

Exegesis

Vs. 12 – After this, we’re told that “from thenceforth Pilate sought to release [Jesus].” Though the governor had thrice exonerated the Lord (cf. 18:38; 19:4, 6), he still looked for a way to set Jesus free. The Greek word behind “sought” is in the imperfect tense, which implies a “series of attempts or strivings.”¹ In other words, Pilate doggedly pursued multiple avenues of release.

It is remarkable that a man such as Pilate, a gentile of dubious morals who was prone to violence, would work so diligently to release a Jew. What motivated such action? Clearly, the governor was not convinced his prisoner was guilty of sedition (cf. 18:33) or blasphemy (vs. 7); otherwise, he would not go through the trouble. But how much did he really care about innocence? He still had Jesus flogged (vs. 1). The Roman was superstitious; maybe the idea of executing a potential demigod probably didn't sit well with his pagan sensibilities. Even his wife had been warned in a dream that her husband should not have any dealings in this matter (cf. Matt. 27:19). Perhaps the governor was swayed by Jesus' courage and fearlessness? After all, the Greco-Roman world considered such virtues admirable.²

Ultimately, whatever motivated Pilate's attempt to set the Lord free is irrelevant; the fact remains that he didn't. And he didn't do the right thing because his fear of Caesar outweighed everything else (cf. 12:42-43). This is why the Jews, seeing that Pilate was stalling, said, “If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar.” Though the phrase “Caesar's friend” could hold a generic connotation, given how the term was used in the first century, this is very likely a reference to *amicus Caesari* (Latin for “friend of Caesar”). This was an official honorific title for “someone who enjoyed the patronage of the emperor and who may have benefited by an imperial appointment, e.g., to the lucrative position of provincial governor.”³ Historically, Pilate, who was not of noble blood, only became governor because he was the protégé of Lucius Aelius Sejanus, the chief officer of the praetorian guard and a man who held significant influence in court circles.⁴ But in AD 31, Sejanus (as well as many others) was executed after a failed coup d'état, and, as such, Pilate was in a delicate position with Tiberius. So, the last thing the governor would want to do would be to jeopardize whatever goodwill he still had with the emperor.

¹ Klink (2016), p. 781.

² Köstenberger (2008), p. 536.

³ Barnett, Paul, *Finding the Historical Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), p. 143-144.

⁴ Carson (1991), p. 607, quoting the Roman historian Tacitus, “The closer a man's with Sejanus, the stronger his claim to the emperor's friendship (*Annals* VI. viii).”

Thus, the Jews were making a not-so-subtle threat that if the governor didn't consent to their demands, they'd go straight to Caesar, something they had already and successfully done once before.⁵ Pilate knew such an action would likely be the end of his career.⁶ Tiberius wouldn't respond kindly to anyone who was seen defending a man claiming to be a king, especially if the defender in question was one of his own governors, a man who just so happened to be a close associate with a failed insurrectionist who had died not two years prior.

Vs. 13 – Finally convinced to condemn Jesus, we're told that Pilate "brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha." The term "judgment seat" is the Greek term **βῆμα** (*bēma*); it is the place where official judicial decisions were made. But even though Pilate may be the one sitting on the *bema*, he has proven to have no real authority. He's been manipulated into acting *against* his own wishes by the very people he despised. Pilate has been shown to be nothing more than a mere puppet, a hapless pawn serving the schemes of demonic forces.

Vs. 14a – John tells us that "it was the preparation of the passover." Some argue this refers to Thursday afternoon, the time of day on which the Jews would've been preparing for the Passover. If so, this means that Jesus was executed around the same time that the paschal lambs were being slaughtered. Admittedly, this interpretation is attractive, and many devout Christians hold to this view.⁷ However, the synoptics are extremely clear that the Lord celebrated the Passover the night *before* his crucifixion (cf. Matt. 26:17; Mar. 14:12; Lu. 22:7). Additionally, like John, the Synoptics also confirm the day that Jesus was brought before Pilate was the so-called "the day of preparation" (cf. Matt. 27:62; Mar. 15:42; Lu. 23:54). And lastly, John will later connect the "day of preparation" with the impending Sabbath (vs. 31); a Thursday crucifixion does not make sense even in John's timeline.⁸ Thus, the phrase "the

⁵ Keener (2003), 2:1128, "When [Pilate] had wished to set up votive shields in Herod's palace in Jerusalem, the leaders of the people (i.e., the sort of priests he now confronted) reportedly asked if he had letters from Tiberius requesting this behavior. They implied that if he did not, he lacked authority for the act; and if he claimed to have such authority, they would appeal the matter directly to Tiberius. Fearful of trouble, Pilate quickly backed away from *part* [emphasis added] of his plan... when the Jewish leaders considered his response inadequate and did appeal to Tiberius, Pilate was reportedly humiliated by the Emperor (Philo *Embassy* 304-305), undoubtedly providing him grounds for more caution by this point."

⁶ In AD 36, Tiberius removed Pilate from office after reports had reached the emperor that the governor had slaughtered many Samaritans on the slopes of Mt. Gerizim. Since the people killed were doing nothing more heinous than a religious pilgrimage, his actions were deemed too extreme, even by Roman standards.

⁷ Keener (2003), 2:1131-1132, Klink (2016), p. 784, and Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 341, espouse this view.

⁸ Kruse (2017), p. 424.

preparation of the Passover” is best understood as the day on which the Jews prepared for the Sabbath that occurred during Passover week—i.e., Friday.⁹

John also tells us it was “about the sixth hour.”¹⁰ That our faithful narrator uses the term “about” should dissuade us from seeking precision (cf. 1:39; 4:6). Additionally, we should not see an inconsistency in Mark’s report that Jesus was crucified at the “third hour” (Mar. 15:25). The apparent contradiction is resolved when we consider that, even though both terms appear to be to specific timestamps, in an era before wristwatches, *specificity was impossible almost everyone*. As Carson explains, “The reckoning of time for most people, who could not very well carry sundials and astronomical charts, was necessarily approximate. If the sun was moving toward mid-heaven, two different observers might well have glanced up and decided, respectively, that it was ‘the third hour’ or ‘about the sixth hour’.”¹¹

Vs. 14b-15 – Pilate says to the Jews, "Behold your King!" He knew perfectly well that they did not accept Jesus' claim to be king. He also knew their feigned allegiance to Caesar was just that, a sham. So, this mock coronation is yet another attempt by the governor to antagonize the religious leaders. In response, the crowd shouts, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him." They apparently didn't appreciate being mocked once again. But Pilate would not back down, so he asked, "Shall I crucify your King?" The governor clearly wanted the record straight; he was not the one who wanted this. The Jews, and only the Jews, sought to crucify their so-called "King." And Pilate's incessant taunts paid off. John tells us that "the chief priests," apparently fed up with the whole affair, said, "We have no king but Caesar."

Irony abounds in these verses. The Jews, in calling into question Pilate's allegiance to Tiberius, imply they themselves are loyal to Rome. They'd much rather be friends of Rome than Jesus (cf. Ja. 4:4). Now, they take it a step *further*. In the hearing of all, they openly declare themselves to be the subjects of Caesar! But in doing so, they not only *reject Jesus*, they also blatantly *reject God*, who was supposed to be their one and only king (cf. Judg. 8:23; 1 Sam. 8:7).

Interestingly, even though God ordained the throne of David, any king from that line were not kings unto themselves; they were *vassal* kings who were always subservient to the King of Kings. This was a truth embedded in the very fabric of Judaism. For instance, during each of the three Pilgrim Festivals—i.e., Passover, Shavuot, Sukkoth—Jewish people recited this prayer

⁹ Köstenberger (2008), p. 537, “Indeed, “Passover” may refer to the (day of) the actual Passover meal or, as in the present case, the entire Passover week, including Passover day as well as the associated Feast of Unleavened Bread.”

¹⁰ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 341, “The place, the day, and the hour are all mentioned, for the Evangelist is conscious of the momentous nature of the vent now taking place.”

¹¹ Carson (1991), p. 605.

after reading the great Hallel (Psa. 113-118): “From everlasting to everlasting thou art God; beside thee we have no king, redeemer, or savior; no liberator, deliverer, provider; none who takes pity in every time of distress or trouble. We have no king but thee.”¹²

Do you see? No self-respecting Jew would ever deny the kingship of God; yet, here before Pilate, the nation of Israel not only rejects the *messiahship* of Jesus but also the *monarchy* of Yahweh. They were the ones who were guilty of treason, not Jesus. And, irony of ironies, for the first time, the Jews told the truth.¹³ By rejecting the Son of God, they showed they were, without a doubt, the loyal subjects of Caesar and not of God.

Which leads us to ask, “If the Jews claimed to have no king but Caesar, were they even Jews?” A denial of God’s kingship is a denial of their Jewish heritage; it is to deny any connection they might have to the OT. As Beasley-Murray explains, “Their repudiation of Jesus in the name of pretended loyalty to the emperor entailed their repudiation of the promise of the kingdom of God, with which the gift of the Messiah is inseparably bound in Jewish faith, and Israel’s vocation to be its heir, its instrument, and its proclaimer to the nations.”¹⁴ In this way, the Jews in the first century were no better than their forefathers who dropped dead in the wilderness, who did what was right in their own eyes, and who constantly rebelled against their Divine Sovereign. Jewish readers of John’s account will not miss this correlation. Sad to say, crucifying their own messiah was well within the parameters of possibility when it came to the nation of Israel. They had made it a habit of rejecting their God; why would it be any different now?

Vs. 16a – “Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified.” At this point, Barabbas was released, and Jesus was scourged (cf. Matt. 27:26; *see notes 19:1*). Truly, the Lord’s sufferings were of the utmost brutality. But who is the “them” that John refers to? The Jews? They could not crucify anyone. Presumably, Roman soldiers are meant, as John himself says in vs. 23-25. But why not make it clear?

This ambiguity is intentional.¹⁵ Indeed, “he came unto his own, and his own received him not” (cf. 1:11). The Jewish people completely rejected Jesus and, by using Rome, got rid of him. Thus, the death of God’s Son was a joint venture between Jews and non-Jews; they were the “them” who crucified Jesus. *Together*, the world hated the Lord (cf. 7:7), and *together*, they succeeded in killing him.

¹² Kruse (2017), p. 424.

¹³ Klink (2016), p. 785.

¹⁴ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 343.

¹⁵ Keener (2003), 2:1133.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 86 | John 19:12-16a

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

In tonight's passage, Jews and Gentiles alike will join hands to crucify the Son of God. Though they would no doubt deny it, they will act more like friends than foes. And in doing so, they will prove they are not friends of God. After all, did not the half-brother of Jesus say, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Ja. 4:4)?

Therefore, make no mistake, when a Christian aligns themselves with unbelievers, they array themselves against the Lord; to be more worldly than holy is to be one of the villains in the story, not the heroes. And God will judge us according to his word and not in the court of popular opinion.

How will you measure up? Will the Lord himself plead your case because you've made him your friend (cf. 1 Jn. 2:1)? Or will you rely on someone else?

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