

The Gospel of John (108): Jesus before Pilate (1)

Introduction:

In John's account of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, we read that the Jews led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the Roman Praetorium where He was tried by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. This is the longest account to be found in our four Gospels of this phase of the trial. Here is John 18:28-40.

Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover. ²⁹Pilate then went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"

³⁰They answered and said to him, "If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you."

³¹Then Pilate said to them, "You take Him and judge Him according to your law."

Therefore the Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death," ³²that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.

³³Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?"

³⁴Jesus answered him, "Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?"

³⁵Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?"

³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

³⁷Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?"

Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

³⁸Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all. ³⁹But you have a custom that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Do you therefore want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"

⁴⁰Then they all cried again, saying, "Not this Man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber.

Actually this passage we just read from John 18 is only the first portion of John's record of this trial before Pilate. Jesus' trial before Pilate continues into the 19th chapter through verse 16. It is then that John records Jesus taken from there to be crucified. To better understand the bigger picture, let us read this second portion of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. Here is John 19:1-16:

So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. ²And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. ³Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands.

⁴Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him."

⁵Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!"

⁶Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!”

Pilate said to them, “You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.”

⁷The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.”

⁸Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid, ⁹and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, “Where are You from?” But Jesus gave him no answer.

¹⁰Then Pilate said to Him, “Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?”

¹¹Jesus answered, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.”

¹²From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, “If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar.”

¹³When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. ¹⁴Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, “Behold your King!”

¹⁵But they cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!”

Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?”

The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!”

¹⁶Then he delivered Him to them to be crucified. Then they took Jesus and led Him away.

As we begin to study our Lord’s trial before Pontius Pilate, I would like us first to consider this episode in its relation with the other events of our Lord’s Passion that are recorded in the other Gospels. And then we will consider the message that the Holy Spirit has provided for us uniquely in John’s account of Jesus before Pilate.

I. The place of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate in the record of the Gospels

Reading John’s account of the trials of Jesus gives us a different perspective than what is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. In John we read of Jesus before Annas (the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest) and of Jesus before Pontius Pilate. We do read that they brought Jesus from the house of Annas to Caiaphas, We simply read in John 18:24, “Then Anna sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.” But John recorded no details of what transpired before Caiaphas. And then we read in verse 28: “Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning.” An entire night had transpired, but John gave no information as to what had occurred. Thankfully, however, we do have the accounts of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) of Jesus before Caiaphas and then having been brought before the entire Jewish Sanhedrin (70 men). We also read from the other Gospels of Jesus having been brought before King Herod, of which John records nothing. Perhaps Luke gives us the fullest account, but Mark also provides some details not covered in the other Gospels.

Let us consider what John does not include. We first read from Luke 22:54-60 of the armed band leading Jesus from the garden directly to the house Caiaphas. John did not record this, but rather stated that they had first taken Jesus to the house of Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest.

⁵⁴Having arrested Him, they led Him and brought Him into the high priest’s house (i.e. Caiaphas). But Peter followed at a distance.

And then in verses 55 through 62 Luke recounts Peter’s denials, after which we read,

⁶³Now the men who held Jesus mocked Him and beat Him. ⁶⁴And having blindfolded Him, they struck Him on the face and asked Him, saying, “Prophecy! Who is the one who struck You?” ⁶⁵And many other things they blasphemously spoke against Him.

⁶⁶As soon as it was day, the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, came together and led Him into their council, saying, ⁶⁷“If You are the Christ, tell us.”

And then what follows is recorded in Mark 14:55-61:

⁵⁵Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. ⁵⁶For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree.

⁵⁷Then some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, ⁵⁸“We heard Him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.’”

⁵⁹But not even then did their testimony agree.

⁶⁰And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, “Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?” ⁶¹But He kept silent and answered nothing.

Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”

And now we return to Luke’s account:

But He said to them, “If I tell you, you will by no means believe. ⁶⁸And if I also ask you, you will by no means answer Me or let Me go. ⁶⁹Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.”

⁷⁰Then they all said, “Are You then the Son of God?”

So He said to them, “You rightly say that I am.”

⁷¹And they said, “What further testimony do we need? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth.”

^{23:1}Then the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate. (Luke 22:54-71; 23:1)

Luke’s Gospel also records that when Jesus was before Pilate, that the Roman governor sent Jesus before the Jewish King Herod. Whereas Pilate was the governor of the region Judea, Herod Antipas was the tetrarch of the regions of Galilee and Perea, which were to the north and east of Judea. Herod was known as both “Herod the Tetrarch” and “King Herod” in the New Testament, although he never held the official title of king. When the Jews brought Jesus before him, Herod tried Him, found Him to be innocent, but after having mocked Him, he returned Him to Pilate. John did not record this event. Here is a portion of Luke’s account:

When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked if the Man were a Galilean. ⁷And as soon as he knew that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him. ⁹Then he questioned Him with many words, but He answered him nothing. ¹⁰And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused Him. ¹¹Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate. ¹²That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other. (Luke 23:6-12)

After having placed John’s record of Jesus before Pilate in the Gospel accounts, let us now seek to understand the uniqueness and emphasis of John’s narrative.

II. Understanding John’s record of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate

Now in John’s account of Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, there is great detail of what transpired between Jesus and Pilate within the Roman Praetorium. In fact there is so many details of their conversation that there have been those that have challenged the account, asking, “How could John have

known what had gone on within the Roman building that the Jews themselves had refused to enter lest they become defiled?” **Donald Carson** (b. 1947) addressed this objection:

We do not know what sources John enjoyed to let him know what happened in the court the Jews would not enter. Possibly Jesus Himself, after His resurrection, told some of the details. Perhaps some of the court attendants became Christians in the early years of rapid growth in the Christian church, and passed on their recollections to the apostolic leadership. Some court records were public, and therefore available to those willing to do some research (such as Luke: cf. Lk. 1:1-4). We do not know where John obtained his information, but our ignorance is not threatening unless some startling reason is advanced as to why John should have told us how he found out, or unless there is overwhelming reason to think that John *could not* have known. And neither condition applies.¹

We may be thankful to our Lord for having given us accounts found within all four Gospels which give us a full understanding of what our Lord suffered and endured through His arrest and trials before His crucifixion. But let us remember that our Lord had intentionally given us these four separate accounts with different, but corresponding emphases. The Gospels are theological interpretations of historical events. What, then, were the emphases that the Holy Spirit purposed to convey through John’s account of Jesus before Pontius Pilate? We have mentioned this before when we spoke of John’s message of the Passion account in its entirety. John set forth Jesus as the One who is faithful to His Father. Jesus Christ I presented as the one who was in actual authority of what was transpiring between Himself and this powerful Roman official. John presents everything as unfolding according to God’s overarching purpose to redeem His chosen people through His Son. Here is what we had recorded earlier regarding the purpose of John’s account of our Lord’s trials and crucifixion:

As in the other Gospels it is the events surrounding the crucifixion and the resurrection that form the climax of the whole book. John had his own way of handling these events, a way which stresses the divine overruling. This account of the arrest stresses Jesus’ complete mastery of the situation, and there are touches like the “It is finished” of the dying Saviour, which indicate plainly that the outcome was completely in God’s control. Here supremely we see the purpose of God worked out, and here supremely is the glory of Jesus displayed.²

One sought to describe in this way the emphasis of this passage of Jesus before Pilate:

Jesus is the Passover Lamb, the King, and the truth, who became the redemptive sacrifice for the world when He, the Son of Man, was exchanged for the “sons of mankind” in order to release them from their enslavement to sin, death, and the foreign powers of this world.³

As we begin to examine the entire passage of John’s account of Jesus before Pilate, which is John 18:28 through 19:16, we may employ the following outline that sets forth this Roman trial of Jesus:

1. Jesus delivered up to Pilate (18:28-32)
2. Jesus examined before Pilate (18:33-40)
3. Pilate’s presentation of Jesus, “Behold, the Man” (19:1-6a)
4. Pilate’s final decision (19:6b-16)

A. Jesus delivered up to Pilate (18:28-32)

¹ Donald Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 587.

² Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 739.

³ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 754.

Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover. ²⁹Pilate then went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this Man?”

³⁰They answered and said to him, “If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you.”

³¹Then Pilate said to them, “You take Him and judge Him according to your law.”

Therefore the Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,” ³²that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.

We read in verse 28 of the Jewish leaders leading Jesus to Pilate’s quarters. John stated that “they” had led Jesus “from Caiaphas.” These were Jews who escorted Jesus before Pilate. The last time we were considering John’s Passion (two weeks ago) we addressed the fact that Jesus had been before Annas, the father-in law of Caiaphas. And although John stated that they had led Jesus from Anna to Caiaphas, John recorded nothing of what transpired when Jesus had stood before Caiaphas, or the Sanhedrin.

John identified the “Praetorium” as the place where they took Jesus to stand before Pontius Pilate. Pilate was the Roman governor over Judea. His official Praetorium was in Caesarea on the coast. But this would have been the official residence in Jerusalem for the Roman governor. It was probably attached or was within the Fortress Antonio, which lie on the north side of the temple mount.

“It was early morning” when they had taken Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate. John had a tendency to identify the time of events in His Gospel.⁴ The entire night had passed with Jesus in their custody. According to Jewish law, the Jews could not convene a trial at nighttime that involved capital punishment. This detail of time might suggest that the Sanhedrin held Jesus, purposely waiting for the morning hours before seeking His execution by the Roman authorities.

John recorded that the Jews took Jesus to the hall for Pilate to judge Him, but they did not enter themselves. **Verse 28b** records, “*But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover.*” Two points may be made here. First, John is clearly setting forth the ironic and hypocritical behavior of the Jewish leaders. They were seeking to have Jesus murdered, but they were concerned about ritualistic purity, for they believed that to step into this Gentile’s house would render them unclean before God. In their minds they were serving and pleasing God even while they sought the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, their promised Messiah. Of verse 29 it was said,

It constitutes a formidable example of Johannine irony. The Jews take elaborate precautions to avoid ritual contamination in order to eat the Passover, at the very time they are busy manipulating the judicial system to secure the death of Him, who alone is the true Passover.⁵

The second clause of this verse brings to the forefront a very, very, difficult and debatable matter. We read that “they (i.e. the Jews) themselves did not go into the Praetorium, *lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover.*” But wait, did not Jesus eat the Passover meal the night before with His disciples? But here the Passover had not yet been eaten, or so it seems. These Jews did not want to defile themselves by entering the residence of the Gentile Pontius Pilate, for it would prevent them from eating the Passover meal that they had not yet prepared or observed. In other words, it is commonly said that John’s account differs in the dating of the Passover from the account recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. It is said that John’s Gospel presents Jesus as being crucified at the very hour when the Jewish people would be slaughtering their Passover lambs in the temple. But the Synoptics have Jesus crucified the day after the lambs had been slain and eaten in the Passover meal. This is also one of the verses that has been argued to assert that Jesus was not crucified on Friday, but on Thursday, the day before on the day before the Passover.

⁴ Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 762.

⁵ Carson, p. 589.

How then is this matter to be understood? There have been a number of proposals. **Leon Morris** (1914-2006) sought to set down all the alternatives, even those of the liberals who do not believe in the historicity of the biblical record.

It is possible to take up any one of a number of positions with respect to it. Both accounts (the Synoptists and John) may be regarded as untrustworthy and rejected, which leaves us with very little knowledge of what went on. Confining ourselves to views which allow for substantial historicity in one or more accounts the following views are possible:

1. The two accounts cannot be harmonized and John is to be preferred.
2. The two accounts cannot be harmonized and the Synoptists are to be preferred.
3. The Passover took place as in the Synoptists (i.e. the Last Supper was a Passover meal) and John is not really in contradiction.
4. The Passover took place as in John and the Synoptists are not really in contradiction.
5. There are calendrical differences so that the Synoptists follow one reckoning and John another.

This last explanation is the one that Leon Morris believed to be the best explanation. After he had rehearsed the arguments of a number of scholars for each of these positions, he wrote this:

The evidence is thus confusing, and it is not in the least surprising that different conclusions have been drawn by different scholars. I do not see how with our present knowledge we can be dogmatic. But on the whole it seems to me most probable that the explanation is to be found in calendrical confusion. The most natural reading of the Synoptists shows the meal there to be the Passover. The most natural reading of John shows Jesus as crucified at the very time the Passover victims were slain in the temple. While it is undoubtedly possible so to interpret the evidence to make both tell the same story it seems preferable to see them following different calendars. According to the calendar Jesus was following the meal was the Passover. But the temple authorities followed another, according to which the sacrificial victims were slain the next day. John appears to make use of this to bring out the truth that Christ was slain as our Passover.⁶

And so, there are those who argue that John changed the detail in order to show forth Jesus to die at the time of the slaying of the Passover Lambs thereby displaying Jesus to be the true Lamb of God who was to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Some of those who hold this position would say that John and the Synoptics are in conflict with one another on the historical record. Second, there are those who argue that John recorded the true date of the Passover to be when Jesus was crucified and that the Synoptics never actually stated that the last supper was the Passover meal, but rather it is set forth in the Synoptics as the inauguration of the Christian Lord's Supper that replaced the Jewish Passover.⁷ And third, there are those who say that the Synoptics did indeed record the last supper as the Passover meal, but that the action of the Jews here in verse 29 reveals the Jews' concern to be able to continue the "Passover Feast" of Unleavened Bread that continued for 7 days after the Passover. This was the understanding argued by **Donald Carson** (b. 1947):

The general problem of reconciling this statement with the Synoptics insistence that Jesus Himself ate the Passover meal, was betrayed that night and crucified the next day (by Western reckoning of days), has already been discussed (i.e. earlier in his commentary). It is tempting here to understand *to eat the Passover* to refer, not to the Passover meal itself, but to the continuing Feast of Unleavened Bread, which continued for seven days. In particular, attention may be focused on the *hagigah*⁸, the feast offering offered on the morning of the full paschal day (cf. Numb. 28:18, 19). There is ample evidence

⁶ Morris, p. 785.

⁷ This was the position of Edward Klink, **John**, pp. 757-760.

⁸ Jewish word for the "Festive Offering"

that ‘the Passover’ could refer to the combined feast of the paschal meal itself plus the ensuing Feast of Unleavened bread (e.g. Luke 22:1: ‘Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching’). If then the Jewish authorities wanted to continue full participation in the entire feast, they would have to avoid *all* ritual contamination. Even if they contracted a form of defilement that could be washed away at sundown, it would preclude (prevent) them from participating that day. True, the *hagigah* could be eaten later in the week, but the Jewish leaders, conscious of their public position, would be eager to avoid any uncleanness that would force them to withdraw from the feast, however temporarily. At this point, distinctions between defilement that lasts seven days become irrelevant.

This interpretation becomes very convincing if our treatment of 19:31 is correct... The interpretation here defended is not that ‘the Passover’ refers to the Feast of the Unleavened Bread *apart from* Passover, but to the *entire Passover festival*. The Jews wanted to continue to participate in the entire feast; they wanted to eat the Passover.⁹

After the introductory remarks, John then relates the dialogue between Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders. We read in **verse 29**, “*Pilate then went out to them and said, ‘What accusation do you bring against this Man?’*”

The Jewish leaders would not go inside Pilate’s residence, so he came out to them. I suspect that this must have been irritating for Pilate to have to pander to these Jews, to whom he would have looked upon with some disdain.

In every important respect Pilate *is* Rome; the authority he assumes, the questions he asks, and his interaction with the Jews and Jesus expresses as much to the readers. Pilate’s entrance “outside” signals that the encounter between the Jews and Pilate has begun.¹⁰

The trial had begun. Pilate is the judge. The Jewish leaders are the accusers, the prosecutors. And Jesus was probably viewed initially as a rather helpless and vulnerable figure. They finally had Him where they had wanted Him to be for so long a time.

It must have been quite early in the morning. That they would bring this man before him at such an hour would suggest to Pilate that there had been a serious breach of the law by this man otherwise they would have not brought Him to him at this time and in this manner. But if they were to bring Jesus before him, they had best have a charge, and that being a legitimate and serious one. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that someone had already informed Pilate when Jesus was brought into his residence as to what the charge against Him the Jews were asserting. But he would have them state the matter clearly and perhaps officially before He convened the trial.

We read in **verse 30** their answer to his question. “*They answered and said to him, ‘If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you.’*” The Greek words are an adjective with a present tense participle, which might be translated, “He is practicing evil” or “He is being evil”, implying that there needed to be Roman justice regarding Him. They must have conveyed to Pilate that Jesus was claiming to be a king; verse 33 suggests that this was the case.

Pilate seemed to dismiss their charge as not worthy of his time or effort, that they could handle the matter themselves according to their religious law. We read in **verse 31**, “*Then Pilate said to them, ‘You take Him and judge Him according to your law.’*” But then their true intention is made manifest in their response to Pilate in **verse 32**: “*Therefore the Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death...’*” The power to execute a law breaker had been taken from the Jewish people some decades before and had been entrusted only to the Roman authorities. The exception to this was if someone had desecrated the temple precincts or had committed blasphemy. The Jews could then proceed to execute the offender. This was played out with the execution of Stephen, which is recorded in Acts 7.

⁹ Carson, pp. 589f.

¹⁰ Klink, p. 761.

However, when the Jews said to Pilate, “*It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,*” they might not have been referring to Roman law but rather to their own Jewish law. In other words, they were not acknowledging that Roman law would not permit them putting Him to death, but that their own Jewish law would not have regarded it as legitimate action to be taken.

But the issue may have less to do with Roman authority and more to do with the regulations described by their own law, perhaps especially in the light of their Passover. This latter sense fits well with the Gospel itself, where the Jews not only freely speak of killing Jesus with no regard to Roman permission (e.g. 5:18; 7:1; 11:53) but are even the ones to whom Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified (see 19:15-16; cf. Jesus’ prediction of this in 8:28). The expression, “It is not lawful,” is almost always used in the Gospels to refer to what is either permitted or forbidden to Jews by their own law of Moses, which makes it difficult to interpret the statement as a reference to Roman law alone. Even the immediate context of the statement is helpful, for it would be odd (historically) to suggest that the Jews needed to remind Pilate of what Roman law did or did not permit; just as it would be odd (chronologically) to suggest that the Jews would defer to Pilate’s Roman authority (v. 31b) seconds after he had just ordered them to act on their own authority (v. 31a). Such a statement, then, serves as an ironic word of self-condemnation, a confession that they were not allowed (by their own law) to do the very thing they were about to do.

But this exchange between the Jews and Pilate is then declared by John to have been a realization of the sovereign purpose of God in fulfilling what Jesus Himself had foretold. **Verse 32b** reads that this was said to Pilate by the Jews so “*that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.*” We had read back in John 12:32 and 33 John’s interpretation of Jesus’ words to this effect. Jesus had said, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” And then John wrote, “This He said, signifying by what death He would die.” Had the Jews determined to kill Jesus apart from Rome they would have had to resort to stoning. But it was in God’s purpose for Jesus to die by crucifixion, which, therefore, required Roman involvement in His prosecution and execution.

B. Jesus examined before Pilate (18:33-40)

We next read of Pilate and Jesus conversing in the Praetorium. What appears to be the first question posed to Jesus involved His claim to be a king. We read in **verse 33**, “*Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’*” Now Pilate may have asked Jesus this question in a derogatory and sarcastic manner or he may have simply been inquiring in order to obtain a definite answer of His claim. It would not seem to be out of the question if Pilate was displaying a patronizing spirit toward Jesus. Pilate was a cruel man who had little or no regard for the people over which he ruled. In Luke’s Gospel we read of the Lord Jesus Himself making reference to Pilate as one who had inhumanly mixed the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1). And so, his attitude of Pilate toward Jesus may have been derisive: “So, do You really make the claim to be the king of the Jews?”

Jesus’ response is somewhat elusive. We read in **verse 34**, “*Jesus answered him, ‘Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?’*” This would seem to reveal that the nature and tenor of Pilate’s question was disrespectful.¹¹ The Lord pressed upon Pilate to voice his own evaluation of the assertion that He was the king of the Jews. It also seems to suggest that Jesus was subtly challenging Pilate as to whether or not the Jewish leaders were in reality manipulating Pilate to their own ends.

Similar to the Jewish “trial,” Jesus again has reversed roles so that the interrogator receives the interrogation and the accuser becomes the accused. The very foundation of Pilate’s rule is being challenged by the probing counter question of Jesus.

¹¹ Klink, p. 763.

Here we see that although Jesus is interrogated by Pilate, He was in no way intimidated by Pilate. Jesus is confident, assertive, unassuming, and appears to have been in control of the direction in which this conversation was about to unfold. Even though Pilate was the governor of the land, Jesus would be governing this interview.

Here is another description of what transpired:

In answer to Pilate's question, *Art Thou the king of the Jews?* Jesus asks whether the question proceeds from a spontaneous recognition that he is in the presence of royalty (1:49; 12:13), or whether it is an echo of the Jewish accusation (Luke 23:2). Pilate disclaims the first and avows the second, asking Jesus what Jesus had done to justify the accusation. Jesus then states quite clearly that a kingdom and sovereign authority and power are His by right, but that the source of His authority is not *of this world*. He does not say that this world is not the sphere of His authority, but that His authority is not of human origin. The other-worldly nature of His authority is, moreover, patent from the fact that no military forces operate on His behalf. No soldiers are present to prevent the King of the Jews from falling into their hands. The action of Peter is therefore again disavowed. And yet neither here nor in 19:9 does Jesus openly say that He is the Son of God, who has come from heaven for the salvation of the world. Pilate, however, concludes that Jesus is a king, *So then Thou art a king*. Jesus reminds him that he (Pilate) first introduced the title. But, rightly understood, the title is correct. The nature of His sovereignty corresponds with the nature of His mission. He is the king of Truth, and He manifests His royal power not by force, but by the witness He bears to the Truth (3:32; 5:33; cf. 3 John 3). For this He was born, and for this He entered the world. His loyal subjects are therefore not those who fight, but those who, being of the Truth, obey their King.¹²

Pilate seems to have then answered Jesus in a dismissive fashion. **Verse 35** records, "***Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?'***" One wrote, "Pilate responds with an indignant, not to say contemptuous, exclamation, "I am not a Jew, am I?"

When Pilate asked, "What have You done?", it would appear that Pilate assumed that there was some reason underlying it all, that which the Jewish leaders had not been forthcoming. Surely Jesus must have done something that resulted in their hostility toward Him and their bent on having Him crucified.

Then our Lord again responded in **verse 36**, which is one of the most important and fundamental declarations regarding the nature of the kingdom of God. We read, "***Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.'***"

Yes, Jesus is a king and He has a kingdom, but it is unlike any kingdom that Pilate had experienced or had envisioned. It was spiritual in nature, not physical. It was in the realm proclamation and embracing truth. It was not a kingdom established and broadened the through power subjugating people to subservience. Jesus declared that His kingdom was of a nature that would never call for armed resistance or insurrection.

The kingship of Jesus is not like an earthly kingship. It does not spring from the earth: it was not given to Him by any earthly power, and it is totally different in character. Thus, for example, it does not employ earthly means. If Christ's kingship had been earthly in origin and character, He would have had officers ("underlings") – just like the Sanhedrin, for instance, which had its police-force, and just like Pilate, who had his Roman guards ---, and these would have been fighting, so that He would not have been handed over to ... here we would expect "the Romans," but Jesus says, "*the Jews!*" Far from

¹² Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, **The Fourth Gospel** (Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), pp. 520f.

trying to lead the Jews in a revolt against the Romans, Jesus considers these Jews His opponents. Have they not delivered Him up to Pilate?¹³

When Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God--His kingdom--was not of this world, He was not saying that His kingdom was so detached from the world that there would be no influence or power to affect or change the world. Indeed, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus is over all the kingdoms of the world. But His kingdom would not achieve universal and absolute dominion through violence or force.

It is important to see 'that Jesus' statement should not be misconstrued as meaning that His kingdom is not *active* in this world, or *has nothing to do with* this world' (Beasley-Murray, p. 331). John certainly expects the power of the inbreaking kingdom to affect this world; elsewhere he insists that the world is conquered by those who believe in Jesus (1 John 5:4). But theirs is the sort of struggle, and victory, that cannot effectively be opposed by armed might.¹⁴

But it would seem that Pilate latched on to the fact that He had claimed to be a king, even if He regarded it as a kingdom that was no political or armed threat to Rome.

Here is the remainder of this interchange which is in **verses 37 through 38a**:

³⁷*Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?"*

Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

³⁸*Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all."*

In verse 36 Jesus had described His kingdom negatively, what His kingdom was not. He said, 'My kingdom is not of this world... My kingdom is not from here.'" But in verse 37 He described His kingdom positively--what it was. His kingdom was centered upon Him bearing witness to the truth. Those who hear and understand, comes to the truth by hearing and believing the words of Jesus, which He declares to be, "My voice."

To be a king was the reason He was born, the reason He came into the world: in the context of the Fourth Gospel, this pair of expressions refers to the incarnation, His move from the glory He shared with the Father in His presence (17:5) to His manifestation in this fallen world to manifest something of that glory (1:14). Only here in this Gospel is the birth of Jesus unambiguously mentioned. He came, in short, to be a king – or, otherwise put, *to testify to the truth*. The parallelism suggests His kingdom is the kingdom of truth; or, more precisely put, the exercise of His saving kingship is virtually indistinguishable from His testifying of the truth. In this context, *truth* is understood in more than an intellectual sense; it is nothing less than the self-disclosure of God in His Son, who is the truth (14:6). Disclosing the truth of God, of salvation and of judgment, was the principle way of making subjects, of exercising His saving kingship.¹⁵

Verse 38 records the official verdict of the Roman authority that Jesus was no threat to Rome, that He did not warrant punishment. Pilate went out again to the Jews and said to them, "***I find no fault in Him at all.***" But the Jews will show themselves to be intractable. They would demand the death of Jesus to be declared and administered.

¹³ William Hendriksen, **John**, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), pp. 408f.

¹⁴ Carson, p. 594.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 595.

As we conclude our consideration of this first portion of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, let us consider the confident demeanor, the quiet dignity, the serene calmness that characterized our Lord even as He was being tried, accused falsely, even while possessing the knowledge of what He would soon face upon His cross. He dealt with matters with the knowledge that God His Father had called Him and had brought Him to this time and place in which He would suffer and die. But He knew that regardless of this, and even through this very means, that He would come into His kingdom, which would encompass and rule over all the world.

Our understanding of our role and place within the kingdom of God should result in us viewing and reacting similarly to events that are unfolding in our world that may appear threatening and detrimental to our well-being. Regardless of what falls out in the kingdoms of this world, the kingdom of God of which we are citizens and the glory of which we share as believers in our King, should lead us and cause us to show forth a confident demeanor, a quiet dignity, and enjoy a serene calmness regardless of what comes. There are many that are quite distressed and worried about what is has come upon our nation and what may yet come upon us through this election cycle and as other events unfold before us. Let us affirm in faith that our Lord will use whatever falls out to bring about the expansion of His kingdom through the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of His people. The kingdom of Christ will not rise or fall depending on the outcome of an election or of some social or political cause that may have earthly implications and ramifications. God has determined that He will use the same kinds of means that He used in the exaltation of His Son to exalt us to our share in His kingdom. Let us stand in faith and enjoy the peace and rest that our Savior secured for us, even as we face and endure whatever might be thrown at us. Jesus Christ is Lord, and He is executing the decrees of His Father in history.

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"; ²³who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:21-25)
