

A case for the Lord's crucifixion having NOT been predestined

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Was Jesus aware from very early on that he was going to be crucified? Suppose we are unable to prove from the Scriptures that Jesus had a long-term foreknowledge that he would be martyred by crucifixion? If we cannot, then minimally, we may accept that even the nature of the Lord's martyrdom was a feature of the then-future that remained open until the time actually drew near. On a larger scale, we may be motivated to consider the possible alternatives to the way the Lord's ministry could have played out.

Did Jesus come to die on the cross? Did God send Jesus to earth to die on the cross? In this article, I intend to show that the Bible does not support the position that the Lord's crucifixion was predestined. Nor was the crucifixion divinely foreknown to any long-term degree.

I know of just a few Bible passages that are typically or occasionally offered as proof that the crucifixion was long foreknown. I will handle them in the order of what I perceive to be the strongest evidence to the weakest evidence.

John 3:14-15 is the passage that most strongly supports divine foreknowledge of the Lord's crucifixion. "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (NRSV). This passage does appear to support the claim that Jesus knew of the means of his death even at this early stage (in the book of John). There are a few features of this passage that cause us to not place too much stock on when the words in the passage were said. First off, the evidence for the reading of the KJV, NKJV and MEV translations of John 3:13 is very strong. "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven" (John 3:13, NKJV). The problem with this reading is that it is difficult. Most readers assume that Jesus is still talking in this verse. Why would Jesus tell Nicodemus that he (Jesus) is in heaven. The difficulty in this reading strongly suggests the reason for the wide variations in the textual evidence (such as, "who was in heaven," "who is from heaven," and the omission of the clause altogether). If it is the case that "who is in heaven" belongs in verse 13, what does that mean? What it means is that somewhere along the line the words of Jesus transitioned into the words of the evangelist (the gospel writer). If the evangelist began soliloquizing in this text, where did he begin. It looks like the beginning of the narrators words begin in verse 11. On the other hand, the words "very truly, I tell you" ("Amen, amen, I say to you," NABRE) are more typical of the Lord than of the evangelist. One solution to that little difficulty is to place it at the end of verse 10 and understand the evangelist to begin speaking with "We speak...." What is said in John 3:11 is definitely typical of Johannine writing. "We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us..." (1 John 1:3). It is also consistent with the evangelist's conclusionary remarks at John 20:30-31.

I think it is appropriate to understand that the evangelist adapted Jesus' remarks to Nicodemus—along with a few phrases of his own—as a preliminary outline, or the first part of a lengthy chiasmus that ends at John 20:31. The book of John focuses from the beginning on the crucifixion, as evidenced by the early allusions to it in that particular gospel.

Nevertheless, the claim that John 3:14 is actually Jesus' words and not the evangelist's is not conclusive and so interpreters should not make too much of its appearance of supporting Jesus' foreknowledge of the crucifixion.

John 12:32-33 reads, "'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die." So at this place in the gospel, Jesus was able to

make statements that would indicate the kind of death he would die. This passage does not support divine foreknowledge as well as some people might hope. Let us observe where in the Johannine gospel this statement falls. John 11:53 reports that the chief priests and Pharisees (11:47) planned to kill Jesus. John 12:9-11 reports that the chief priests plotted to kill Lazarus too, because many Jews were believing in Jesus on account of Lazarus. Jesus' motivation for avoiding public places was this very threat (11:54). How did Jesus know? Some, by reflex, conclude that Jesus know by divine means; but it is just as reasonable to accept that he heard about it. Jesus often learned about things by hearing about them (John 9:35; Matthew 14:13). If he heard about the plot of the priests, surely he also heard about WHAT they were planning (to get the Romans to crucify Jesus). This knowledge is not foreknowledge. It is current-events knowledge.

In Acts 2:23 Peter says, "This man, hand over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law." By modern Reformist standards, this verse seems to say that God not only foreknew the crucifixion, he planned it! There are some very strong exegetical problems with this interpretation. Firstly, it was this claim here and in 2:36 that convicted Jews such that they were "cut to the heart" (2:37). If they heard Peter say that it was God's plan to have Jesus crucified, Peter would have had to do a lot more explaining to try to convince the Jews that it was their fault! What John 2:23 actually says is that Jesus was surrendered to the Jews by God's plan. That's all it says. We cannot read more into it by any kind of sound exegesis. Peter uses a stronger word (surrendered) than he could have, such as "came" (John 1:11), to show that Jesus gave himself over to the power of the Jews. What they did next was a choice they made on their own.

Acts 4:27-28 reads, "For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (NRSV).

To begin, I will make the dubious assumption that these disciples were praying under divine inspiration. If it is true that they prayed under divine inspiration, and if the passage is properly translated, then what was predestined was the death of Jesus and not the means. The particular actors and the means of the death were yet open features of what God had generally predestined. This verse appears to be the only one in the Bible that seems to strongly point to the Lord's death as being predestined at all.

I have made the case that there is no Bible passage that conclusively shows that the Lord's death by crucifixion was predestined. Thus, Biblically, the means by which the Lord was to die was a feature of the future, early in the Lord's ministry, that was open and not predestined.

I have made the case against the crucifixion being predestined? The case has been made. I believe the conclusion is solid. The pillars of my argument are stated above. I will, below, make a few further comments that warrant further study. The comments below are on a related topic.

Are we really certain that Acts 4:28 shows the Lord's martyrdom was predestined?

Recall above when I addressed this verse that I made a big assumption. I assumed that these disciples were praying under divine inspiration. The verse appears in the middle of a prayer offered up by Peter, John and their friends. This prayer is a reaction to the events earlier in the chapter in which Peter and John were arrested and made to testify before the counsel of the Jews. The counsel ordered the apostles to quit preaching about Jesus and then released them. I question if it is appropriate to draw bullet-proof theology from a corporate prayer recorded in the Bible. Just because somebody is quoted

in the Bible as saying something does not mean we should accept what the person said as absolute truth. There are many examples (think: Job's "friends") but I submit John 9:31. "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will." Ah! God doesn't listen to sinners, right? But this statement did not come from prophet, Jesus or the evangelist. It came from a man Jesus had healed of blindness. The man was giving a defense to some Pharisees about what he thought about the man (Jesus) who had healed him of his blindness. This man was just trying to make sense of what had happened and he made the statement in John 9:31. This passage does not show that God is deaf to the sinner's prayer. God does hear the sinner's prayer (Acts 10:31)! So what the once-blind man said is contradicted. My point is, it is unstable ground to assign too much truth value to what uninspired people in the Bible say. Could it be the case that these disciples were not praying by direct divine inspiration? If so, then the only verse that can possibly show that Jesus' death was predestined is based upon dubious exegesis.

But what if the prayer was divinely inspired? Does it prove the Lord's death was divinely foreknown?

Look very carefully at Acts 4:27-28. It is not clear in NRSV if it was Herod, Pilate and the Gentiles who were carried out God's plan or if Jesus was anointed to do God's plan.

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. (NRSV)

All one has to do with the NRSV is question the placement of the comma after the word "anointed." Then, Jesus was doing something God anointed him to do but these other free agents (Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and Jews) thwarted the plan. To get to the NRSV reading, the Greek wordage needs to be rearranged. The Greek word order more closely follows the RSV which reads, "for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place." RSV and similar translations (e.g., KJV, NKJV, ESV, NASB) place the fulfillment of God's plan squarely in the hands of Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and Jews. The word order of the NRSV and similar translations (HCSB, MEV, NET, NIV) leave open question of who was fulfilling God's plan. It is not unusual to rearrange the English equivalent words if keeping the Greek word order is misleading.

Greek scholar Adam Clarke is certain that part of this passage should be parenthetical. He translates it thusly: "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, (for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done,) both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and people of Israel, were gathered together." Clarke further comments, "These gathered together to *hinder* what God had before determined that his Christ or Anointed should perform" (emphasis Clarke's).

This understanding is consistent with the whole context of the prayer. In this prayer, the disciples quoted Psalm 2:1-2 (in Acts 4:25-26) and applied it to Jesus. The application of this Old Testament passage means that the agents mentioned in Acts 4:27 were in fact attempting to thwart God's plan. Unfortunately for them, they could not thwart God's plan (of redemption). Nor could the Jewish leaders who had just threatened Peter and John thwart God's plan to spread the Gospel through preaching. It is not the case that, by resisting God, they were unknowingly acting to fulfill God's plan. They were resisting in vain. In other words, whatever Herod, et. al., were attempting to thwart of God's plan, they failed. We could just as accurately see what God planned was redemption (= the gospel) rather than the Lord's death by crucifixion.