

John 18:28-40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] John chapter 18 verses 28 to 40. Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.
- So Pilate went outside to them and said, What accusation do you bring against this man? They answered him, If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you. Pilate said to them, Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.
- The Jews said to him, It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death. This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, Are you the king of the Jews?
- Jesus answered, Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me.
- What have you done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.
- [1 : 0 7] But my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him, So you are a king? Jesus answered, You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.
- Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him, but you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover.
- So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? They cried out again, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. At the beginning of John chapter 18, Jesus has been arrested and has faced Annas and Caiaphas.
- After Peter denied him, Jesus was then sent from Caiaphas to Pilate. This was done early in the morning, probably around dawn, so that this would be the first thing on Pilate's desk in the morning.
- They are dealing with Jesus as a matter of urgency. They are concerned to be able to eat the Passover. This, of course, raises chronological questions. How are we to relate this account to the account that we find within the Synoptic Gospels?
- [2 : 1 5] There are some details in Mark that might support John's chronology, but it seems difficult to reconcile the fact that Jesus eats the Passover with his disciples, and then at this point, the people are preparing to eat the Passover after Jesus has eaten with his disciples and been arrested.
- Unsurprisingly, there have been a number of suggestions put forward. Some have suggested that the Last Supper is an early Passover, that it's connected to the Passover, but not actually the Passover meal itself.

Others have suggested that the disciples were using a different calendar from that of the Judeans. The Jews are using a lunar calendar, but Jesus was using a solar calendar. In John, as in the Synoptic accounts, it would seem that this occurred on a Friday.

The question then is not what day of the week this occurred on, but how it relates to the celebration of the Passover. An important consideration here is that the different Gospel accounts have their differing purposes.

John, as elsewhere, focuses more upon the relationship between the symbol of the Passover and the fulfilment with Christ as the Passover lamb himself. Christ is our Passover, sacrificed for us.

[3 : 19] In the other Gospels, however, there is more of an emphasis upon the new symbol of the Last Supper, which is then connected to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and so there is a connection more between the two symbols than between the symbol and the ultimate reality to which it points.

This fits into John's theology more generally, which connects Jesus with the Lamb of God, the Passover lamb that is sacrificed for the people. It helps us to understand a bit more of the theology of the cross that John is operating in terms of.

Jesus is the Passover lamb. He's the firstborn son, and this gives a very clear Passover context for what takes place on the cross itself. Such a theology is also seen in places like 1 Corinthians chapter 5, where Paul speaks about Christ as our Passover sacrifice for us.

Pilate asked for an accusation about Christ. He isn't particularly keen to get involved. The fact that no compelling charge can be brought against him might serve an apologetic purpose.

Likewise, highlighting the fact that Pilate is a reluctant participant might underline the point. The true enemies in John's Gospel are not the Romans, but Jesus' own people. As the Gospels spread throughout the Roman world, this might have been a helpful point to emphasise.

[4 : 30] Even though he was put to death by the Romans, they were never his primary opponents. The Jews didn't have the authority to give a death sentence, and so they brought Jesus to Pilate, so that they might have a death sentence delivered upon him by Pilate.

Once again, we are reminded that Jesus' word is being fulfilled even as he is being condemned to death. Pilate questions Jesus, presumably after hearing the accusation that he presents himself as the king of the Jews.

Naturally, Pilate would interpret this as revolutionary. On the surface of it, that's what it sounds like. The claim is a political one. Jesus needs to be challenged as such a figure. There are details within John's Gospel that would seem to give some substance to such a claim.

Jesus had a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which suggests some sort of royal aspiration. The people wanted to make him king after the feeding of the 5,000. But yet, as he speaks to Pilate, it becomes clear that Jesus' kingdom is not what Pilate might have expected.

Jesus defines himself not primarily as the king of the Jews. That is a title that was given to him by others. He never fully owns it. Rather, he thinks of his kingdom in terms of truth rather than in terms of ethnic identity.

[5 : 39] His is a different sort of kingdom. He's the king of the Jews, but that's not primarily the way to understand him. If he really were a pretender to be the king of the Jews in the way that the Judean leaders were presenting him to be and in the way that Pilate initially presumed, his servants would have fought to protect him.

But they didn't. Rather, Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom of truth. Truth might mean different things to different ears. To the ears of a Greek, it might be associated with philosophical claims about the nature of reality.

To a Roman, it might be more about factual accuracy of things that occurred. And to a Jew, it might be more about God's covenant faithfulness. Pilate's response, what is truth, is ambiguous.

Probably he's dismissing Jesus as a mere philosopher, a harmless, innocuous figure for Pilate's political purposes. He's not really a political challenge to the Romans. He's just someone who's an annoyance to the Judean leaders who have their own peculiar religious sectarian objections against him.

Pilate wants to set Jesus free, but he does not want to aggravate the crowd and the Jewish leaders. And so he refers to the custom of absolution at the time of the Passover. The Jews, however, insist that he should release Barabbas, the insurrectionist, instead.

[6 : 49] They falsely present Jesus as a political revolutionary, but then they asked for an actual violent revolutionary to be released to them instead of him. This is an example of some of the irony that's going on in John's Gospel.

John frequently uses irony to highlight and to contrast certain things, to help us to perceive what is really taking place. A question to consider.

In his conversation with Pilate, Jesus speaks about his kingdom. At this point, we might start to wonder why this is such a rare occurrence within John's Gospel. Neither Jesus nor John the narrator typically speak about the kingdom.

In the other Gospels, however, we have constant references to the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. Yet it's very rare that we find references to it in John's Gospel. Why might this be? Why might this be?