

JOHN 18

John 18:1–11. Jesus Is Arrested

Though John only mentions a garden, we know from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that the name of the place was Gethsemane. Similarly, John omits the account given in the other Gospels of Jesus’s agonizing prayer to the Father—at which point we understand the process of the Atonement to have begun. Perhaps John wishes to pass over this event in reverent silence.

Instead, John quickly passes on to the arrival of Judas and the arresting party. We know from the Synoptics that Judas has been looking for a convenient “opportunity” (Greek *eukairia*) to betray Jesus, and knowing that Gethsemane is a place where Jesus and the Twelve often met, he leads the authorities to the spot.¹ Note that the arresting party are not Roman soldiers but rather a detachment sent “from the chief priests and Pharisees”—probably the temple police under the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin.

As he so often does, John contradicts expectations by showing that Jesus is totally in control—even while in the seemingly powerless position of being arrested. John does not mention Judas’s betraying kiss; instead, Jesus willingly identifies Himself. This is important. Jesus, though possessing the power to save Himself, *chooses* to lay down His life, as He has earlier promised.²

Moreover, John takes the moment of an arrest that would normally be considered a humiliation and presents it as a moment of revelation. Jesus’s words “I am he” would pack more punch than may be obvious in the English translation; in the Greek they are *egō eimi*, the same name by which Jehovah identified Himself in Exodus 3:14. Thus, at the moment of the arrest, Jesus presents Himself as the God of Israel. A later rabbinic source explains that when Israelites heard the name of God (which was not normally pronounced at the time of Jesus), they were supposed to fall down in worship, which may explain the fact that the arresting party falls to the ground.

John 18:12–27. Jesus in the High Priest’s Court

Only John mentions that Jesus is taken to Annas, a former high priest, before appearing in front of Caiaphas, the current high priest. This should not be surprising; Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas and an emeritus high priest, he still holds considerable influence. It would not be surprising, then, for Caiaphas to consult with him on sensitive legal matters such as the trial of the controversial Jesus of Nazareth.

The Evangelist has juxtaposed the answers of Peter and Jesus for contrast. Jesus’s answers are open, honest, and confident; Peter responds to those who question him with suspicion, deceit, and fear. Even though condemned, Jesus speaks with the calm assurance of one who has complete trust in His Father. On the other hand, Peter represents those of us whose journey on the path of discipleship is not yet complete, who still have doubts, and who may occasionally falter when moments of decision arrive. Yet John beautifully demonstrates Peter’s opportunity for redemption in chapter 21, in which he will make up for his threefold denial with a triple confession of his love for Jesus.

John 18:28–32. Jesus Brought to Pilate

The interesting comment about Passover in verse 28 indicates that Caiaphas’s headquarters (a gentile residence) in Jerusalem is not free from leaven, as the Passover requirements stipulated. Therefore, anyone hoping to keep the Passover feast would not be allowed to set foot inside—a clear irony, since they are bringing Jesus, the true Passover Lamb, there. Verse 31 suggests that the local Jewish authorities, though granted extensive autonomy by Rome, do not possess the power to perform capital punishment, but this prohibition is not recorded elsewhere. At any rate, Jesus’s previous predictions that He will be lifted up³ clearly point toward a death by crucifixion, which although occasionally performed by Jewish authorities, was a thoroughly Roman practice.

Pontius Pilate was a complex figure—especially as he is portrayed in the Gospel of John. He served as the Roman *praefectus* over the province of Judea from AD 26 to 36. The fact that he was the authority who executed Jesus is recorded not just in the Gospels but also by the ancient historians Flavius Josephus and Cornelius Tacitus. Josephus also notes that Pilate’s period of administration in Judea was marked by tension, violence, and a lack of sensitivity toward Jewish customs. This makes his apparent sympathy for the plight of Jesus all the more surprising.

John 18:33–40. Pilate Interviews Jesus

Jesus’s interview with Pilate is longer in John than it is in the other Gospels, and it is one of the best examples of John’s use of irony and dual meanings to teach profound lessons. Pilate brings forward a charge that amounts to treason—there is no place for a king in the Roman province of Judea. Such a blatant rival to

imperial power could not be tolerated. Jesus does not answer Pilate’s question directly, perhaps because neither a simple yes or no would convey the truth.

In a very real way, the title “King of the Jews” can be more accurately ascribed to Jesus than to any of the other earthly sovereigns who had claimed it, such as the Hasmoneans or Herod the Great. To answer no, then, would be wrong. Yet Jesus is not a king in the sense that these other figures were. He leads no political movement; He is no threat to Roman control of the province. Therefore, to answer yes would be equally misleading. Jesus is indeed a king, but His is not the sort of kingship that this gentile governor would understand.

While Pilate cannot grasp the true extent of Jesus’s enigmatic answer, he *is* convinced that Jesus is no political revolutionary. His declaration that there is no fault in Jesus is close to an acquittal; “fault” (Greek *aitia*) means something like “cause for legal action.” But the offer of acquittal is rejected, and the crowd demands Barabbas. “Robber” does not capture the full force of the Greek *lēstēs*. Barabbas is not a simple thief; the Greek connotes an outlaw, an insurgent, the sort of figure who will later help to spark the disastrous revolt against Rome in AD 66–73. It is a truly ironic twist that Pilate exchanges the harmless Jesus for Barabbas—a man actually guilty of the crimes with which Jesus has been charged.

Notes

- 1 Matthew 26:16; Mark 14:11; Luke 22:6.
- 2 John 10:17–18. Note the emphasis: “No man taketh it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself.”
- 3 John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34.

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Source: *New Testament Insights: John*, by Jackson Abhau

