

Exegesis

19:1 – The Jews chose Barabbas over Jesus, and so, John tells us, “Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him.” While the scourging of Jesus is a well-known feature of the Passion, its placement at this point in the timeline creates an apparent contradiction. According to the synoptic tradition (cf. Matt. 27:26; Mar. 15:15), Jesus was scourged *after* he was sentenced to death, not *before*. Did John get the events mixed up? No.

In Matthew and Mark, the authors use the Greek term **φραγελλῶ** (*phragellōō*) to describe the “scourging” that Jesus received *after* he was sentenced to death. Nowhere else is this term used in either the N.T. or the Greek translation of the O.T.—i.e., the Septuagint (LXX). Given that the word is used *in tandem* with the crucifixion implies that this sort of scourging was reserved for those who would be crucified as well.¹ Though not used in the N.T., two Greek terms refer to a form of torture that was paired with a crucifixion: *flagella* and the *verberatio*.² In both cases, the condemned would be stripped and then thrashed with a leather whip called a “*flagrum*,” whose multiple cords had been embedded with bone, lead, or some other material.³ This type of scourging could leave skeletal structures exposed and entrails ripped out, and, unsurprisingly, it would often lead to death.⁴

In contrast, John does not use the term *phragellōō* for “scourged,” but **μαστιγῶ** (*mastigōō*). And while it can be translated as “scourged,” it is better understood as “flogged,” as it was a *less severe* form of punishment.⁵ Do not misunderstand. The sort of lashing John is referring to is still quite painful (cf. 2 Cor. 11:24), but it was *not* life-threatening (cf. Mat. 10:17; 23:34; LXX Ex. 5:14-16). In fact, as with *flagella* and *verberatio*, the Romans had a term for this type of punishment too: *fustigatio*. In a *fustigatio*, criminals would be whipped, given a severe warning, and then released (cf. Ac. 5:40-41).⁶

Coincidentally, John’s “flogging” aligns perfectly with Luke’s account of how, *before* sentencing Jesus to crucifixion, Pilate wanted to “chastise” Jesus (cf. Lu. 23:16, 22). The Beloved Physician uses the Greek term **παιδεύω** (*paideūō*), and like *mastigōō*, it refers to a mode of punishment

¹ Köstenberger (2008), p. 531.

² Kruse (2017), p. 420.

³ This is distinct from the “cat o’ nine tails,” a whip seemingly based on the Roman *flagrum*. However, the 17th-century scourge had knotted ends rather than having some embedded material.

⁴ Carson (1991), p. 597; Morris (1995), p. 699.

⁵ “Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him” (ESV); “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged,” (NIV); “So Pilate then took Jesus and had Him flogged” (NASB); “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged” (CSB).

⁶ Köstenberger (2008), p. 531; Carson (1991), p. 597; Kruse (2017), p. 420; contra Keener (2003), 2:118-119; Klink (2016), p. 776.

that, while serious, is not so vicious that a recipient might die. In fact, we see this distinction in how the two words are used throughout the New and Old Testaments. For instance, the writer of Hebrews says, “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth (*paideúō*), and scourgeth (*mastigóō*) every son whom he receiveth” (Heb. 12:6; cf. Rev. 3:19; LXX Ex. 5:14; Deut. 8:5; 22:18; Pro. 3:12; 13:24; 23:13;).

Therefore, there is no discrepancy between John and the Synoptics. The whipping that John is referring to is the same one hinted at in Luke’s account. Sadly, this means that Pilate had the Lord beaten *twice*.⁷ As we’ll see, the first beating was intended to shame him more than harm him, while the second was every bit as violent and bloody as we’ve come to imagine it. In totality, the Lord was humiliated via *flogging*, mutilated via *scourging*, and terminated via *crucifying*.

Vs. 2-3 – Though this flogging would not be fatal, it would still be *brutal*. John says the Roman “soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on [Jesus’] head,” a diadem of spikes for the King of Kings. Thorny vegetation in Israel is abundant and varied, so it is difficult to speak dogmatically as to the *specific* kind of thorns employed for Jesus’ mock crown. If the date palm was used, as is commonly espoused, the thorns could’ve been as long as *twelve* inches.⁸ If it was some other plant, the thorns would’ve been far shorter but hardly less painful. After all, any circlet woven from thrones would likely draw blood, especially when it was fixed atop one’s head by a band of Roman brutes. Theologically, it also shows us that as the Lord would soon bear humanity’s sin, so he bore a token of creation’s curse. Just as “thorns and bristles” tore Adam’s hands (cf. Gen. 3:18), barbs and spears tore Jesus’ brow. Before Roman nails pierced Christ’s flesh, the ground was first to stab his skin.

But the thorny crown was only the beginning. The soldiers also clothed Jesus in a “purple robe.” The “robe” was likely that of a Roman soldier. But if so, we’ve once again come upon yet another apparent contradiction since the garb of a man enlisted by Rome was *red*. In fact, Matthew says this robe was the color of “scarlet” (Matt. 27:28), not “purple.” So, which was it? Unlike the issue of the two beatings addressed above, this seeming discrepancy is easily explained. The lines of demarcation that distinguish one color from another were *not* as clear back then as they are today. In fact, though the cloak of a Roman soldier was “red,” there’s

⁷ Contra Keener (2003), 2:1120.

⁸ Carson (1991), p. 598.

first-century textual evidence that it was sometimes referred to as "purple."⁹ So, the contradiction is non-existent.

Regardless of the color, the soldiers clearly wanted to *humiliate* Jesus. A crown of thorns for his head and a robe draped over his bloodied back, these were the tools used to *ridicule* the Lord. This is made apparent when the Romans paired jeering chants ("Hail, King of the Jews") with even *more* physical abuse ("they smote him with their hands"). And given the imperfect tense of the term "smote," these were *repeated* blows to the face.¹⁰ Though he had already been flogged, the Lord now had to endure a thorough pummeling.

However, John's readership will see something more profound in the soldier's actions. As with Caiaphas (cf. 11:50), these men spoke better than they knew. For the Lord was, in fact, the "King of Jews" and, for that matter, the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Rev. 19:16; cf. 1 Tim. 6:15). Rather than revere God Incarnate, they mocked him. Rather than kiss the Lord's hand in reverence, they beat him with their fists (cf. Isa. 50:6). How could anyone get something so right so wrong?!

Vs. 4-5 – Once the soldier had had their horrible fun, John tells us, "Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him. Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man!"

This is the *second* time Pilate has insisted that he's found "no fault" in Jesus (cf. 18:38). Yet rather than release his prisoner, the man *prolongs* the proceedings just as he did before. Like some horror show procession, he puts the Lord on display instead of setting him free! Clearly, the governor hoped the gruesome parade would placate the Jews. He assumed that, upon seeing their enemy bruised and ridiculed, the Sanhedrin would stop insisting on crucifixion. Pilate even says, "Behold the man," which is like saying, "Look at this poor fellow!"¹¹ The terminology highlighted Jesus' harmlessness.¹² From Pilate's perspective, this "man" has been systematically disgraced and discredited. What would be the point in pursuing crucifixion now?

However, from the Christian's perspective, the phrase "behold the man" has a level of meaning that would've been utterly foreign to Pilate's thinking. Because according to the Scriptures, just as Adam was the "first man," Jesus was the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45-49). In other words, the

⁹ Carson, D.A., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Revised Edition, Volume 9, Matthew and Mark, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan Academic, 2010), p. 640.

¹⁰ Köstenberger (2008), p. 532.

¹¹ Köstenberger (2008), p. 533.

¹² Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 337.

legacy of the “first man” is one of death and decay; the inheritance of the “second man” is one of life and renewal.¹³ So, when Pilate says, “Behold the man,” the believer does not look at Jesus with condemnation but *admiration*. For in Jesus “was life, and the life was the light of men” (1:14; cf. 14:6). The God-man gives mankind the right to become the children of God (cf. 1:12). Believers are no longer of the line and lineage of death, but, in being “born again” (cf. 3:16), they’re the heirs of a living inheritance, a watery stream of life that’ll never run dry (cf. 4:10).

Vs. 6 – Unsurprisingly, Pilate will once again fail to convince the Jews. The sight of Jesus only served to provoke the crowd even more. Notably, the “chief priests” began shouting, “Crucify him, crucify him.” And then, whether in exasperation or indignation, Pilate says sarcastically, “Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him.” This is the *third* and *final* time he says he finds “no fault” in Jesus (cf. vs. 4; 18:38). And with this definitive declaration of innocence, it would seem Pilate and the Jews were now at a *standoff*. The Jews could not crucify anyone; everyone knew this. And as things stood, Pilate was unconvinced that Jesus was a threat; the governor would be manipulated no longer. The Jews would have to change tactics.

¹³ Klink (2016), p. 777-779.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 84 | John 19:1-6

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Pilate has already exonerated Jesus once, and in today's passage, he will do so again *two more times*. The claim that Jesus was guilty of insurrection and sedition against the Roman Imperium was a groundless accusation made by a bloodthirsty mob. Pilate knew this; he was not fooled.

Yet, the governor plays along with the charade anyway. So much so that after flogging Jesus, Pilate dresses him up like some faux king and parades him before the crowd. Despite affirming Jesus' innocence *three times*, Pilate had no problem humiliating and even pummeling an innocent man. Apparently, the Romans had a funny way of proving someone's blamelessness.

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