

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XXI

THE ARREST OF JESUS AND TRIALS BEFORE ANNAS, CAIAPHAS AND PILATE

I. The Gospel according to John presents the passion and death of Jesus in terms of Jesus fully in control of the situation and fulfilling His role as the Passover sacrifice, the King, and the new Adam. The other major figures in the narrative, by contrast, are controlled by other forces.

A. Jesus begins the passion in a garden, is buried in a garden, and, after the resurrection, first looks like a gardener, all reflecting His restoration of the communion with God that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the garden of Eden.

1. He also takes up the thorns and death that were a part of the punishments levied out to Adam.

2. Pilate brings Him out to the crowd and says, "Behold, the man," which in Hebrew would be "Behold, Adam." While on the Cross, He says to John, "Behold, thy mother," which in Hebrew would be "Behold, thy Eve."

3. At His death, He says, "It is finished," reflecting the completion of a new creation. See Gen. 1:2.

B. In His discourse with Pilate, Jesus begins to claim the title of king, albeit a kingdom that does not belong to this world. Pilate and his soldiers also call Him "the King of the Jews," not realizing the implications of what they saying.

C. Jesus is slaughtered just as the lambs for the Passover are being slaughtered.

1. John presents the Passover as beginning at sunset on Friday, in contrast with the Synoptic Gospels, which present it as going from Thursday to Friday. It may be that the Passover was on Friday to Saturday, but Jesus moved it a day earlier, consistent with some rabbinical practices that would avoid a conflict between the Passover and the Sabbath.

2. Consistent with the requirements for a Passover lamb, none of His bones were broken. See Ex. 12:46.

D. By contrast, the leaders in Jerusalem increasingly accept the foreign rule of Caesar, finally saying, "We have no king but Caesar," They thus reject the prophecies of a great and glorious king from the line of David. See, e.g., Zech. 6:9-15; 9:9-17.

E. The secular authority Pilate is trapped and gives into popular opinion and threats of reports back to the emperor.

F. Peter is also controlled by fear, although he is unlike the others, basically well intentioned.

1. He does make a clumsy effort to defend Jesus in striking the high priest's servant and cutting off his ear. And he follows Jesus to the praetorium. But he cannot follow through on his resolution to stay with Jesus even unto death.

2. However, the Gospels will relate Peter being forgiven and giving a three-fold affirmation of Jesus' knowledge that he loves Him, which occurs around a charcoal fire, as the denials did.

II. The arrest in the garden demonstrates that Jesus is fully in charge.

A. John does not identify the garden itself, probably wanting to emphasize the fact of it being a garden more than anything else. He does say that it is across the Valley of Kidron, a wadi, i.e., a river bed that is usually dry but that fills up quickly after rains. There is perhaps a hint of fulfilling what Joshua did when he led the Chosen People across the Jordan Valley into the Promised Land.

- The text indicates that Judas knows Jesus will be there, but also that Jesus fully knows what is going to happen.

B. There are apparently both Temple guards and Roman soldiers arresting Jesus, indicating that the Jewish authorities have already begun bringing the pagan Romans into their plots, either with or without Pilate's consent. If it was a full cohort as the term (speira) suggests, there were 600 Roman soldiers, plus the Temple guards.

C. Despite the massive show of force against a small band, Jesus is in charge, challenging them with a question about whom they are looking for. The soldiers (apparently even the pagan ones) fall back in fear when Jesus says "I am," reflecting again the divine name from Exodus. See also Ps. 56:10.

D. Jesus then commands them to let the other Apostles go. He does not wish to lose any of them, both in the simple sense of allowing them to die before the mission of reconstituting the Kingdom on earth has been completed, but also in the sense of allowing them to die before they know the saving power of Jesus' death and Resurrection. There is also a strong note of obedience to the Father, for Jesus the text says that the Father gave the disciples to Jesus, see also John 17:12, not simply that

Jesus chose them, although He did also do that. See John 15:16. Jesus also soon speaks again of the cup that He must take. The symbolism is both one of suffering, as Matthew, Mark and Luke indicate, see Matt. 26:29; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42, Ps. 11:3, Is. 51:17, 22, Zech. 12:2, Hab. 2:15, and one of winning God's blessings. See, e.g., Ps. 16:5, 23:5, 116:13.

E. Peter, loyal but still misunderstanding the situation, makes a valiant but hopeless attempt to defend Jesus, cutting off the Malchus' ear. It would seem from the situation that he was not trying to kill, but rather give a warning. Jesus then indicates again that He must suffer the arrest and crucifixion.

III. The trials before Annas and Caiaphas alternate with the denials of Peter.

A. John describes the first trial before Annas with more detail.

- Anna was the former high priest, whom the Romans deposed in 15 A.D. However, because the Romans had no authority to do so, many people considered him to be the high priest, or at least joint high priest with his son-in-law Caiaphas.

B. Under Jewish law, there was a sort of right against self-incrimination. Crimes were supposed to be provable by other witnesses. As the other Gospels indicate, the Sanhedrin was having trouble getting two witnesses to agree, as required for criminal convictions under Jewish law. See Deut 17:6, 19:15.

C. Jesus points out that none of His teachings were in secret. This approach stands in dramatic contrast to the Gnostic sects, which believed that there was a secret knowledge available only to the few. See, e.g., Rev. 2:24. Jesus' testimony is available to all. It is true that He does explain the parables only to the Apostles, see Mark 4:10-12, but even then the parables themselves were available to all.

D. The lawless violence of the court is demonstrated by the soldier striking Jesus, in contrast to Jesus' reasoned response.

E. The Gospel according to John only mentions the trial before Caiaphas in passing. The other Gospels describe Jesus plainly telling the Sanhedrin, in response to a direct question from Caiaphas, that He is the Son of God and the Messiah. This Gospel focuses more on Jesus identifying Himself as the new King.

F. The denials by Peter are in all four Gospels, indicating the fame of that event. Peter is not treacherous as Judas is, nor unconcerned with truth as Pilate and the Jewish leaders are. Rather, he simply does not have enough courage to defend Jesus when the situation seems hopeless. It should be remembered that nine other Apostles were nowhere in sight, and John was partially protected both by his youth and by his contacts with the priestly family. (It seems likely that John himself, and therefore, James, were from a priestly family.)

- Peter's statements "I am not" stand in contrast to Jesus' bold statement "I AM" the one they are looking for.

IV. The trial before Pilate contrasts dramatically the kingship of Jesus, the cowardice of Pilate, and the fury of the crowds.

A. The overall structure forms a sort of chiasm, focusing on the kingship of Jesus.

B. The first half of the trial goes from: (1) the Jewish authorities demanding Jesus's death by the Romans; (2) Pilate's inquiry about Jesus and His kingdom; (3) Pilate's declaration that Jesus is innocent and the demands of the crowd for His death; and (4) the abuse of Jesus with a crown of thorns and a purple cloak.

C. The central theme "the King of the Jews," is here spoken by the soldiers in mockery, but really meaning much more than they can imagine.

D. The second half of the trial then goes in the reverse direction: (1) the soldiers striking Jesus; (2) Pilate declaring Jesus innocent again and the crowds demanding His death; (3) the inquiry by Pilate, here focusing on true power and responsibility; and (4) the crowd demanding Jesus' death by crucifixion

E. The scene begins with the crowds demanding Jesus' death by the Romans. They could have assassinated Him in secret or organized a stoning, and the Romans may well have looked the other way. See, e.g., John 7:59; 9:1-11; Acts 7:54-50. But without the public execution and the involvement of the Romans, they would be worried about a riot breaking out because of the injustice. In addition, the prophecies of slaughter by scourging and piercing the flesh had to be fulfilled. See, e.g., Is. 53:5, Zech. 12:10. Because they want a public execution with the Roman's on their side, the leaders recognize and seem to accept the fact that they have no right to execute anyone.

F. The Gospel implies that the crowds brought a charge of sedition against Jesus, for Pilate immediately asks Jesus whether He is

the King of the Jews.

1. Jesus' reply suggests to Pilate that if He were really fermenting a rebellion, Pilate should have heard about it before now. It should be clear to Pilate that this charge was trumped up as a guise for the real issue, i.e. Jesus' challenge of the religious authority of the Jewish leaders.

2. Pilate in frustration puts the blame for the situation on the Jewish leaders, which will be a continuing theme.

3. Jesus then indicates that the term king is accurate, but not in the way that Pilate thinks. This will be a kingdom in which the stable force of truth reigns supreme, not the ups and downs of popularity or political power. Pilate's question "What is truth?" could be one of scorn or puzzlement. Either way, it is clear that he is coming from an environment of scepticism, in contrast to the truth that Jesus promotes, which alone can set His People free. See, e.g., John 8:32.

- Jesus indicates that, if His kingdom were like that of Caesar, His attendants would be fighting for Him. The angels are certainly His attendants. See Matt. 26:53. But He could also mean that if He provided monetary and political rewards and threatened violent punishments as the Romans did, He could have easily had a revolutionary army. See, e.g., John 6:15.

4. Pilate quickly realizes that Jesus poses no political threat to the Roman Empire and tries to release Jesus. Pilate calls Jesus the King of the Jews, indicating to the crowds that He was very willing to give them a certain type of king. But they call for the release of political revolutionary (who was also a murderer, see Mark 15:7.) John focuses on the irrationality of demanding the release of a political revolutionary at the same time as they are rejecting their true King and accepting Roman rule.

G. In a desperate attempt to placate the crowd, Pilate has Jesus scourged. The soldiers add additional suffering and indignities, not realizing that their words, "The King of the Jews" are true beyond their imagining. The scene may reflect cruelty on their part and/or a mockery of the Jewish desires for their own nation.

- Pilate then brings Jesus out, hoping to stir up pity, or at least a diminishment of the rage against Jesus. But the attempt produces the opposite effect.

- Whether Pilate is thinking about it or not, he is also imitating the general custom of presenting a new king in royal robes and with his new name. Here the robes of Christ represent His taking upon Himself the punishment for sin, and His name (the man) indicates His restoration of mankind.

- When the crowd says that Jesus "made Himself" the Son of God, Pilate becomes afraid, possibly fearing the passions of the crowd, or possibly fearing that Jesus may in fact be divine, and that he (Pilate) has just had him scourged.

H. Pilate then asks Jesus where He is from, possibly trying to figure out where this claim to divinity come from.

- As with Herod, Jesus at first gives no answer, for Pilate is not capable of grasping Jesus' words.

- Then Jesus speaks to Pilate in his own terms, saying that all his authority is from above. There is a play on words here. At the basic level, all of Pilate's authority comes from the Emperor. But on a deeper level, which Pilate may or may not have understood, all rightful authority comes from God alone. Because final authority comes from God, the religious leaders, who should represent God, are more guilty than Pilate, who is basically a worldling.

- Even now, Jesus is in full command of the situation.

I. Pilate again wants to release Jesus, but the crowds now up the ante and threaten to tell the Emperor that Pilate was not worthy to be called a "Friend of Caesar." That term was an honorific title bestowed on some of the royal officials. Pilate either has that title or would like to obtain it. But the crowds here are threatening that, if he releases Jesus, they will tell the Emperor (at this time Tiberius) that Pilate is allowing Jesus to oppose Roman rule.

J. Pilate, probably angry at the crowds for backing him into a corner, mockingly (but truthfully) sits Jesus down on a stone seat, as a judge would be seated, and says, "Behold, your king." For it is the suffering of Jesus that would test and judge the world.

- The crowd has worked itself up into such an excitement that they people now reject any idea of having their own king. Part of the idea here is that, if one will not accept Jesus as king, someone else (here the Romans) will be dominant. Independence from any power is in the end impossible. The choice is between the loving and self-sacrificing power of God and the political power of the pagans.