

### Exegesis

**Vs. 33** – Returning to the “judgment hall again,” Pilate “called Jesus and said unto him, “Art thou the King of the Jews?” Pilate's question reveals how the Jews tried to obtain a death sentence for Jesus. Jesus' claim to be the "Son of God" was equivalent to saying he was the "King of Israel" (cf. 1:49). Anyone who held the messianic title also staked a claim on the Davidic throne. However, considering Tiberius Caesar was the ruling monarch, anyone with aspirations to rule would be viewed as a traitor. For Rome, the penalty for treason was crucifixion.

Interestingly, Pilate's question is recorded in all four gospels (cf. Matt. 27:11; Mar. 15:2; Lu. 23:3). In Greek, "thou" heads the sentence, showing its emphatic.<sup>1</sup> This means his question was more contemptuous than contemplative—i.e., “*YOU'RE* the King of the Jews?!”<sup>2</sup> This aligns with the theory that this moniker became like a “grim joke” to Pilate, where he'd use it repeatedly to not only demean Jesus but mock the Jews (cf. vs. 39; 19:3, 19-22).<sup>3</sup> In the eyes of Pilate, the accusation that this unassuming man claimed to be the “King of the Jews” was so bizarre that it was silly.

**Vs. 34-35** – Before Jesus can answer Pilate truthfully, *ownership* of that question had to be established. Depending on who was really asking the question would determine his response. This is why the Lord asks the governor, “Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?” Had Pilate's question come from his own reflection, Jesus' response would've addressed the governor personally. This sort of question would demonstrate that Pilate was motivated by a drive to know the truth. But if the question had come from "others"—i.e., the Jews—Jesus' response would need to address the claims of the Jews. This sort of question would demonstrate that the governor was merely a means to an end, a pawn in the hands of a bloodthirsty Jewish mob.

What's more, it's remarkable that the Lord answers Pilate with a *question*. As when Jesus stood before Annas (vs. 21), the tables have been turned. Jesus is not the defendant; he's the prosecutor. Everyone else is on trial, with the Lord as the DA, interrogating the suspects. John's audience is the jury, and already, we've been given more than enough evidence to incriminate the world and exonerate the Son of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris (1995), p. 679.

<sup>2</sup> Carson (1991), p. 592.

<sup>3</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 527, citing Michaels (1989: 317), “All that happens...is the product of Pilate's sick and anti-Semitic sense of humor. He seems obsessed throughout with the grim joke that Jesus is the Jew's king.”

Pilate responds with a rhetorical question: "Am I a Jew?" The governor took great pride in the fact that he *wasn't* a Jew. To suggest that he might've wondered if Jesus was, indeed, the "king of Jews" was an absurd notion. And so, as if to confirm our suspicions that he was nothing more than a puppet, Pilate admits, "Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me." The only reason the two of them were even having this conversation was because of Jesus' "own" people and leadership.

All this hearsay was getting tedious. This is why Pilate asked Jesus, "What has thou done?" Setting aside the claims to be king, what had this man done to earn him an execution? If he aspired for the throne, where's the proof? Where's his army? Had he amassed a large arsenal? Has he undermined Roman rule in any way? Enough talk. It was time to see if the Jew's request was warranted.

**Vs. 36** – The Jews had pegged Jesus as a threat to Roman rule. This could not be further from the truth. This is why Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world." Unlike the Synoptics, where kingdom language is used frequently, reference to the "kingdom of God" is sparse in John's account. In fact, it only occurs outside the passion in two other instances: 3:3-5 and 6:15. In both cases, the idea of an actual earthly kingdom is *discouraged*. Jesus was not a political rival to Caesar. His throne wasn't of this realm; it was otherworldly, a point emphasized by Christians during the second century. For instance, when Domitian questions the sons of Jude, the Lord's half-brother, about the nature of Christ's kingdom, they reassure the Roman emperor that "it was not a temporal nor an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly and angelic one, which would appear at the end of the world, when [Jesus] should come in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and to give unto every one according to his works."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus admits that he does, indeed, have a kingdom, but its *nature* is distinct from those in the world. Had the Kingdom of God been of the kind Pilate was familiar with, Jesus' "servants [would] fight." If, as the Jews had claimed, Jesus threatened Rome, his followers wouldn't have allowed their king to "be delivered to the Jews." The fact that there wasn't a skirmish going on outside the walls of Pilate's palace suggests that Jesus' "kingdom [is] not from thence," which is to say, it is unlike anything he's encountered before. Namely, his realm is not *militaristic*, which, by the world's standards, was unheard of. And though critics might rightly point to Peter's actions in Gethsemane as warlike (vs. 10), they must admit that Jesus healed Malchus' ear (cf. Lu. 22:50-51). Except for his own, Jesus did not want bloodshed; he would even mend the wounds of his enemy to ensure peace.

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<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.19,20

Of course, this is not to say Christians *must* be pacifists. Violence is allowed if it seeks to uphold God's justice (i.e., abolition of slavery in the Civil War), protection/self-defense (cf. Ex. 22:2-3; Lu. 22:36), or prevents further loss of life (i.e., Bonhoeffer's attempted assassination of Hitler). However, such cases are the *exception*, not the rule. Too often, the Church has used violent tactics to impose its law (i.e., forced conversions of Saxons by Charlemagne, the Crusades, John Calvin burning Michael Servetus at the stake, etc.).<sup>5</sup> We must remember that the Lord did not say "blessed are the warmongers" but "blessed are the *peacemakers* [emphasis add]" (cf. Mat. 5:9). Almost always, when we've raised our fists to fight, rather than offer the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), we've left the way of Christ. We've been given the ministry of reconciliation, not retaliation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:11-21). We ought to love our enemies, not fight them (cf. Matt. 5:43-48).

**Vs. 37** – But Pilate is not interested in the nature of Jesus' kingdom. All he heard was that the Lord admitted to being a king. This is why he says, "[So, you are] a king then?" Jesus affirms his kingly station by saying, "Thou sayest that I am a king." Another way of translating that verse is, "You say *rightly* that I am king" (NKJV), or "You say *correctly* that I am a king" (NASB).<sup>6</sup> Jesus may have denied being Caesar's enemy, but he did not deny being a king.

However, as was the case with Jesus' kingdom, the *nature* of his kingship is unlike any that has ever existed. The Lord explains, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." This is the only reference in John's account to Jesus' birth. And it comes a pivotal moment. Every king has a prerogative, endowed to them at birth. But Jesus' birthright wasn't subjugation, domination, or even occupation, at least not in the way Pilate understood those things, but *attestation*. The Lord was born to "bear witness unto the truth." The essence of Jesus' monarchy is truth itself; it is a reality that is accurate, genuine, and legitimate. The kings of the world may feign authenticity, but they are pale shadows when compared to Jesus Christ, King of kings. Just as the sheep of the Good Shepherd listen to their master's voice (cf. 10:27), so "every one that is of the truth heareth [Jesus] voice." All lovers of truth will listen to the Lord.

**Vs. 38** – Pilate looks Jesus straight in the eyes and says, "What is truth?" And then John tells us, "When he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all." Considering that he did not wait for a response, we can assume that the man did not ask this question sincerely; it was rhetorical. In other words, "what is truth" is the same as saying, "there is no truth." The governor didn't believe there was any truth in the world, or, if

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* by John Dickson (Zondervan; 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Carson (1991), p. 594.

there was, it would be impossible to know anything was true even if it was standing right in front of him. Life had made Pilate distrustful, so much so that he easily dismissed *everything* Jesus said.

The governor's response reveals why he had become so cynical. His problem was that he thought truth was an *object* instead of a *person*; he assumed *something* would give his life meaning rather than *someone* (cf. Matt. 10:39).<sup>7</sup> The passage of time had led him to believe that there was nothing of substance in the world; he had given up hope. One wonders how different things might've been had he asked, "Who is truth?" Jesus might've answered, "Me." Or, if he had asked, "Where is truth?" The Lord might've pointed to himself and said, "Here." Even the question, "What is truth," already had an answer: *the Son of God is truth* (cf. 14:6).

However, Pilate didn't stick around for a reply, did he? He only wanted to ask questions. It was better to remain ignorant than face an uncomfortable truth, better to believe a lie than come to grips with reality, better to think you're okay than admit you're not and have to change. No. Pilate liked the so-called "truth" he had made for himself; sure, it was subjective, but it was also comfortable.

Ironically, though Pilate refused to admit to the truth, as presented through Jesus Christ, he had enough sense to say, "I find in him no fault at all." Despite the Jews' best efforts, Pilate didn't consider Jesus a threat to Rome (cf. Lu. 23:14-16). Or, at the very least, he didn't deserve crucifixion. Either way, Pilate couldn't find any "basis for legal action."<sup>8</sup>

**Vs. 29-40** – Though Jesus is innocent, Pilate doesn't release him; he opts for a different path. He says that the Jews had a "custom" where he would "release unto [them] one at the Passover." Such a practice is yet unknown in the extrabiblical literature.<sup>9</sup> But given that all four gospels recount this event (cf. Matt. 27:15; Mar. 15:6; Lu. 23:18), we have no basis to question its validity.

Pilate asks, "Will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews?" Referring to Jesus, yet again, as the "King of the Jews," wasn't an admission of the Lord's sovereignty but a way to further antagonize the Jews. Had he been an honest man, Pilate would've freed Jesus then and there. Instead, he took this opportunity to prolong the proceedings. Why? Because he was having too much fun, he wasn't ready for the ride to be over.

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<sup>7</sup> Klink (2016), p. 767.

<sup>8</sup> Klink (2016), p. 767.

<sup>9</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 530.

But this tactic backfired. John tells us, “Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas.” And then our faithful narrator explains, “Now Barabbas was a robber.” While the terms “robber” and “thief” may refer to the same thing in today’s vernacular, there seems to be a distinction in the N.T. (cf. 12:6). The Greek term for “robber” is **ληστής** (*lēistēs*), and while this isn't always the case (cf. Lu. 19:46), whenever it is used, it is often used in contexts where there violence is involved (cf. Lu. 10:30). Whereas, with the term “thief”—i.e., **κλέπτης** (*kléptēs*)—almost always refers to common theft (cf. Mat. 6:19). In other words, of the two terms, a “robber” was thought to be more combative and far more violent than a “thief.” And given how *lēistēs* was used in the first century, we can assume that Barabbas was no mere burglar but an “insurrectionist”!<sup>10</sup>

Köstenberger explains,

“Josephus frequently uses the term for those engaged in revolutionary guerilla warfare who, harboring mixed motives of plunder and nationalism, roamed the Jewish countryside in those volatile days. The term applies particularly to the Zealots, who had made armed resistance against Rome the consuming passion of their lives and who were committed to attaining national liberty by all means, including risk of their own lives.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, rather than release a man he *knew* was innocent, Pilate had to release a man he *knew* was guilty. And this Barabbas wasn’t just guilty of stealing; he was an aggressive criminal who had murdered someone (cf. Mar. 15:7). Pilate should’ve quit while he was ahead. Instead, because of his ineptitude, the bright and morning star took the place of a blight on society. The Jews have chosen the “robber” over the “Good Shepherd” (cf. 10:8) and, in doing so, they proved they were not of God’s flock.

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<sup>10</sup> Keener (2003), 2:1117; Carson (1991), p. 596, uses the terms “terrorist” and “a guerilla” to describe *lēistēs*.

<sup>11</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 530.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

### **Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 82 | John 18:33-40**

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

While looking at the Truth Incarnate in the eyes, Pilate will ask, "What is truth?" A Roman governor ought to be more perceptive than that. But, as we'll see, he was no more discerning than the Jews.

In fact, Pilate and the Sanhedrin made quite the comedic pair together. They will be so blinded that they will choose Barabbas over Jesus, a blight on society for the bright and morning star. There has never been a worse trade than this: a convicted murderer for the miracle-working Son of God!

**Pastor's manuscript can be found here:**

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