

# John 18-19: Jesus' Trial before Pilate

Jesus' trial highlights the conflict between the three powers in Israel, the Jewish and Roman authorities and God.

*What are the major powers in our society? How do they influence how we see God?*

(28) Early in the morning Jesus was taken from Caiaphas' <sup>a</sup> house to the governor's palace. The Jewish authorities did not go inside the palace, for they wanted to keep themselves ritually clean, in order to be able to eat the Passover <sup>b</sup> meal. (29) So Pilate <sup>c</sup> went outside to them and asked, "What do you accuse this man of?" (30) Their answer was, "We would not have brought him to you if he had not committed a crime." (31) Pilate said to them, "Then you yourselves take him and try him according to your own law." They replied, "We are not allowed to put anyone to death." <sup>c</sup> (32) (This happened in order to make come true what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he would die.)

(33) Pilate went back into the palace and called Jesus. "Are you the king <sup>d</sup> of the Jews?" he asked him. (34) Jesus answered, "Does this question come from you or have others told you about me?" (35) Pilate replied, "Do you think I am a Jew? It was your own people and the chief priests who handed you over to me. What have you done?" (36) Jesus said, "My kingdom does not belong to this world; if my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. No, my kingdom does not belong here!" (37) So Pilate asked him, "Are you a king, then?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this one purpose, to speak about the truth. Whoever belongs to the truth listens to me." (38) "And what is truth?" Pilate asked.

Then Pilate went back outside to the people and said to them, "I cannot find any reason to condemn him. (39) But according to the custom you have, I always set free a prisoner for you during the Passover. Do you want me to set free for you the king of the Jews?" (40) They answered him with a shout, "No, not him! We want Barabbas!" (Barabbas was a bandit.)

(19:1) Then Pilate took Jesus and had him whipped. (2) The soldiers made a crown out of thorny branches and put it on his head; then they put a purple robe <sup>e</sup> on him (3) and came to him and said, "Long live the King of the Jews!" And they went up and slapped him.

*Continued over...*

<sup>a</sup> Caiaphas was the High Priest, the leader of the institutional religion of Jesus' day.

<sup>b</sup> The Passover festival celebrated God rescuing God's people from slavery. The writer sees this as an illustration of what Jesus would do.

<sup>c</sup> Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea under Caesar. Only the Roman governor had authority to execute.

*What does it tell us about the authorities that they are so concerned about ritual purity whilst trying to kill Jesus?*

*Why do you think the authorities are so hostile to Jesus?*

<sup>d</sup> Since Israel was under Roman occupation, a royal claim would be understood as a challenge to the emperor. The Messiah would be a king of the Jews.

*How does Jesus explain his kingship? What does he mean?*

*What would be the implications if Jesus was a king for (i) the Jewish authorities, (ii) Pilate, (iii) the crowd?*

*Why do you think Pilate asks the rhetorical question in (38)?*

*How do you think Pilate is feeling at this point? Why?*

*If the Passover is a celebration of God's people being set free, how is the author using irony to make points here?*

<sup>e</sup> The torture of Jesus is presented by the author as a mock royal coronation.

*Why do you think the gospel puts a mock coronation at the centre of the trial of Jesus?*

(4) Pilate went back out once more and said to the crowd, "Look, I will bring him out here to you to let you see that I cannot find any reason to condemn him." (5) So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Look! Here is the man!" (6) When the chief priests and the Temple guards saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "You take him, then, and crucify him. I find no reason to condemn him." (7) The crowd answered back, "We have a law that says he ought to die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."<sup>f</sup> (8) When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid.

(9) He went back into the palace and asked Jesus, "Where do you come from?" But Jesus did not answer. (10) Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Remember, I have the authority to set you free and also to have you crucified." (11) Jesus answered, "You have authority over me only because it was given to you by God. So the man who handed me over to you is guilty of a worse sin." (12) When Pilate heard this, he tried to find a way to set Jesus free.

But the crowd shouted back, "If you set him free, that means that you are not the Emperor's friend! Anyone who claims to be a king is a rebel against the Emperor!" (13) When Pilate heard these words, he took Jesus outside and sat down on the judge's seat in the place called "The Stone Pavement." (In Hebrew the name is "Gabbatha.") (14) It was then almost noon of the day before the Passover. Pilate said to the people, "Here is your king!" (15) They shouted back, "Kill him! Kill him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Do you want me to crucify your king?" The chief priests answered, "The only king we have is the Emperor!" (16) Then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified.

<sup>f</sup> In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), Son of God was a name given to God's people, and the Messiah who would represent them. Jesus uses it to speak of his relationship with God.

*What is Pilate's conclusion about Jesus?*

*On what grounds do the crowd want Jesus executed?*

*Why might Pilate be afraid?*

*Why do you think Jesus didn't answer?*

*How did Jesus turn the tables on Pilate?*

*How did Jesus view the relationship between the different powers in this story?*

*Why did Pilate want to set Jesus free?*

*How would the Jewish authorities and the crowds feel about declaring their allegiance to the hated emperor over someone claiming to be the Messiah? What does this tell us about them?*

*Pilate declares Jesus to be innocent and the king of the Jews, and then hands him over to be crucified. What does this tell us about him?*

*In this account, the Jewish and Roman systems, as well as the crowds and Jesus are all on trial. What is the verdict on each of the different parties?*

The symmetrical structure of the passage can be shown as follows:

Jewish authorities seek Jesus' death  
Pilate questions Jesus  
Pilate declares Jesus innocent  
Mock coronation  
Pilate declares Jesus innocent  
Pilate questions Jesus  
The crowd seek Jesus' death

*How does this outline help us to see the key points the author is making?*

*Why is both the religious and political establishment so threatened by Jesus? What are the implications of this if we decide to become followers of Jesus?*

*How do you feel about having Jesus as king of our lives?*