

Jesus' trials focused on His alleged status as the "King of the Jews" (*Messiah* in the Jews' interaction with Him), and so it was with His crucifixion. Though the Sanhedrin formally convicted Him of blasphemy, it was the people's widening embrace of Him that provoked the authorities to act. They were convinced that Jesus wasn't Israel's messianic king, but they recognized the disastrous consequences of allowing that belief to continue to spread. *They also understood that this messianic claim was a useful device for achieving their end.* Israel's rulers wanted Rome to execute Jesus in order to prove to the nation that He wasn't the Messiah and the best way to force Pilate's hand was to present Him as a threat to Caesar's authority. Pilate didn't care about Jewish religious or legal matters, but he'd have to take action if confronted with a rebel Jewish king.

Jesus was convicted as the alleged King of the Jews and this charge overarched the entire process of His punishment culminating with His death. Each of the evangelists presents a distinct account of that process, but all four emphasize that Jesus was being executed as Israel's messianic king. Pilate condemned Him under this title (19:14-16; cf. Mark 15:9-12) and his soldiers brutalized and crucified Him with this in view (19:2-3; Matthew 27:27-30; Mark 15:16-19). So Pilate made sure everyone in Israel associated Jesus and His crucifixion with this messianic "King of the Jews" by nailing above His head a placard with that inscription (19:19-20; cf. Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38).

Both the historical episode and the gospel accounts leave no doubt that Jesus was being crucified under the claim of being Israel's Messiah. The rulers' outrage at Pilate's placard (19:21) reflected their intent that this outcome would disprove that notion and put the whole matter to rest. If blasphemy really were their concern, they could have stoned Him – just as they were prepared to do with the adulterous woman (8:1-5) and would soon do with Stephen (Acts 7:54-60) – and Rome wouldn't have cared in the least (18:31). But that wouldn't have served the Jews' purpose; they didn't simply want Jesus dead; they wanted the messianic claim to die with Him and Roman crucifixion would insure that.

In the end, Jesus' crucifixion reflected the different agendas of Israel's rulers and Rome's Procurator. But the Father and Son had their own agenda in it: Jesus' death in this manner and at this time was critically important to the fulfillment of the Scriptures – not in a generic or proof-text sense, but as the Scriptures set forth the story of God's purpose for His creation to be realized through Abraham's covenant household. As seen, the Passover/Exodus theme is the central motif in this sweeping story and it embodies the sub-themes of exile, Yahweh's return, the defeat of the enslaving power, the liberation of the captive people, the forgiveness of sin, the renewal of the covenant and the inauguration of the Abrahamic (Davidic) kingdom in its consummate form. All of these themes converge in Jesus of Nazareth who embodied in Himself both *Yahweh*, Israel's covenant God, and *Israel*, the Abrahamic covenant household. He was Yahweh returned to Zion to defeat the powers, set the prisoners free and restore His enthroned presence in His sanctuary in their midst. But He was also Israel in truth: the faithful Servant-Son (Exodus 4:22-23) who would take upon Himself Israel's unfaithfulness and bear the judgment against it in order to bring forgiveness, reconciliation and the renewal of the covenant relation between Yahweh and the children of Abraham (cf. 1:14-18, 19-34, 2:13-22, 4:21-24, 6:32-51, 8:31-58, 12:23-32; also Matthew 21:1-44, 26:17-29, 57-64).

The people of Israel – and especially their rulers – were aware of these scriptural themes and their relation to the promised Messiah. They were longing for his coming and the work of conquest, deliverance and renewal Yahweh would accomplish through him. Their rejection of Jesus was not a repudiation of the Scriptures or the Messiah as such, but their repudiation of a man they viewed as an imposter and false prophet. Jesus didn't fit Israel's messianic expectations and the centerpiece of the disparity was His cross: The Jews viewed His crucifixion as proof that He wasn't Israel's Messiah; Jesus understood it to be the incontrovertible proof that He was. What they saw as His defeat was His victory; what they considered His abject humiliation was His glory; what they perceived to contradict the sign above His head proved the truth of its words.

- a. The gospel accounts begin the crucifixion episode with Jesus' journey out of Jerusalem to Golgotha. The Synoptists provided the translation as "the place of a skull" ("the skull" in Luke's account) but none of them specified its exact location. It obviously was the Romans' chosen location for Jerusalem's public executions and they would have strategically selected it. Rome wanted people to witness these crucifixions and so Golgotha was likely a hill near one of the roads into Jerusalem (ref. Mark 15:29). Early writings seem to support this by indicating that the name reflected the skullcap shape of the hill. And since a man could carry a cross there, Golgotha must have been just outside the city wall (ref. 19:20).

The Law of Moses associated death with uncleanness and thus executions took place outside the camp of Israel (ref. Numbers 15:32-35, 19:11-13). The Jews seemed to have continued this practice in their cities up to the first century (ref. Luke 4:28-29; Acts 7:51-58). Indeed, the Law required all uncleanness to be eliminated from the camp, regardless of whether it derived from sin, disease, imperfection or defiling circumstances (cf. Exodus 29:1-14; Leviticus 4:1-21, 10:1-4, 13:45-46, 16:1-28, 24:10-23; Numbers 12, 15:22-36; etc.) and this Jewish concern likely drove the Romans' choice of execution site. For both the reasons of death and judicial uncleanness, the Jews weren't about to have Jesus crucified in Jerusalem in the vicinity of the sanctuary, but the author of Hebrews saw profound symbolic significance in this circumstance (13:10-12). (Note that Jesus' statement in Luke 13:33 speaks to a different issue, namely the fact that Jerusalem (*Zion*, Yahweh's bride) had rejected all of His prophets. It was in this sense that no prophet could die outside of Jerusalem (13:34; cf. Matthew 23:29ff)).

More important than Golgotha's location, though, is what transpired on the way there. The Synoptic writers all recorded that Jesus couldn't carry His cross (probably only the transverse beam; the Romans typically left the tall vertical pole standing in the ground at the execution site) and the Roman soldiers forced a man named Simon from Cyrene to carry it for Him (cf. esp. Mark 15:21 with Acts 19:33 and Romans 16:13). Luke added that a large crowd was accompanying the procession and he alone recounted the warning Jesus issued to them. Doubtless many in the crowd were mocking and jeering Him, but Luke mentioned only those weeping in lament. And specifically the women among them, for they were the ones to whom Jesus directed His ominous words (23:27-31).

The heart of His warning was the fate coming upon Jerusalem and the Jewish nation because of their unbelief. Jesus had already spoken of this, first in private sorrow as He presented Himself to Jerusalem as her King (Luke 19:41-44) and then to the people of Jerusalem (Luke 21:5ff; cf. 13:34-35) and His disciples (Matthew 24:1ff; Mark 13:1ff). *Notably, all of these settings pertained to the temple and its future.* He'd been open about what awaited Jerusalem, her children and her sanctuary and the wailing women provided the occasion for one final word of warning. The days were coming, not far hence, when Zion's daughters would weep for themselves and the verdict of blessedness would be pronounced, not on those who'd born children (the greatest blessing for Israelite women), but those whose wombs had remained barren. For such women were to be spared the agony of watching their children slaughtered, even while they themselves pled for the mountains to fall upon them and so deliver them from that dreadful fate.

Jesus punctuated His pronouncement with a rhetorical question framed in the characteristic Hebrew fashion of arguing from the lesser to the greater: "*If they do this in the green tree [wood], what will happen in the dry?*" (Luke 23:31). This might seem to be a strange expression unconnected to His warning, but it makes perfect sense treated within its context. Jesus was warning the crowd of the fierce, almost unimaginable calamity that was coming upon Israel, and that because the nation had rejected its Messiah and so also its covenant God (19:14-15). Jesus' procession to Golgotha was the proof that the "sons of kingdom" had renounced Yahweh and His kingdom and so would find themselves cast out and subject to "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Luke 13:22-30).

The mourners were lamenting Jesus' judgment at the hands of Rome, but they should have been mourning their own. Rome was crucifying Him as a rebel king – a Jew opposing Roman authority and power. But in fact He wasn't the rebel defying Rome, *Israel* was. This was overtly the case in the Zealot movement, but the Zealots were merely a tangible expression of Israel's national psyche. The whole Israelite nation was in rebellion against Rome in view of its national messianic hope: *In their eschatological vision, Messiah was coming to vanquish Roman power and subjugation, not die powerless at Rome's hand.* Jesus' death would not end that vision, but merely make room for other messianic figures.

Jesus was the "green wood," subjected to Rome's "burning." But green wood is unsuited for burning because it is unseasoned; it burns with difficulty and without intensity. Dry wood, on the other hand, is fully seasoned and fit for burning; it burns completely and with great intensity and heat. Israel was that "dry wood" suited and prepared for burning. Jesus was warning that the fire He was enduring was coming upon the whole nation. It was burning Him *incompletely* as One unsuited and undeserving, but Israel, the "dry wood," would experience Rome's fire as fully seasoned and find itself utterly consumed. And this fate awaited Israel because it refused to embrace the burning of the "green wood": *Israel refused the purging fire of its own judgment – and so its forgiveness and renewal – born by the One who embodied Israel and so consigned itself to the destroying flames.*