



**Pilate Before Jesus Part 1**  
**John 18:24-40**  
**March 13, 2022**

**Main Idea:** Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

## **Personal Study Guide**

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**READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 18:24-40**

## Highlight – What stands out?

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1. What stands out in the text?
2. Who are the characters in this text? What did they do? How do they each interact with each other?
3. What surprises you in this text?
4. What about Jesus' and Pilates interaction is confusing? What about it is clarifying?

## Explain – What does this mean?

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Let's unpack each of the main characters in this scene before Pilate.

1. Look at verses 28-32. Why does the high priest not enter the governor's headquarters? What does he ask Pilate to do? How is this ironic given what John tells us about them in verse 28b? How would you describe their hearts in this moment?

2. Why is Pilate concerned about Jesus being "King of the Jews"? How would you describe Pilate's heart in this moment?

3. Based on how Jesus responds to Pilate throughout this scene, who would you describe him? Can you think of words or phrases that describe him?
4. Try to recite or write down from memory the purpose statement of John from John 20:31. How does this passage fulfill this passage?
5. Where are we in the narrative of John? What is left in John? How does this passage and the characters in the passage move the narrative forward?

## **Apply – How does this change me?**

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1. What if you asked someone on the street what they thought Jesus' kingdom was about—how do you think they would respond? How do people in the church think about Jesus' kingdom today?
2. Pilate essentially scoffs at Jesus saying “what is truth?” in verse 38. Based on what Jesus says in verse 37 about his purpose, how would you describe “the voice of Jesus” and what are some ways people can listen or ignore the voice of Jesus?

## Respond – What’s my next step?

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1. What specific change can you make in your life to actively witness FOR Jesus from now on?
2. How does knowing that Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world change how you live and what you fight for right now?
3. What are some ways you are responding like Pilate in verse 38 when you hear the voice of Jesus in your life? What are some ways you are walking in obedience?

## Commentary

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### **TAKEN FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN BY D.A. CARSON**

**18:24.** Annas recognizes that he will get nowhere with this man, and sends him to Caiaphas. If Jesus is to be brought before Pilate, the legal accusation must be brought by the *reigning* high priest, Caiaphas, in his capacity as chairman of the Sanhedrin (*cf.* Additional Note). The *av*’s pluperfect, ‘Now Annas had sent him bound ...’, is an attempt to alleviate the difficulty inherent in having two ‘high priests’ (*cf.* notes on vv. 13–14, 15–16). Syntactically it is a possible but unlikely rendering of the Greek, and is in any case unwarranted once the complexities of the first-century high priesthood are grasped.

#### **Additional note**

**18:24.** In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion on the composition and authority of the Sanhedrin in the time of Jesus. Some have argued that there were two ‘Sanhedrins’ operating under the aegis of Roman law, one essentially religious and the other civil. The scholars who espouse this view say that Jesus must have been tried before the latter, and the Evangelists have got it wrong. The evidence involved, however, is largely inferential, and based on sources of widely scattered dates and uncertain interpretation. The majority of scholars, both Jewish and Christian, do not multiply Sanhedrins in ad 30. Alexander offers an excellent summary of what was most likely the case.

### **5. Peter’s second and third denials of Jesus (18:25–27)**

For discussion of the relation between this report and those of the Synoptic Evangelists *cf.* Carson, *Matt*, pp. 557–558; for brief treatment of the essential historicity of Peter’s denials, *cf.* Beasley-Murray, pp. 325–326.

**18:25.** John takes us back to the fire (v. 18) where Peter stood warming himself. The reason for interweaving Jesus’ first replies to his accusers with Peter’s denials is to make the contrast stand out: ‘John has constructed a dramatic contrast wherein Jesus stands up to his questioners and denies nothing, while Peter cowers before his questioners and denies everything’ (Brown, 2. 842). The clause *he was asked* is the niv’s periphrastic rendering of ‘they said to him’, possibly a generalizing construction that reflects one interlocutor while several other temple officials and retainers are standing around the fire within earshot. The question they put is virtually identical to that recorded in v. 17, including the reference to ‘another of his disciples’ (which may suggest that the ‘other disciple’ was still present). Peter *denied it* (*ērnēsato*, repeated in v. 27), which calls to mind Jesus’ saying about those who deny him before men (Mt. 10:33 = Lk. 12:9).

**18:26–27.** Only John specifies that the third person to challenge Peter was a *relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off*. This can most sympathetically be read as evidence that the beloved disciple is none other than the ‘another disciple’ (v. 15), displaying detailed knowledge of the high priest’s household. Perhaps the fire flared, and the man glimpsed Peter’s features a little more clearly. But again Peter denied any knowledge of his Master. John makes no mention of the oaths and curses to which he resorted this third time (Mk. 14:71 par.), nor of the bitter tears that followed the crowing of the rooster. The account is leaner, quietly veiled. The effect is to emphasize the fulfillment of Jesus’ words to Peter (13:36), and to make it clear that ‘Peter cannot follow Jesus, until Jesus has died for him’ (Fenton, p. 182).

Both for John’s readers, and for the early church generally, this is not Peter’s final scene. As serious as was his disowning of the Master, so greatly also must we esteem the grace that forgave him and restored him to fellowship and service. And that means—both in John’s Gospel and in our lives—that there is hope for the rest of us.

## **Additional note**

**18:25.** The repetition of *warming himself* (cf. vv. 18, 25) is often taken as evidence of a literary seam, the opening of an otherwise smooth narrative to let in the intervening material. The fact that a similar repetition is found in Mark's account of Peter's denials (Mk. 14:54, 67) has generated considerable scholarly dispute as to whether or not the parallels between Mark and John constitute proof of literary dependence, or at least of a common source. Craig A. Evans surveys the evidence and convincingly argues that this kind of repetition, with intercalated material, is a stock literary device in Greek romances and histories, in particular where two lines of the plot are developing simultaneously (in this case, the interrogation of Jesus and Peter's denials). The differences between John and Mark are sufficient that direct literary dependence cannot be *proved*; on the other hand, the device is so standard that each Evangelist may have used it independently, or even codified in written form something of the way the accounts of Jesus' passion were circulating in oral form as part of the church's preaching and teaching.

## **6. The trial of Jesus before Pilate (18:28–19:16a)**

John reports far more details of this trial before Pilate than do the three Synoptists combined. Theologically, the dominant theme is the kingdom, the authority of Jesus (18:36; 19:11, 14). At numerous points, knowledge of the Synoptic material is (wittingly or unwittingly) presupposed. For instance, the formal decision of the Sanhedrin is not mentioned, but is clearly assumed (cf. the notes below). Some critics find it incredible that any report of what occurred in the privacy of Pilate's court should have slipped out to become part of John's narrative. It is simpler, they allege, to postulate that the Evangelist is indulging in creative writing to make theological points that have no reference in historical reality. Theological points he is doubtless making, but that is no reason to think he is creating a narrative *ex nihilo* ('out of nothing'). We do not know what sources John enjoyed to let him know what happened in the court the Jews would not enter. Possibly Jesus himself, after his resurrection, told some of the details. Perhaps some of the court attendants became Christians in the early years of rapid growth in the Christian church, and passed on their recollections to the apostolic leadership. Some court records were public, and therefore available to those willing to do some research (such as Luke: cf. Lk. 1:1–4). We do not know where John obtained his information, but our ignorance is not threatening unless some startling reason is advanced as to why John should have told us how he found out, or unless there is overwhelming reason to think that John *could not* have known. And neither condition applies.

Although Pilate is the only figure who appears in every scene, it is Jesus himself, and the nature of his kingdom, that occupy centre stage.

### a. Pilate questions the prosecution (18:28–32)

**18:28.** The Greek text does not supply a definite subject to the verb *led*. 'Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas ...' has been clarified by the niv to read 'Then *the Jews* led....' This is not unjust, if by 'the Jews' is meant the Jewish authorities of the Sanhedrin under the leadership of Caiaphas (*cf.* 18:31; 19:6, 15). They led Jesus to the *praitōrion* (Gk. transliteration from the Lat. *praetorium*), which denotes the headquarters of the commanding officer of a Roman military camp, or the headquarters of a Roman military governor (as Pilate was). Pilate's normal headquarters was in Caesarea, in the palace Herod the Great had built for himself; but he and his predecessors and successors made it a point to be in Jerusalem on the high feasts, to be available to quell any untoward disturbance. While in Jerusalem, his abode became his Jerusalem *praetorium*. Archaeologists differ as to whether this headquarters was Herod's palace on the western wall, or the Fortress of Antonia (named after Mark Antony) north-west of the temple complex and connected by steps to the temple's outer court (*cf.* Acts 21:35, 40). niv's 'palace' rather begs the issue.

The word rendered 'early morning' (*prōi*) is ambiguous. The Romans gave to the last two watches of the night (roughly midnight to 3.00 a.m. and 3.00 a.m. to 6.00 a.m. respectively) the names *alectorophōnia* ('cock-crow') and *prōi* ('early morning' or 'dawning'). If the word is used in this technical sense, Jesus is brought to Pilate before 6.00 a.m. In itself this is unsurprising: as we have noted, many Roman officials began the day very early in the morning and finished their day's labours by 10.00 or 11.00 a.m. (*cf.* Sherwin-White, p. 45). More likely the word should be understood without this technical meaning. The formal session of the Sanhedrin, which passed judgment on Jesus before sending him on to Pilate, would have been happier to meet 'very early in the morning' (Mk. 15:1 par.) but *after* sunrise, than in the fourth watch of the night, since Jewish law forbade trying capital cases at night.

On arriving, the Jewish authorities refused to enter Pilate's headquarters, preferring to stand outside in the colonnade. They wished to avoid *ceremonial uncleanness*; they *wanted to be able to eat the Passover*. This statement calls for three comments:

(1) The Mishnah provides evidence that a Jew who entered the dwelling-places of Gentiles became ceremonially unclean (*Oholoth* 18:7, 9; *cf.* SB 2. 838–839); remaining outside in the colonnade avoided the pollution. Under normal circumstances most Jews with business in Gentile quarters would incur the defilement and follow established procedure to regain ritual purity. Such cleansing procedure took time, and therefore in this instance the Jews want to avoid the uncleanness so that they will still be *able to eat the Passover*. Some forms of defilement could be removed by taking a bath at the end of the day (*i.e.* at sundown; *cf.* Lv. 15:5–11, 16–18; 22:5–7). If that were the case here, the Jews would then have been free to eat the Passover the 'next' day, *i.e.* after sundown on the same day, by our reckoning. We must therefore assume that the

defilement in view is of a kind that cannot be removed until seven days have elapsed. Bruce (p. 349) suggests it is the presence of yeast (*cf.* Ex. 12:19; 13:7; Mishnah *Pesahim* 1:1; 2:1); others have suggested contamination from road dust brought in by foreign visitors (Mishnah *Berakoth* 9:5). These were but one-day pollutions. The context of Mishnah *Oholoth* suggests rather that the reason why a Jew would contract uncleanness in a Gentile home was because Gentiles were believed to bury aborted fetuses (*i.e.* corpses) in their homes, or flush them down their drains, and Numbers 9:7–10 insists that anyone who is unclean on account of contact with a dead body—a seven-day defilement, Numbers 9:6–11; 31:19—at the time of Passover must not participate in the feast, but must keep a second Passover, held a month later to accommodate such hardship cases. The evidence is complex and the matter not certainly resolved. Moreover, we shall note below, under (3), that the problem may be a false one, resolved another way.

(2) The effect of this statement in the flow of the narrative is twofold. First, it constitutes a formidable example of Johannine irony. The Jews take elaborate precautions to avoid ritual contamination in order to eat the Passover, at the very time they are busy manipulating the judicial system to secure the death of him who alone is the true Passover. Second, the effect of the Jews' scruples is to send Pilate scuttling back and forth, acting on two stages as it were, a front stage and a rear stage (so Dodd, *HTFG*, p. 96). This simultaneously enhances the drama of the narrative, ensures that the Jews do not hear Jesus' self-disclosing claims before Pilate, and 'portrays the human predicament in which one must choose between Jesus and the world' (Duke, p. 126).

(3) The general problem of reconciling this statement with the Synoptic insistence that Jesus himself ate the Passover meal, was betrayed that night and crucified the next day (by Western reckoning of days), has already been discussed (*cf.* notes introducing 13:1, and on 13:1, 27; 19:14, 31, 36). It is tempting here to understand *to eat the Passover* to refer, not to the Passover meal itself, but to the continuing Feast of Unleavened Bread, which continued for seven days. In particular, attention may be focused on the *ḥagigah*, the feast-offering offered on the morning of the first full paschal day (*cf.* Nu. 28:18–19). There is ample evidence that 'the Passover' could refer to the combined feast of the paschal meal itself plus the ensuing Feast of Unleavened bread (e.g. Lk. 22:1: 'Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching'). If then the Jewish authorities wanted to continue full participation in the entire feast, they would have to avoid *all* ritual contamination. Even if they contracted a form of defilement that could be washed away at sundown, it would preclude them from participating that day. True, the *ḥagigah* could be eaten later in the week, but the Jewish leaders, conscious of their public position, would be eager to avoid any uncleanness that would force them to withdraw from the feast, however temporarily. At this point, distinctions between defilement that lasts until sundown and defilement that lasts seven days become irrelevant.

This interpretation becomes very convincing if our treatment of 19:31 (*cf.* notes) is correct. Morris (pp. 778–779) concedes that ‘the Passover’ can refer to the Passover plus the Feast of Unleavened Bread, but insists that ‘to eat the Passover’ cannot refer to all or part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread *apart from* the Feast of Passover. The criticism has little weight: the interpretation here defended is not that ‘the Passover’ refers to the Feast of Unleavened Bread *apart from* Passover, but to the *entire Passover festival*. The Jews wanted to continue to participate in the entire feast; they wanted to eat the Passover.

**18:29.** Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, is introduced to the narrative. He received his appointment from the Emperor Tiberius in ad 26, probably about four years earlier than these events, and held the post until ad 37. He has often been thought of as a Roman Procurator, owing to the evidence of the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* XV. xlv. 4), but an inscription published in 1962, discovered in the Herodian theatre in Caesarea, calls him ‘prefect (Lat. *praefectus*) of Judea’. The Gospels use the generic category ‘governor’ (*hēgemēn*). Both from biblical and extra-biblical sources, historians have come to know him as a morally weak and vacillating man who, like many of the same breed, tried to hide his flaws under shows of stubbornness and brutality. His rule earned him the loathing of the Jewish people, small groups of whom violently protested and were put down with savage ferocity (*cf.* Lk. 13:1).

Because the Jewish authorities refused to enter the praetorium (v. 28), the Governor *came out to them*. This is not historically incredible. Any Roman governor would have been aware of the Jews’ deep religious sensitivities, and some of them, at least, he would have honoured, especially during the high feasts when it was more than usually necessary to avoid riots. It was an easy task to order his servants to move his judgment seat.

His question *What charges are you bringing against this man?* formally opened the judicial proceedings. The fact that Roman troops were used at the arrest (vv. 3, 12) proves that the Jewish authorities had communicated something of this case to Pilate in advance; the sparring that follows in the wake of his question confirms the point. They had expected Pilate to confirm their judgment and order the death sentence by crucifixion; instead, he orders a fresh hearing in his presence.

**18:30.** This explains the truculence of their reply; otherwise their words appear impossibly insolent. The fact that Pilate had sufficiently agreed with their legal briefs to sanction sending a detachment of troops had doubtless encouraged them to think that he would ratify the proceedings of the Sanhedrin and get on to other business. To find him opening up what was in fact a new trial made them sullen. Hence their terse remark. The course of the subsequent interrogation (v. 33) shows that, whether at this point or in earlier legal briefs, the Jews had cast their case in political categories that Pilate could understand, even though the categories that upset them the most were theological (19:7).

**18:31.** Resentful of their truculence, their disrespectful assumption that the Roman governor would fit into their plans, Pilate humiliated them yet further: *Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.* Doubtless Pilate knew what the Jewish authorities wanted. But if they were going to talk in vague generalities about law-breaking, they could handle the case within their own court system. By contrast, if they expected a capital sentence to be handed down they were going to have to speak up and convince him, since, as they themselves conceded, they could not legally proceed without him. The Pilate disclosed in the historical documents almost certainly acted like this not so much out of any passion for justice as out of the ego-building satisfaction he gained from making the Jewish authorities jump through legal hoops and recognize his authority.

A long line of scholars influenced by Lietzmann (and cautiously represented by Barrett, pp. 533–535) have argued that John is historically inaccurate on this point, and that the Sanhedrin retained the power of execution. In fact, the evidence supporting John is rather strong. When Rome took over Judea and began direct rule through a prefect in ad 6, capital jurisdiction was taken away from the Jews and invested in the governor (*Jos., Ant.* xii. 117)—Rome’s common practice in provincial administration. Indeed, ‘the capital power was the most jealously guarded of all the attributes of government’ (Sherwin-White, pp. 24–47, esp. p. 36). Second-century Jewish evidence (*J. Sanhedrin* 1:1; 7:2) says that this power was taken from the Jews forty years before the fall of the temple, *i.e.* in ad 30, about the time of Jesus’ death. The date assigned is curious; according to Josephus’ evidence, we might have expected sixty-four years before the destruction of the temple. Bruce’s suggestion is attractive (p. 351): ‘it may be that the remembrance persisted of a situation around ad 30 when the deprivation of this right was of special significance.’

Those who suspect John of inaccuracy focus most of their attention on Josephus (*Bel.* v. 193–194; vi. 124–126), who insists that the Jewish authorities had the right to execute any Gentile, even a Roman citizen, who trespassed into the inner part of the temple. But this is surely the exception that established the rule, especially since the Romans were not thereby conceding very much. Desecration of a temple was almost universally viewed as a heinous crime in the ancient world, frequently punishable by death. That may be the reason why, according to the Synoptists (*Mk.* 14:57–59), the Sanhedrin expended some energy in trying to prove that Jesus had threatened the temple (*cf.* notes on *Jn.* 2:18–22). The report of Stephen’s death (*Acts* 6–7) is frequently cited as evidence that the Sanhedrin retained capital jurisdiction, but that sounds more like mob violence winked at by the court than officially sanctioned by the court. Barrett (p. 534) and others, rather strangely, refer to Josephus’ report (*Ant.* xx. 200) of the execution by stoning of James the half-brother of Jesus, but Josephus makes a major point of the fact that Annas (he calls him ‘Ananus’) the high priest convened the Sanhedrin and secured a capital verdict in the interval

between the administrations of Festus, who had died, and Albinus his successor, who was still on his way.

In short, the evidence of John is well supported by extra-biblical witness. But this means that not only the *Jewish* authorities had to secure a guilty verdict, they had to persuade *Pilate* to find Jesus guilty of a capital crime. Offences that were simply against the Jewish law (v. 31a) would be of little moment to Pilate. This forced the Jewish authorities to tinge their charges against Jesus with political overtones: these were the categories Pilate understood (*cf.* notes on v. 33; 19:6, 12).

**18:32.** Whatever the mix of religious and political motivation, John the Evangelist detects the hand of God himself. The political realities guaranteed that when sentence was finally passed Jesus would be executed by crucifixion, not by stoning. The text does not say that *the Jews* wanted Jesus crucified rather than stoned, ostensibly because they remembered that ‘anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse’ (Dt. 21:23), and they wanted to ensure that Jesus would be viewed as accursed (so Beasley-Murray, p. 328). Rather, John is saying that the flux of events, including the brute fact that the Romans had to sanction capital punishment, brought about the fulfillment of Jesus’ words *indicating the kind of death he was going to die*, his being ‘lifted up from the earth’ (Jn. 12:32–33). And thus, too, Jesus’ words are fulfilled in the same way that Scripture’s words are fulfilled.

### **b. Pilate questions Jesus (18:33–38a)**

**18:33.** Back inside the *praetorium* (*cf.* v. 28), Pilate begins his interrogation of Jesus. The question *Are you the king of the Jews?* is reported in all four Gospels (*cf.* Mk. 15:2 par.); in John’s narrative, it presupposes that the charge the Sanhedrin levelled against Jesus before Pilate was cast in these terms (*cf.* 19:21). Possibly Pilate asked it in a contemptuous manner: opening the question with ‘you’ (*sy*) may suggest it (though *cf.* M. III. 37). Apparently the rage of the Sanhedrin was roused by the theological threat they perceived in Jesus—a point made clear in the Synoptics and implied throughout John’s account (*e.g.* 18:35; 19:7). Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God; their problem was how to formulate this claim in a manner calculated to impress Pilate with how dangerous Jesus was, and therefore to bring down the death penalty. The solution lay ready to hand. In Jewish expectation, the Davidic Messiah was necessarily the promised king of Israel (*cf.* 1:49). Thus is introduced a theme of controlling importance to chs. 18–19 (*cf.* 18:33–37, 39; 19:3, 12, 15, 19–22).

**18:34–35.** In the Synoptics, Jesus replies to Pilate’s question with a brief *sy legeis* (niv ‘Yes, it is as you say’: Mt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:3). The expression is ‘affirmative in content, and reluctant or circumlocutory in formulation’. That answer also appears in v. 37, but John reports an intervening exchange between Jesus and Pilate that sheds light on the nature of Jesus’ kingship. John includes these details for two reasons. Not only does this raise the horizon

from the plane of antiquarian interest (*Was Jesus a pretender to the throne of a minor Roman province in ad 30?*) to the level of universal appeal ('My kingdom is not of this world', v. 36), but, more importantly for Jewish readers in the diaspora, it clarifies the *nature* of the messianic reign. If Jesus' claims are to be believed, if faith is to be invested in Jesus, the essence of his kingship must be made clear.

Jesus cannot possibly answer with a simple 'Yes' or 'No' unless he knows what is meant by the question. He therefore asks Pilate if the question the governor has posed spontaneously springs from his own understanding and curiosity (*cf.* Hoskyns, p. 520), or is simply a repetition of the Sanhedrin's charge. If the former, then perhaps Jesus can lead him to better or deeper understanding; if the latter, then Pilate is already so profoundly misled that major clarification will be necessary if Jesus is to answer truthfully at all. At the same time Jesus, as it were, has become the interrogator; the prisoner has become the judge (*cf.* notes on 3:2).

Pilate's answer is indignant, perhaps contemptuous: literally 'Am I a Jew?'—expecting a strong negative answer. He is saying, in effect, that the royal pretensions of any Jew can mean nothing to him personally; he has no stake in their outcome, and could not possibly be seriously contemplating the claims of the man before him. *It was your people and your chief priests* [they are singled out, as the predominant voice in the Sanhedrin] *who handed you over (paredōken se: the verb may have the force of 'betrayed you') to me.*

Pilate's response also suggests that he is less than satisfied with the Sanhedrin's charges against Jesus. There must be *something* behind the virulence of their animosity, even if it is unclear; and a cynical Roman governor in a political hotbed like first-century Judea was unlikely to be swayed into thinking that the Jewish authorities would take such pains with someone intent on doing damage to Rome—unless their own interests were at risk. Hence the question: *What is it you have done?*

It is just possible that under Pilate's question 'Am I a Jew?' the Evangelist finds lurking deeper ironies. Pilate despises and distrusts the Jews, yet in the course of the narrative he is eventually forced to adopt their position. Insofar as the Jews here represent the 'world', Pilate joins them. And in any case, the reader knows that in a profound sense Pilate's question really means (though certainly not intended this way by Pilate), 'Are you my king?' (*cf.* Duke, pp. 129–130).

**18:36.** If Pilate is simply conveying the charge laid against Jesus by the Sanhedrin, Jesus knows how to answer Pilate's first question (v. 33). He acknowledges that he is a king, but so defines his 'kingdom' (*basileia*; the word has primary overtones of 'reign', 'kingship', not territory; *cf.* notes on 3:3, 5) as to remove all possibility of offence against the Empire. That is why Jesus defines his reign negatively: it *is not of this world* (*kosmos*; *cf.* notes on 1:9). If Jesus were a king or king-pretender in any sense that concerned the governors of the Empire, he would have marshalled his followers to fight and protect him from

arrest. The fact that he was arrested so easily—indeed, that he stifled the inclination of one of his followers to rely on the sword (18:10, 11)—proves that his kingship is of a different order. It is not *of this world*; it is not ‘from here’ (*enteuthen*; strangely, niv opts for a positive statement, and says it is ‘from another place’). Both expressions mean that Jesus’ reign does not have its source or origin in this world (*cf.* 8:23)—this world which is both created by God through the agency of the pre-incarnate Word (1:2, 3) and locked in persistent rebellion against its creator (1:10, 11). It is the sphere of darkness, of rebellion, of blindness, of sin. The kingships of this world preserve themselves by force and violence; if Jesus’ kingship finds its origin elsewhere, it will not be defended by the world’s means. And if it resorts to no force and no fighting, it is hard to see how Rome’s interests are in jeopardy.

It is important to see ‘that Jesus’ statement should not be misconstrued as meaning that his kingdom is not *active* in this world, or *has nothing to do with* this world’ (Beasley-Murray, p. 331). John certainly expects the power of the inbreaking kingdom to affect this world; elsewhere he insists that the world is conquered by those who believe in Jesus (1 Jn. 5:4). But theirs is the sort of struggle, and victory, that cannot effectively be opposed by armed might.

**18:37.** Pilate has understood little. He knows that Jesus has spoken of his ‘kingdom’, and therefore that Jesus’ pretensions as a king must be probed a little harder: *You are a king, then!* Jesus’ answer, translated literally, reads, ‘You say that I am a king’, periphrastically rendered by Dodd as ‘“King” is *your* word, not mine’ (*HTFG*, p. 99; similarly Bruce, pp. 353–354). But in fact the evidence is very strong that the expression is unambiguously affirmative (hence niv’s *You are right in saying I am a king*), even if, as in the simpler expression, it is reluctant or leads to circumlocution (*cf.* notes on vv. 34–35). In other words, Jesus has gone far enough in self-disclosure that he must frankly attest his own kingly status, but he would be profoundly misleading if he did not continue to spell out the peculiar nature of his reign. Having described his kingdom negatively (v. 36), he now defines his kingly mission positively. To be a king was the reason he was born, the reason he came into the world: in the context of the Fourth Gospel, this pair of expressions refers to the incarnation, his move from the glory he shared with the Father in his presence (17:5) to his manifestation in this fallen world to manifest something of that glory (1:14). Only here in this Gospel is the birth of Jesus unambiguously mentioned. He came, in short, to be a king—or, otherwise put, *to testify to the truth* (*alētheia*; *cf.* notes on 1:14; 4:24; 14:6). The parallelism suggests his kingdom is the kingdom of truth; or, more precisely put, the exercise of his saving kingship is virtually indistinguishable from his testifying to the truth. In this context, *truth* is understood in more than an intellectual sense (*cf.* de la Potterie, 2. 624ff.); it is nothing less than the self-disclosure of God in his Son, who is the truth (14:6). Disclosing the truth of God, of salvation and of judgment, was the principal way of making subjects, of exercising his saving kingship (*cf.* Lagrange, p. 477).

Similarly, only those who are rightly related to God, to the truth itself, can grasp Jesus' witness to the truth (cf. 3:16–21). *Everyone who is on the side of truth* (lit. 'who is of the truth') listens to Jesus (cf. 10:3, 16, 27).

**18:38a.** If Jesus' kingship is indistinguishable from his testimony to the truth, and if his followers are characterized by allegiance to his testimony rather than by violent upheaval, Pilate is forced to recognize that Jesus is the victim of a Sanhedrin plot. Moreover, there is an implicit invitation in Jesus' words. The man in the dock invites his judge to be his follower, to align himself with those who are 'of the truth'. Jesus is not dangerous; he may also be getting under Pilate's skin. Either way, Pilate abruptly terminates the interrogation with a curt and cynical question: *What is truth?*—and just as abruptly turns away, either because he is convinced there is no answer, or, more likely, because he does not want to hear it. He thus proves he is not amongst those whom the Father has given to the Son (cf. Haenchen, 2. 180).

### **c. Barabbas (18:38b–40)**

**18:38b.** Returning to the outer colonnade (cf. vv. 28–29), Pilate yields his verdict to 'the Jews' (cf. notes on 1:19), now apparently augmented by vociferous supporters (v. 40; 19:6, 12, 14, 15). His statement *I find no basis for a charge against him* (cf. Lk. 23:14) shows that he understood Jesus' answer well enough to grasp that the formal 'Yes, I am a king' really meant 'No, I am not a king in any merely political sense, a king who might endanger the Empire'.

**18:39.** If Pilate had been stamped with integrity, his verdict would have ended the matter: Jesus would have been released, and the Jewish authorities dismissed. For whatever reason (to help the Jews save face? to save his own skin, because he had already received private threats akin to the public threat of 19:12? to embarrass the authorities before the crowds, whom he thought would support Jesus?), he offered to release Jesus in accordance with the custom at that season of the year (cf. Additional Note). The cast of his question—*Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?*—suggests he was still trying to antagonize the authorities, since this was the title they specifically denied could be rightly ascribed to Jesus.

**18:40.** All four canonical Gospels tell us a little of Barabbas (whose full name may have been Jesus Barabbas: there is a variant reading in support of the longer name in Mt. 27:16, 17). He was a *lēstēs* (lit. 'one who seizes plunder'). In the hands of some first-century authors, however, the word depicts not simply a brigand, but a terrorist (from the Roman point of view), a guerilla (from the nationalist perspective); hence *niv's had taken part in a rebellion*. He had participated in bloody insurrection (Mk. 15:7).

Thus, at the instigation of the chief priests, who normally had nothing to do with Zealots and others interested in armed rebellion, the crowds call for the release of a man who has committed murder in his struggle against Rome,

while condemning a man falsely accused of being a danger to Rome. Pilate cannot fail to see the irony. What will he do?

### **Additional note**

**18:39.** There is no unambiguous extra-biblical evidence for this Passover custom, and this has led not a few scholars to doubt its historicity. One passage in the Mishnah, *Pesahim* 8:6, probably refers to it: they may slaughter the Passover lamb for a variety of people whose actual condition is uncertain (e.g. invalids), including 'one whom they have promised to bring out of prison'. Such a prisoner could scarcely have been under restraints by a Jewish court, since such a court would know about the demands of Passover and could be counted on to make a clean decision one way or another. A special promise of release, by a foreign court, at Passover season, seems to be in view; and the fact that legislation is required suggests that these releases occurred with some regularity. Although Mark 15:8 pictures the crowd asking for the release of a prisoner according to custom, while John has Pilate bringing the matter up, the custom itself is still assumed. It is not unlikely that some request was made to Pilate before his public offer, just as there must have been some formal charge laid against Jesus before Pilate began his interrogation (*cf.* notes on v. 33). In both instances John omits the details as irrelevant to his purposes.