

**“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world,
to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the
truth listens to my voice.” John 18:37**

Pilate Questions the Kingship of Jesus

JOHN 18:28–40 ²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ³⁰They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” ³¹Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” ³²(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I

*was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”*³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

*After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.”*³⁹ *But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”*⁴⁰ *They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!”* Now Barabbas was a bandit.

In comparison to the other gospels, the trial before Pilate is greatly expanded in John’s gospel and its drama is heightened. The trial is divided into seven scenes; the setting shifts back and forth from outside the praetorium to inside. The fact that the religious officials wish to avoid ritual defilement by not entering the Gentile palace before the Passover explains Pilate’s comings and goings. There is great irony in the fact that they were rigorously avoiding ceremonial uncleanness while remaining unconcerned about the moral guilt of condemning an innocent man to death. There is even deeper irony in the fact that they are concerned about not being able to eat the Passover meal, yet they are seeking to kill the true Passover Lamb.

Pilate shuttles back and forth from the frenzy of Jesus’ opponents outside to the eloquent defense of Jesus inside. The inside represents the realm of truth that Jesus embodies, and the outside represents the world that rejects his revelation. This dramatic technique expresses the struggle that is taking place within Pilate himself as he weighs his own conviction of Jesus’ innocence against the pressure from outside to condemn him.

The emphasis throughout the trial before Pilate is the kingship of Jesus. Jesus’ condemnation under the pretext that he claims to be the king is the means John uses in the gospel to reveal the true kingship of Jesus. As in the other gospels, in response to Pilate’s question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (verse 33), Jesus responds ambiguously. He does not entirely reject the notion that he might be a king. In fact, the readers of the gospel know that he is king of heaven and earth. He is not a king in any worldly, political sense: “My kingdom is not from this world” (verse 36). Yet Jesus, bound as a prisoner, possesses a power that easily surpasses the power of Rome and its empire. This new kind of power is expressed in self-effacement, suffering, and generous love. The scene dramatically contrasts the obvious power of Pilate and the less apparent but much more genuine power of Jesus.

