

Exegesis

Vs. 7-8 – For the Jews, whether Pilate found “fault” in Jesus was *irrelevant*; from their perspective, he was guilty. This is why the Jews said, “*We* [emphasis added] have a law, and by *our* [emphasis added] law he ought to die because he made himself the Son of God.” In other words, their rationale wasn’t based on *Roman* law but on *Mosaic* law. Claiming to be God’s Son is claiming equality with God (cf. 5:18; Mar. 14:61-64). To a *monotheistic* Jew, such a claim was tantamount to blasphemy, a transgression punishable by death (cf. Ex. 20:7; Lev. 24:11-23).¹ So, what Pilate thought about Jesus was of little consequence to the Jews. The fact remained that Jesus had “made himself the Son of God” on multiple occasions (cf. 3:16, 18; 5:17-18, 25; 10:30, 36; 11:4, 27). And from their point of view, this blaspheming teacher deserved to die.

Now, the Jews did not invoke the Scriptures because they thought it would convince Pilate. They knew an argument based on the O.T. would have little to no effect on a non-Jewish person. Instead, by saying that Jesus’ condemnation was rooted in Judaism, they were saying that as a gentile, Pilate would *never* be convinced of Jesus’ culpability. And they were right. He would never sentence a man to be crucified simply because some Jewish text said that he should.

But if the *Roman* governor would be unconvinced by *Jewish* law, why even bring it up? A full explanation of that question will have to wait till our discussion of vs. 12-16. Suffice it to say, this tactic was yet another attempt to manipulate Pilate. What would Caesar think of Pilate? He was defending someone claiming to be the “King of the Jew” while the Jews, according to their own laws, thought that same person ought to be crucified.

Interestingly, mentioning that Jesus “made himself the Son of God” struck an ominous chord in the superstitious governor. John says that when he heard this, the governor “was the more afraid.”² It is hard to say whether this reaction was intended by the Jews. Regardless, we must ask ourselves why would Pilate be so shaken? Up to this point, he’s seemed to enjoy himself.

¹ As both Carson (1991), p. 599, and Köstenberger (2008), p. 533 point out, claiming to be the “Son of God” wasn’t automatically considered blasphemy (cf. Ex. 4:22; 2 Sam. 7:14; Psa. 2:7; 89:26-27; Hos 11:1). Jesus himself makes this argument in 10:34-37 regarding the term “gods” (cf. Psa. 82:6). However, as Jesus employed the phrase, the Jews *rightly* understood he meant something *more* than a mere messianic claim. As wielded by the Lord, the phrase “Son of God” was a claim to divinity. Jesus claimed to exert the same authority and hold the same rights as God himself (cf. Matt. 9:1-8). For the Jews, such an assertion went too far, becoming blasphemous (cf. Lu. 5:21).

² Carson (1991), p. 600, points out that the term “more” is misleading; it implies Pilate was *already* fearful, a fact hitherto unattested in the narrative so far. The governor hasn’t demonstrated even the slightest bit of fear. To the contrary, he’s been smug, cynical, and dismissive. Thus, it is better to understand “more” as either ‘he became afraid *rather than complying with their wish,*’ or ‘Pilate was *very much* afraid.’

Why has he suddenly become afraid? Like their accusation that Jesus claimed to be “the King of the Jews” (18:33), claiming to be God’s “Son” could be misinterpreted. To those who came from a polytheistic culture, such as Pilate, to be “the Son of God” is to assert that one was one of the many Roman gods.

In Rome’s mythology, there are well over *sixty* deities, and they fall into three broad categories: major gods, minor gods, and demigods. Being that they were the offspring of two gods, major and minor gods were considered *fully* divine (e.g., Jupiter/Juno=Mars). In contrast, demigods were the offspring of a god and a human, so they were considered only *partially* divine (e.g., Jupiter/Semele=Bacchus).

Understandably, a religion that has multiple gods, goddesses, and demigods, each with varying levels of importance and power, makes the religious system in the Roman world a convoluted mess. But to a mind reared in this system, it was only logical to assume that the gods and their offspring regularly walked among mortals (cf. Ac. 14:11). According to the Roman Imperial Cult, even the emperor himself was divine. If so, then what do you suppose someone who had been raised as a Roman would feel if he had just flogged and ridiculed one of the children of the gods? To a polytheistic person like Pilate, that was a truly *terrifying* thought.

This is why Pilate reenters “the judgement hall” and asks Jesus, “Whence art thou,” or “Where are you from?” The governor wanted to know of his origins, something which was of great importance to people in the first century.³ Establishing someone's pedigree establishes one's credibility (cf. Ac. 21:39; Phil. 3:4-6). If Jesus claimed to be from heaven, then he was claiming to be one of the many gods or demigods.

But John tells us, “Jesus gave him no answer” (cf. Isa. 53:7; Mar. 14:61; 15:5). This is *not* because the Lord denied being “the Son of God;” it was because saying nothing was preferable to the other two options. If he gave a simple “yes,” he’d be affirming a false belief system. If he gave a simple “no,” he’d be denying the truth. To answer Pilate’s question properly would take time they did not have. But even if they had the time, it was unlikely that Pilate would understand. Up to this point, he’s not shown himself to be a reasonable man who was open to goodwill arguments. This is to say nothing of the fact that his mindset was completely alien to Jewish thought. Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin had trouble comprehending Jesus’ claims, particularly those about his origin. What hope would Pilate have of understanding the truth of

³ Kruse (2017), p. 421.

Jesus' claims if not even the doctors, scribes, and lawyers of Judaism could understand them?⁴ Thus, silence was the preferable option.

Vs. 10-11 – Apparently frustrated, Pilate said to Jesus, “Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?” The governor was the most powerful person in the region; he wasn’t used to being ignored. When he asked a question, he got an answer. But Jesus’ silence was a subtle reminder that Pilate’s power wasn’t *absolute*. Though he had the power to “crucify” or “release” Jesus, the Roman didn’t have the power to compel speech. And even the power he thought of as his wasn’t really his at all; it was God’s, whose power is *absolute*. This is why Jesus says, “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.” The only reason Pilate had any power at all was because God gave it to him. Jesus is there only because that is where his Father wanted him to be (cf. 8:29).

Herein is the subject of God’s *sovereignty* and man’s *culpability* brought to the forefront of the passion narrative. In other words, who’s to blame for Jesus’ crucifixion? God? Or someone else? Pilate’s power has been given to him by God; does this mean God is controlling the governor like some mindless robot? No. Pilate is *not* exempt from guilt because his authority is derived from God. Pilate is still a free agent; he’s been granted autonomy by the Almighty to do as he pleases, and, as such, he is still held liable.

But to be clear, just because men are free to choose does not mean they can negate God's will. Though Pilate can wield his authority however he wants, he does not control the outcomes of those choices. Though God is sovereign, Pilate was still a wicked man who would wrongfully condemn an innocent man. Though his power was given to him by God, the governor is still responsible for his actions.

And this leads us to a remarkable truth: *despite mankind’s ill will, the Lord can still fulfill his goodwill* (cf. Gen. 50:19-20; Ac. 4:27-28). This he does not do by *outwitting* humanity but by *outmaneuvering* it. In other words, man is free to throw the dice, but he has no actual control over how the die will land; that decision is in the hands of God (Pro. 16:33; cf. Is. 5:9-10). Though some are instruments of unrighteousness and others are instruments of righteousness (cf. Rom. 9:21-23), God uses all men to accomplish his will without ever nullifying free will. Like a novice chess player challenging a grandmaster, the beginner can move whichever piece he wants, but the seasoned pro will always be one step ahead, moving pieces to ensure victory.

⁴ Köstenberger (2008), p. 535.

Pilate does indeed have authority over Jesus, but he only has that authority because God gave it to him, and someday, he'll have to give an account for the way he wielded that authority.

Notably, this means that the governor isn't the only one responsible for their sin. Jesus says, "he that delivered me unto thee hath the *greater* [emphasis added] sin." Who was the "he" referenced by Jesus? There are three possible candidates: Judas, Caiaphas, or Satan. Judas seems the *least* likely since he's been absent from the narrative since 18:12. Considering it was his idea to use Jesus as a scapegoat for Israel (cf. 11:50), Caiaphas seems to hold the lion's share of the guilt. However, though he is mentioned in passing during the passion, the high priest hasn't been featured prominently. Thus, in my opinion, the most likely candidate is Satan. After all, it was he who put it into Judas' heart to betray Jesus (cf. 13:2). The devil was the true mastermind, pulling strings behind the scenes and, as such, the "father of lies" (cf. 8:44) takes credit, be it directly through Judas or indirectly through Caiaphas, for the murder of Jesus Christ.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 85 | John 19:7-11

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Jesus is still under Pilate's custody, but the Jews could see they were fighting a losing battle. Their faux accusation that their enemy was a threat to Caesar didn't pan out. So, they'd have to change tactics.

In today's passage, the Jews will argue that the Lord blasphemed God. Was that true? Join us to find out.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

Grace Pointe Baptist Church

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

Contact: info@GracePointeLife.com

Website: <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

Give: <https://www.gracepointelife.com/give/>

Podcast Details:

Season 1 | 85