

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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John 18:28-40 -- The Conflict of Two Kingdoms

by Dan Trygg

“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.’ ³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, ‘So You are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.’” John 18:36-37

“*Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early...*” (18:28) -- John does not record Jesus’ trial before Caiaphas (Mk. 14:53-64). Neither does he mention the sentencing hearing, held early in the morning before they brought Jesus to Pilate (Mk. 15:1). **Although giving an outward show of staying within the limitations of the law, these secret legal proceedings were clearly in violation of the intent of the law.** They were plainly an indication of the desperate attempt of those in power to quietly remove Jesus, who had so often been a thorn in their sides, with the least amount of political damage. If the time reference to the “sixth hour” in 19:14 was 6:00 a.m. in Roman time, then the arrival of the Sanhedrin members with their Accused would have been *very* early, shortly after the brief sentencing hearing that would have occurred at daybreak. “*...they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.*” -- How ironic! Here they are knowingly committing a clear travesty of justice, ...going to elaborate lengths to conduct secret meetings at night, even attempting to find false witnesses to accuse the pre-condemned man (Matt. 26:59), so that they could *say* they followed proper procedure and appear righteous to people, ...and now they were concerned about *religious purity*! Had not **Jesus correctly observed that they were after glory which came from men**, and they were not seeking the glory which was from the one and only God (7:44)? **Thus, it was important for them to keep up appearances, above all else.** Their concern lay in the notion that to enter the house of a foreigner would cause them to become unclean, and they would not be able to participate in the feast (cf. Acts 10:28).

“*Pilate went out to them...*” (vs. 29) -- An accommodation to their religious sensibilities. “*What accusation do you bring against this Man?*” -- To try the case before the governor, there would need to be a charge levied against Jesus which would be serious enough to warrant a Roman trial. Since Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy by the Jews, a meaningless concept to the Romans, **the accusers would need to bring a charge against Jesus that would not only justify a trial before the governor, but also warrant a death sentence.** “*If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.*” (vs. 30) -- The Jewish leaders tried to see if Pilate would just “rubber stamp” their decision. “*Take Him yourself and judge Him according to your law.*” (vs. 31) -- Pilate was not in the mood for political games. If they were going to bother him with this case, they had better have a good reason. It is important to recognize that this was no ordinary judge. This was the Roman governor. There were lesser courts to deal with unimportant issues. “*We are not permitted to put anyone to death.*” -- The Romans did not allow local people to have the power of capital punishment. It would be only too easy for Roman supporters to be removed under trumped up charges, if such power were available to local magistrates and judges. Thus **Rome determined that it was in her self-interest to try all capital cases under Roman law, by Roman officials**, to prevent such political purges. “*...signifying by what kind of death He was about to die.*” (vs. 32) -- Jewish capital punishment was carried out by stoning, while **capital crimes under Roman jurisprudence were punishable by crucifixion, for those who were not Roman citizens.** This fulfilled what Jesus had implied in 3:14; 8:28, and what He had directly said in the other gospel accounts (e.g., Matt. 20:19). Furthermore, as Paul states in Galatians 3:13, **death by crucifixion signified that Jesus became One accursed of God, according to the Law** (Deut. 21:22,23; cf. Isa. 53:1-9).

Kingdom questioning -- “Are You the King of the Jews?” (vs. 33) -- **These are the first words of Pilate to Jesus in all four gospel accounts.** Though not referred to by John, from Luke’s account we see that the accusations of the Jews themselves suggested this title to Pilate. Luke records three basic charges against Jesus: (1.) misleading the nation; (2.) forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar; and (3.) saying that He was Christ, a King (Lk. 23:1,2). “*Are you saying this of your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?*” (vs. 34) -- This question is somewhat puzzling, until we recall that the conversation between Pilate and the Jews was out of Jesus’ hearing. He had been brought into the Praetorium, while they had remained outside (vs. 28). **It would seem that Jesus was attempting to discern something from the governor’s response, before giving answer to the question.** Was Pilate an honest inquirer, or was he simply following up on the Jews’ accusation, ...i.e., that Jesus was a self-proclaimed Jewish Messiah? **If, however, Pilate perceived in Jesus a true threat against Rome, he would misunderstand the nature of Jesus’**

Kingdom, and the cause for which He truly had come. It may be that Jesus asked Pilate the question to make him think a little more deeply, and personally, than he would have otherwise considered the significance of the Man before him, and what He stood for. ***“I am not a Jew, am I?”*** (vs. 35) – Pilate’s response reveals that he did not at all consider this encounter as *anything* of significance to him. ***“Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have you done?”*** -- Pilate was attempting to give Jesus an opportunity to defend himself. ***“My Kingdom is not of this world.”*** (vs. 36) -- Instead of responding directly to the governor, Jesus leads the conversation in an entirely different direction. **The Lord makes clear that the Kingdom which He reigns over is no threat to Rome, or to the Jews. “If My Kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews...”** -- This statement cut at the core of the Roman governor’s concern. ***There was no attempt at political insurrection here, ...no threat to the peace, or to Roman power. “So you are a King?”*** (vs. 37) -- In a follow-up question, Pilate attempts to draw out any other underlying competition with Rome. ***“You say correctly that I am a King. For this end I have been born, and for this I have come into this world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”*** (vs. 37) -- This certainly is not the language of someone attempting to rebel against Rome. Jesus’ message was not directed against the political and economic power structures of His day. His message was aimed at the human heart. If the heart was changed, there *would be* changes made in the ways people related to each other. ***Truth was the rallying cry, weapon, and mark of the Kingdom of Jesus. “What is truth?”*** (vs. 38) -- Whether this was a cynical mockery of what Pilate saw as Jesus’ naiveté, ... or if it was an honest statement of Pilate’s self-doubt about what Jesus was saying..., the result is clear: ***Pilate concluded that Jesus was not guilty of any crime. “I find no guilt in Him.”***

The Barabbas Exchange -- Before commenting on this strange, but significant, twist of events, it is helpful to note that **Jesus’ trial before Herod (reported only by Luke) took place immediately after this first interview with Pilate** (Lk. 23:1-15). Having found no guilt in Jesus, the Roman governor had hoped to pass off the jurisdiction, and, thus, the responsibility, of this distasteful case to his Galilean counterpart, Herod, since Jesus was from Galilee. In spite of Herod’s attempt to question Him, Jesus said nothing. Having publicly mocked Him, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate. ***Since neither Herod, nor he, had found any substance to the charges against Jesus, Pilate intended to scourge Him and release Him*** (Lk. 23:14-16). What follows concerning Barabbas is recorded in all four gospel accounts. ***“But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover...”*** (vs. 39) -- Matthew and Mark both make reference to the same custom (Matt. 27:15; Mk. 15:6). We know from history that such a practice was not without parallel in other locations on special occasions. The Romans did this as both a token of good will, and also as an expression of their self-confidence. It was like throwing a bone to a dog. What is clear is that this was a well-known, established tradition, probably initiated by Roman governors before Pilate’s time. His statement, “you have a custom” is probably a reference to this previous history. ***“...do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?”*** -- It is not altogether clear who brought up the custom, the governor or the crowd. **Certainly, Pilate wanted to use this custom as way to release Jesus. This would serve his interests well, since Jesus was guiltless and harmless, in his mind, while other prisoners who might be chosen would be much more of a liability.** Pilate was not ignorant of Jesus’ popularity, nor the underlying treachery of the chief priests (Matt. 27:18), and was undoubtedly counting on the crowd to jump to support this proposal. (At this juncture, Matthew 27:19 reports that Pilate’s wife sent him a message, imploring him to have nothing more to do with Jesus, referring to a troubling dream she had experienced. In spite of their great accomplishments, many Romans were very superstitious. Such dreams or omens would have had a very unsettling effect.) Note the continued focus on Jesus as “the King of the Jews”. ***“Not this Man, but Barabbas.”*** (vs. 40) -- The chief priests and elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas instead of Jesus (Matt. 27:20; Mk. 15:11). **The contrast between the two men could not have been more dramatic.** The name meant “son of a father” (Heb., *Bar* = “son of” and *abba* = “father”). If, as the ancient traditions report, Barabbas’ first name was also Jesus, then **he would have been all that the enemies of Jesus were falsely attributing to Jesus, i.e., the illegitimate child of an unknown father, a political insurgent famous as a robber and murderer against Roman forces. He was all Jesus was not, ...a folk hero of near-messianic notoriety, one who had tried by force to overthrow Roman power and to create justice by a “rob from the rich and give to the poor” type of strategy. If anyone was “misleading the nation, and forbidding them to pay taxes”, it was Barabbas, yet in the choice between Jesus a son of a father (Barabbas), and Jesus the Son of the Father, the priests and the people rejected the true Messiah, and chose a worldly counterfeit.**

At Jesus’ trial, we definitely see two very different kingdoms. Jesus represents the Kingdom of God, whose power becomes visible wherever truth is recognized and embraced. Truth changes hearts, transforms relationships, and liberates people from sin and selfishness to live for God. Power and ability are given to serve others. The worldly kingdom is established and maintained by force and deception. Power is used to serve self, and to dominate and control others. **We must choose our King. If we choose Jesus, then we must be willing to live according to His ways.**