobias are everywhere in this story—far more than people usually think.

REFLECTION 5 | What were these people so afraid of? Above all, they were deeply afraid of the supernatural. Although the followers of Jesus accepted his miracles as manifestations of divine power, those who did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God found those wondrous works disturbing. A common reaction to the miracles of Jesus was fear, for if Jesus worked not by the power of God, he must have been possessed by “Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils” (Mark 3:22).

In Matthew 9 we read that Jesus healed a man who had been paralyzed by some kind of stroke. The King James Version of the Bible says that when the people saw this “they marvelled”; but the original Greek says that “they were afraid” (Matt. 9:8). When the multitude saw Jesus raise the son of the widow in Nain and heard the young man speak, their reaction again was sheer terror: “And there came a fear on all,” reads Luke 7:16. Fear of the extraordinary powers of Jesus, which nonbelievers saw as coming from the realm of the occult, explains much that transpired in his trials.

Personal manifestations of miracles or the glorious appearance of supernatural beings would probably evoke fear in most of us. The first words of an angel to Zacharias were, “Fear not.” Mary was told by Gabriel, “Fear not” (Luke 1:30), as were the shepherds in the fields. Even the apostles ran from the angel at the tomb, trembling, “for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). When those disciples had assembled, the resurrected Lord’s first words to them were, “Be not afraid” (Matthew 28:10).

Imagine trying to arrest Jesus. The chief priests could not have undertaken this venture lightly and must have steeled themselves against the unexpected. Jesus was known to have amazing powers. He was a new Moses, and the chief priests were well aware of what Moses had done to Pharaoh and his army. Some of the chief priests had been involved in the attempt to stone Jesus when he “hid himself . . . , going right through the midst of them,” and escaped undetected (John 8:59). With Jesus known as something of an escape artist, people had their hands full trying to take him at the height of his power. It is no

wonder they needed to enlist the assistance of one of his closest followers.

If Jesus had the power to command loaves and fishes, to still the waves, to wither fig trees, and to order evil spirits, what powers might he use in defense of himself and his apostles? The raising of Lazarus, only a few days earlier, just over the hill from Jerusalem, brought Jesus' powers too close to the Holy City. It was then that the chief priests and Pharisees gathered in a council and said, "What do we [do]? for this man doeth many miracles" (John 11:47). This disclosure tells us that the deep root of their concerns was the fact that Jesus worked many miracles. If they were not miracles from God, then Jesus had to be some kind of trickster or sorcerer. Coupling these powers with what they considered to be his incantation against the temple (Mark 14:58) yields a potent formula for fear and trepidation and the need to strike quickly.

Even at his arrest, Jesus continued to call upon his miraculous powers. Jesus told Peter, "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53); and when Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus "touched his ear, and healed him" (Luke 22:51). Anyone in the group of arresters hearing or seeing these things must have been stunned. Moving forward must not have been easy.

Supernatural factors continue to play a dominant role up to the end of Jesus' life. People witnessing his crucifixion wondered if Jesus could save himself; they waited to see if the miracle-working Elijah would rescue him from the cross. Although that did not happen, the rocks split apart, graves opened, and holy spirits came forth out of the ground after Jesus' death (Matthew 27:51–53).

Behind everything lurked a strong undercurrent of fear, misplaced fear, that Jesus was an evil magician. In a significant revelation from the Book of Mormon, an angel announces that Jesus Christ would go about "working mighty miracles, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, [and] cast[ing] out . . . evil spirits" (Mosiah 3:3); but "even after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil, and

shall scourge him, and shall crucify him" (Mosiah 3:9). In the Book of Mormon, this is the proximate cause of the death of Jesus: not that he was a political threat, and not that some people disagreed with his doctrines, but that certain key people considered him to be of the devil. Latter-day Saints can relate. In 1879 an article appeared in the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* comparing the death of Jesus to that of the Prophet Joseph Smith. In both cases, the "chief crime was that he obtained revelations from heaven." In both cases, divine power had been mistaken for magic.

Indeed, the chief priests worried to the bitter end that Jesus, whom they called a "trickster" (*planos*), would rise after three days, as he had prophesied. They worried that this, his last trick (*planē*), would be worse than his first. Their concern confirms the Book of Mormon text. Indeed, the word *planos*, in other early texts such as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Sybilline Oracles, can mean especially one who deceives through evil powers or spirits and fools even the elect through nature miracles, including churning up the sea or raising the dead. Obviously, being a *planos* could raise serious legal and religious concerns.

REFLECTION 6 | Was it possible that sorcery and necromancy could be considered criminal conduct in Jesus' day? Of course, certain forms of magic and wizardry were not legally problematical under the law at that time. Magicians such as Simon the Magician (see Acts 8:9) and Theudas, another wonder worker (see Acts 5:36), seemed to walk the streets freely. But when magic was used for improper purposes, it was severely punished.

Biblical law prohibited sorcery, soothsaying, and necromancy. Some knowledge of sorcery was even "a requirement to be appointed a member of the Sanhedrin," presumably so that such cases could be properly prosecuted. Leviticus 20:27 provides: "A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death." We have here the same words, "being worthy of death," that are used in Matthew and Mark to condemn Jesus as worthy of death. Having a

familiar spirit refers to "calling out of the earth" or conversing with the spirits of the dead (might one think of Lazarus?). Being a wizard has to do with giving signs or wonders, and Deuteronomy 13:1 made it a capital offense to use signs or miracles to pervert or lead people into apostasy. To some, the case of Jesus could easily, although erroneously, have presented a *prima facie* case of such conduct warranting the death penalty.

Likewise, Roman law at the time of Jesus outlawed certain forms of spell-casting or divination and made them punishable by death. In A.D. 11 Augustus Caesar himself issued an edict forbidding mantics from prophesying about a person's death. Such conduct had become a serious political and social problem in the Roman world. The main thrust of Augustus' decree was to expand the law of *maiestas*, which had long punished people who harmed the state by actions, to now include treasonous divination, especially augury directed against the imperial family. This "empire-wide imperial legislation circumscribed astrological and other divinatory activities everywhere," and we know of about one hundred trials for *maiestas* from the time of Tiberius alone. Later Roman law would specify that the punishment for enchanters or spell binders was crucifixion.

This is not to say that Jesus was crucified for predicting the death of Tiberius Caesar or anyone else, but it may explain why the chief priests thought they could get Pilate to take action against Jesus. If Jesus—who had been born under an unusual star and visited as an infant by magi (astrologers or sign-readers) from the east—spoke evil predictions against the temple and the lives of the Jews and prophesied about his own death, perhaps he would next lay spells on Caesar. If that were to happen, letting Jesus go would certainly make Pilate no friend of Caesar. In final desperation the chief priests argued that anyone who made himself a king "*speakeeth* against Caesar" (John 19:12). All this looks like attempted allegations of *maiestas*.

Ultimately, of course, Pilate found no legal cause of action here. Jesus claimed that his kingdom had nothing to do with

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Caesar's world, and Pilate was satisfied that the man from Nazareth had not broken any Roman law. But Pilate was still worried enough by the situation that he was willing to take action or to go along with Jesus' accusers.

Laws against sorcery are mentioned occasionally by commentators writing about the trial of Jesus, but this underlying cause of action is not usually taken seriously by them. No formal accusation of magic ever seems to be made during the trial. But, as Morton Smith argues, the term "worker of evil" used by the chief priests only in John 18:30, or its Latin equivalent *maleficus*, is "common parlance" in Roman law codes referring to a "magician." So the supernatural may well have had more to do with the death of Jesus than people think, just as Mosiah 3:9 indicates. This is not to say that other legal charges did not figure into the course of these proceedings. But concern over Jesus' mighty power best explains all that the Gospels report.

An underlying concern about demons would explain especially the puzzles of crucifixion and the lack of legal formalities. Since the publication of the Temple Scroll from the Dead Sea in the 1970s, many scholars acknowledge that hanging on a tree (or crucifixion) could serve as a

possible Jewish mode of execution. In one other notorious case a century before the time of Jesus, 80 witches were hung or crucified in Ashkelon without proper trials, because the Jewish court saw the matter as an emergency. This event shows that such things could happen, even if only rarely. Thus, both Romans and Jews (especially on an emergency charge involving a fear of demons) were capable of executing someone by crucifixion.

REFLECTION 7 | We can now turn to our second main question: Who killed Jesus? We can now realize that lots of people were involved. But before we answer this question, we must back up again and reflect on which of the four Gospels to favor, for again we get different answers from the different Gospels.

In giving weight to various statements, Latter-day Saints generally favor the report of the highest priesthood authority, which in this case is the Apostle John. With Peter and James, John was one of the highest ranking apostles. Matthew, the publican, was one of the Twelve, but Mark and Luke apparently were not.

Moreover, most people find more credibility in the testimonies of eyewitnesses, and it is not clear how Matthew, Mark, and Luke learned the details they



report. None of them were present for most, if any, of the proceedings surrounding Jesus' trial and death. Mark may have learned something from Peter, but after the arrest, Peter only "followed [Jesus] afar off" (Matt. 26:58) and stayed outside the door of Caiaphas' palace hoping to remain unrecognized. But John was present for the duration of the hearing. Significantly, he was the only disciple who actually "went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest" (John 18:15), and, of course, John was there at Golgotha when Jesus entrusted his mother Mary into his care (John 19:26–27). Of the spear thrust, John testified: "And he that saw it bare record [gives solemn testimony], and his [testimony] is true" (John 19:35). In this affirmation, John distinctively speaks of himself as the *one* who saw, claiming for himself special status. Latter-day Saints do not take his witness lightly.

REFLECTION 8 | Latter-day Saints should be especially comfortable with the Johannine approach to the trial of Jesus, which is strongly supported and clarified by the Book of Mormon.

A key element in LDS doctrine is the knowledge that the sacrifice of the Savior was promised and foreordained from before the foundation of this earth, as we read in the words of Lehi, Benjamin, Abinadi, and Alma. Likewise, for John, the death of Jesus was a foregone conclusion from the beginning. It had to happen. It was supposed to happen. "For this cause came I into the world" (John 18:37).

John particularly wants his readers to understand that Jesus was not killed because of some offense against the temple or its economy, as many people conclude (especially from Mark). Here John is particularly interesting. Unlike Matthew and Mark, John does not have Jesus say either that *he is able* or *actually will* destroy the temple; rather, John 2:19 reads, "[If *you*] destroy this temple, . . . in three days I will raise it up."

People have also long puzzled over the distance that John puts between the cleansing of the temple and the death of Jesus. For John, the cleansing occurs at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry (see John 2:13–17), not after his triumphal entry

into Jerusalem. Why does John place it there? One reason is to introduce Jesus' prophesy of his death from the beginning; another is to show Jesus working at a cleansed temple, where he often went throughout his ministry.

Latter-day Saints understand that Jesus, the Holy One, was innocent of any crime. Indeed, in John's good news, Jesus was not convicted of anything. In John we find no mention of any Jewish court at all, let alone a verdict against him; and on this point I think John is right. Even in discussing the synoptic accounts, it is something of a misnomer to speak of the "trial" of Jesus. There was a hearing (maybe) or perhaps an inquiry or attempted deposition and the voicing of an opinion of how things "appeared" (as the Greek reads in Matthew 26:66 and Mark 14:64), but not a trial and verdict.

Latter-day Saints agree with John that an innocent Jesus died for the *whole* world, for all mankind, and that the *whole* sinful world in a significant sense brought about the death of Jesus. Look who arrests him in John's account: not just a group of men with torches, as in the other Gospels, but a cohort of soldiers, servants of chief priests and Pharisees (see John 18:3), and the commander or chiliarchos (see John 18:12). The whole world, it seems, was symbolically there. This seems particularly consonant with another important revelation extended to us by the Book of Mormon. Nephi prophesied: "And the *world*, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, [smite him and spit upon him] and he suffereth it, . . . because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards [all] the children of men" (1 Nephi 19:9).

REFLECTION 9 | If we need to find a precipitating culprit in all of this, the prime and persistent movers in the final actions against Jesus were probably only a small group identified as "the chief priests," the most powerful and best known officials of Jerusalem. An interesting pattern emerges by carefully examining every reference to these chief priests: It is the chief priests and scribes of whom Herod asks about the birthplace of the

Messiah. When Jesus prophesies about his death in Matthew 16:21, he mentions only the chief priests, elders, and scribes as being involved. It is the chief priests and elders who in the temple question Jesus' authority. The chief priests alone seek Jesus' death after the raising of Lazarus. Judas betrays Jesus to the chief priests. The chief priests alone demand Jesus' death before Pilate in Mark 15:3; and in the end, it is they who want the title to read, "*He said, I am King of the Jews*" (John 19:21).

Fourteen times in the Gospels and four times in Acts, the chief priests act alone against Jesus or his disciples. Eighteen other times they act together with the elders, rulers, captains, or the Sanhedrin. Twenty-one times they are associated with the scribes. Clearly the chief priests and these associates of theirs are the driving force behind the arrest and execution of Jesus. The Pharisees often debated Jesus and were verbally denounced by him, but they are mentioned much less often, and they lacked the political muscle of the Sadducean chief priests, whose party had a strong majority in the Sanhedrin. It is not hard to see that *small* group of chief priests as the one consistent force that agitated and militated against Jesus and his disciples. Their crowd was not large; certainly it did not contain all the Jews.

This subtle point is consistent with an important passage in the Book of Mormon. In 2 Nephi 10:5 it clearly says that it would be "because of *priestcrafts* [in other words, because of a small, powerful group interested in trafficking in religion for money] and iniquities, [that] they at Jerusalem will stiffen their necks against him, that he be crucified." The Book of Mormon by no means implicates or condemns all Jews.

In this regard, we should also remember the testimony of Paul. As a student of Gamaliel, Paul would have been well informed about legal events in Jerusalem, and he adds an important corroboration to this Book of Mormon position. The words in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–15 speak of Jews who killed Jesus. Notice the great importance of the punctuation between these words: should it read "the Jews who

killed Jesus,” with no comma (meaning the particular Jews who killed Jesus)? or should it read “the Jews [comma] who killed Jesus” (meaning that all of them killed Jesus)? This is the most famous punctuation mark in the world and is known as the “antisemitic comma.” But based on the Greek construction of this sentence, no punctuation mark should be there. Paul spoke only of those *particular* Jews who killed Jesus. Surely many Jews accepted Jesus. Peter was a Jew. Mary was a Jew. John was a Jew. Those in the crowds on Palm Sunday were all Jews.

REFLECTION 10 | Finally, especially for John, Jesus was in full control from the beginning to the end. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus spoke of his death even to prominent Jewish leaders and others outside his circle of disciples. Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus said, “Even so must the Son of man be lifted up” (John 3:14).

Consistent throughout his writing, John reports the death of Jesus with Jesus knowing exactly what was required to carry out the plan. When his hour had come, Jesus knew and “bowed his head, and *handed over* his spirit” (according to the Greek in John 19:30). Might it be significant that this same word is used three times in the story: when Judas betrayed or handed Jesus over to his arresters; when the Jews handed Jesus over to Pilate; and when Jesus handed over his spirit to God? For John, we must never forget that it is God who is voluntarily, purposefully, and knowingly dying as planned.

With all this as background, and knowing that much more work still remains to be done, we can now cautiously offer an answer to the question Who was responsible for the death of Jesus? For John and for Latter-day Saints, the whole world killed Jesus. As Nephi prophesied, the whole “world” would kill their God (1 Nephi 19:9). And if *everyone* was responsible, then, in an important sense, *no one* was responsible or to blame. Or if someone specifically were to blame, that is quite irrelevant for John, the apostle of love.

Of course, iniquity played its part. But, ironically, Greeks and pagans, for whom the gods could be found anywhere, were quite accepting of miracle workers.

The Jewish legal system, however—with its prohibitions against witchcraft, necromancy, and idolatry—effectively made the Jews (as the Book of Mormon says) the only nation on earth in which anyone could have cared enough about such supernatural conduct to have reacted with such hostility and to have “stumbled” against the very presence of their God in their midst, as Jacob says (Jacob 4:15).

In 2 Nephi 10:3–6 Jacob writes that it was “expedient” (which means pragmatically effective, “tending to promote some good end or desired purpose, expeditiously, quickly, and profitably”) that Jesus “should come among the Jews,” for “thus it behooveth [or was fittingly necessary for] our God.” Jacob identified that Old World location as “the *more* wicked part of the world,” with more wicked being a comparative between two places. From Jacob’s point of view, the question was whether Jesus should come to the Old World or to the New, and his answer is, to the Old, for its inhabitants would be more wicked than his posterity. He further explains, “And there is none other nation on earth that would crucify their God,” and I hasten to emphasize that this statement views this conduct in collective terms and does not infer that all people in that body necessarily agreed with their national leaders on this action. Continuing on, Jacob writes, “For should the mighty miracles be wrought among other nations they would repent, and know that he be their God.” We can indeed agree that such recognition would have been more easily given by people in cultures of other religions, where laws against such activity did not warrant the death penalty.

There may have been some miscarriages of justice in the trial of Jesus, but I do not think that John or Jacob want us to think of the death of Jesus that way. Jesus was not a victim. His death was supposed to happen. It had to happen. For this reason, God in his mercy does not come out and place blame on any single person or group of people. The writers of the New Testament Gospels were intentionally ambiguous. They could have been much clearer about who killed Jesus if they had wanted to be, but that was not

their point. Even in Judas’ case, we do not know what motivated him; things certainly did not turn out the way he had intended or expected.

In the final analysis, overwhelmed with irrational fear, all of them knew not what they really did. As Peter said only a few weeks later to those very people in Jerusalem “who killed the Prince of life,” “I [know] that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers” (Acts 3:15, 17). Jesus forgave people as he hung on the cross, forgiving whom he would; and of us it is required that we forgive all people. Whereas God will judge, we are to judge not. Placing blame is not part of this picture. Masterfully understating all that happened, all Jesus said, out of the darkness to the Nephites, was, “I came unto my own, and my own received me not” (3 Nephi 9:16). Let us never forget that we also reject and crucify Jesus anew whenever we partake of the world and its darkness.

In his first general epistle, the Apostle John concluded: “And we know that the Son of God is come, [we have heard; we have seen with our eyes, and handled with our hands] and he hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life” (1 John 5:20 [1 John 1:1]). By reflecting carefully and cautiously on the events and causes leading up to the death of Jesus, one may more surely agree that he is indeed the Son of God, of whom the Book of Mormon and all the holy prophets have ever testified.

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