

Views from the Pews: The stoning of Stephen

When Jesus was finally arrested and put on trial, Jewish religious leaders seeking the death penalty had to take their case to the Roman governor, Pilate. When Pilate told the Jews to try Jesus according to Jewish law, they responded, “We have no right to execute anyone” (John 18:31). Later, however, a mob led by those same leaders stoned Stephen to death in Jerusalem (Acts 7:58). This seems to present a conundrum: if the religious leaders were not allowed to inflict the death penalty, why did they execute Stephen? Or, if they could administer capital punishment, why did they involve Pilate with Jesus’ death?

The answer lies in the very different circumstances of these two incidents. In the case of Jesus, one of the religious authorities’ concerns was that Jesus’ immense popularity would somehow lead to Roman retribution (John 11:47—48). Specifically, they were afraid that, if Jesus started a revolt, Rome would blame the Jewish leaders. So, part of the motivation for involving Pilate was to prove—or at least give the impression—that the Jewish leadership was loyal to the Roman Empire despite the civil unrest. Hence the chief priests’ outrageous statement to Pilate, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). Having the Romans execute Jesus would provide two layers of protection: Rome would not object—legally—to His death, and Jesus’ supporters would be discouraged from attempting revenge. Pilate was more interested in political harmony than justice (John 19:4, 6, 15–16).

The difference in Stephen’s case was that Stephen did not have an extensive history of antagonizing the Jewish religious leaders. And, given Pilate’s growing political weakness, there was little chance he would respond to an incident of mob justice, from the Jews, against a Jew. Beyond that, Stephen’s sermon seems to have so infuriated the crowd that it’s possible nobody was thinking logically (Acts 7:54, 57).

The stoning of Stephen by the Jews was indeed technically illegal, but the Romans had no vested interest in the matter, and the temple leaders in Jerusalem rightly predicted that Rome would not respond. Jesus, on the other hand, had caught the attention of many powerful people, and the Jews did not dare to violate Roman law by executing Jesus on their own. Rome’s interest in enforcing their own rule varied with circumstances, not the least of which was whether or not the incident was—in Rome’s view—worth pursuing.

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