

Study Notes for [John 18:28-40](#)

THE TRIAL OF THE KING I

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Setting:

The passage begins just before dawn (likely around 6:00 AM) Friday morning (18:28). The two sham 'trials' are now over. The first trial had been before Annas the emeritus high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas the current high priest (18:19-23); and second trial was before Caiaphas and Sanhedrin (18:24). In John's gospel little is said about this second trial before Caiaphas. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke however have much more to say and are important to read at this point (See [Matthew 26:57,59-68,27:1](#); [Mark 14:55-65,15:1](#); [Luke 22:54,63-65](#)). It is clear in the second trial that Caiaphas was only interested in a conviction which would lead to Jesus' death. Caiaphas understood Jesus' response to their question of whether he was the Messiah to be blasphemy ([Mark 14:61-62](#)) requiring a death sentence. However, the Romans had not given the Jewish province of Judea the right to apply the death sentence on crimes adjudicated by Jewish courts. Instead, they had to go before the Roman governor who at this time was Pilate. Conveniently, Pilate was in town. Normally he would have been in his own city of Caesarea ([Acts 23:35](#)) where the permanent residence for the governor of Judea was. Pilate was likely in Jerusalem because of the Passover Feast. He, as well as Herod Antipas, were there to help keep watch over the festival since it always brought out a great deal of unrest from the Zealots.

Pilate had been appointed governor of Judea just four years earlier (26 AD) by the emperor Tiberius and he continued as governor until 37 AD. He was a tactless leader who often offended the Jews and his tenure included several incidents of bloodshed ([Luke 13:1](#)). Pilate had already lost face by putting the Roman Eagle in the Temple. Tiberius Caesar told him to remove it. Pilate also raided the Temple treasury to help build the aqueduct. Again Tiberius Caesar told him to return the money. So Pilate was compromised with respect to Rome. Pilate was governor for ten years and then he was removed and not heard from again. Yet is still remembered by Christians. In the Apostles Creed, the entire world for generations past and present have regularly repeated the phrase "suffered under Pontius Pilate." Dorothy Sayers writes that this may have been the troubled dream that Pilate's wife had ([Matthew 27:19](#)).

Notes:

18:28 John tells us nothing of what took place at Caiaphas' house other than that Jesus was sent there. See the synoptic Gospels for detail ([Matthew 26:57,59-68,27:1](#); [Mark 14:55-65,15:1](#); [Luke 22:54,63-65](#)).

The governor's headquarters (*praetorium*) was not Pilate's permanent residence; it was only used when he needed to be in Jerusalem for business. This included set times when he would adjudicate difficult cases but it also included times when the Romans expected trouble. The Passover Feast was one of those times.

Roman officials often began their work day very early (about 6:00 AM) and so this was likely when Pilate was available. Note John's concern for time throughout the passage.

Entering a Gentile's house would have caused defilement which would have excluded them from participating in the Passover Feast, something they definitely did not want to have happen. Defilement lasted seven days (Morris, 675). Again, the irony of the situation is evident; they were deeply concerned about ritual but unconcerned about moral defilement.

18:29 Because Pilate had most likely already co-operated with the Jewish leaders in arresting Jesus (18:3), the Jewish leaders may now have expected Pilate to rubber stamp their decision. They must have been surprised by his question of "what accusation do you bring¹." It is likely that the Jewish leaders had already sent Pilate a document outlining the charges of Jesus' claim to be king of the Jews and they were now expecting Pilate would simply go along with the charges (Bruce, 350). However, it is clear that Pilate viewed the 'trial' before Annas and Caiaphas as only an interrogation and that their decision to put Jesus to death was just an accusation (NET Bible, 2nd beta Edition). Pilate's earlier co-operation with the leaders did not constitute agreement with them. He was simply trying to keep the peace during a difficult time. This was his main concern. He knew that Jesus had a huge presence and could be the catalyst for a major riot. Pilate is clearly demonstrating to everyone he is in charge and the one with authority and not the Jewish leaders.

18:31 Pilate wanted to keep the peace as much as possible. He needed to show sound and competent judgement because any major problem would get back to Rome and caused trouble for him. Pilate was Rome's sole representative within a very troubled region. There was great concern for the Romans during the Passover Feast in Jerusalem as rioting or even an uprising could occur. It is not surprising then that Pilate passed the decision, for what he knew was an internal Jewish dispute, back to the Jewish leaders. John is also making clear to his readers that the responsibility for Jesus' death rested on the Jewish religious authorities.

"We have no right to execute anyone" – a great deal of historical scholarship has gone into verifying this statement. Rome was very concerned that a local Jewish government would execute persons favourable to Rome. Therefore, when Judea became a Roman province in 6 AD the authority to apply capital punishment was expressly reserved for the Roman governor (Bruce, 351).

18:32 Jewish executions were by stoning, yet it was required that Jesus be crucified. This was the necessary form of execution in order for Jesus to bear God's curse ([Deuteronomy 21:22-23](#)). So, although the responsibility for the death of Jesus fell on the Jewish leaders it was the Romans that put him to death. Again we see God's providential hand to make sure that the events occurred as they should (Bruce, 351).

The statement is a fulfilment of Jesus' earlier prophecy when he said "when I am lifted up from the earth" (12:32). As already noted, Caiaphas's determination to crucify Jesus fulfills God's divine purpose (Morris, 677).

¹ The question does not mean that Pilate did not know the accusation but that he was "simply observing due form and asking for a formal charge" (Morris, 676).

- 18:33 Because of the Jewish leaders' insistence that Jesus must die, Pilate was forced to question Jesus himself. The Jews had told Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah which meant the king of the Jews as well as being the Son of God (1:49)². The first part of the accusation meant breaking Roman law (king of the Jews) and the second part meant breaking Jewish law (claiming to be the Son of God). Either claim carried the death sentence from Rome or from the Jews. Here Pilate asked Jesus directly if the first part of the accusation (are you trying to set yourself up as the king of the Jews and conspiring against Caesar) is true? In effect he was asking Jesus, as a judge, are you "Guilty?" or "Not Guilty?" It is difficult to discern Pilate's own view, however since he later declares Jesus innocent and therefore did not consider Jesus a threat to Roman authority he must have been somewhat surprised at the accusation from Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. In any case, Pilate was trying to discern whether Jesus had committed an offense against the Roman government and whether that offense deserved death.
- 18:34-37 Jesus responded to Pilate's question by giving his own definition of kingship. He was not the kind of king that was known to or understood by the world. It was a kingship that was beyond the jurisdiction of Roman law. Pilate did not understand and so responded with "So, you *are* a king, then?" Jesus replied in effect, "king is your word but if you do use that word my kingdom is the kingdom of truth and the citizens of this kingdom understand me to be their true king." As Bruce states, "Here it is the incarnate Logos who is speaking, the embodiment of eternal truth, now revealed on earth at a particular time and place" (Bruce, 354). Interestingly in John, the term "king" is used exclusively for Jesus (Mounce, 379).
- 18:38 John includes this interchange about truth to encourage his readers to reflect on what truth is; of course, he has already given the reader the answer in 14:6. These words of Jesus seem to be lost on Pilate but John hopes they are not lost on his readers.

The word "truth" is a very significant word for John's Gospel (using it over twenty times). The meaning is not simply the accuracy of a statement. Truth is closely related to God himself. John opens by saying that Jesus came "full of grace and truth." Truth also means 'living the truth.' In 3:21 Jesus says, "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light." In his letter John states that those who claim to have fellowship with Jesus but who continue to walk in darkness "do not live by the truth" (1 John 1:6). Knowledge and living out the truth are one and the same. As well, John states that the Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of truth" (14:16-17; 15:26; 16:13; and see 1 John 4:6; 5:6). The Spirit reveals the truth and defends Christ's followers by testifying to the truth.

It is probably safe to say that Pilate was never interested in truth or justice or understanding the deeper questions. He was only interested in maintaining the status quo and keeping his position as governor in tack (or possibly getting a promotion). He viewed the question of what to do with Jesus as an irritant. He wanted to know how he could dismiss Jesus from his life while still looking good. This has been a common theme for humankind ever since.

² A Davidic king of Israel that was anointed by God was understood to be a son of God by adoption (Psalms 2:7; 89:26f) but the Jewish leaders understood Jesus' claim to be much more because of his actions and his words (5:18; 10:33).

- 18:38b "I find no guilt in him" means that Pilate, despite this last interchange with Jesus, did not understand Jesus' kingship to be, in any way, a threat to Roman peace and law. This is the conclusion he reached and this is the judgement he gave the Jewish leaders. But he also knew that the leaders would be very dissatisfied with his assessment and so he tried to placate them with a favor to release a prisoner. However in doing so he simply could not help himself in not annoying them and so he presented Jesus as "King of the Jews." He had to know this would not go over well. The tension between Pilate and Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin is evident throughout the passage. Pilate wanted to exercise his authority and control while the Jewish leaders were determined that Jesus must die.
- 18:39 This "custom" was likely unique to Pilate as a means of keeping the peace and attempting to achieve better relationship with the Jews.
- 18:40 There has been much speculation about Barabbas' crime. Although the term used in this verse can mean a robber or highwayman, it is much more likely he was a Jewish guerrilla or freedom fighter. In this case, Barabbas would have belonged to the Zealots (as Jesus' two disciples, Simon and Judas did); the group which caused so much trouble for Rome. See [Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:19,25](#). There is certainly irony in this exchange because the name, Barabbas, means "son of the father." Here the Jewish leaders were asking for the "son of the father" while the true "Son of the Father" was being condemned.
- Pilate now had no choice but to release Barabbas but he still had the problem of what to do with Jesus. The next verses tell us what his decision is.

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