

November 22, Reign of Christ: John 18:33-37

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue

Of the four Gospels, John provides the most detailed account of the encounter between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator (governor) of Judea from about 26 to 36 CE, when he was recalled to Rome for trial for cruelty and oppression. His callousness was legendary: if you could choose your judge, you would not want Pontius Pilate.

Jesus cannot choose. As John describes it, he is caught between a rock and a hard place. Complex power dynamics existed between the Judean religious leaders and the Roman procurator, who had the power to pronounce the death sentence. Passover, the annual celebration of Israel's liberation from slavery, God's victory over Pharaoh, was always politically explosive. You never knew when some Galilean hothead would stir up riots against the hated Romans.

Pilate's job was to make sure that did not happen. He always brought in extra military power to handle the large crowds of Passover pilgrims coming to the temple. The presence of Roman legions, along with his own no-nonsense reputation, had generally done the job.

In recent years, Jewish and Christian scholars have collaborated to reach a better understanding of the events of the passion narratives in the Gospels—and in John's Gospel in particular, because of its polemical language about "the Jews." It is important to stress how difficult it is to recover, many centuries later, with almost no written materials that could be characterized as unbiased, the events leading up to Jesus' death under Pilate.

This Gospel was written when emerging Christianity and emerging Pharisaism were rival versions of Judaism, one of which believed that God's Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the other of which doubted that God's Messiah would die on a cross and did not see any signs of the messianic age present since the coming of Jesus. So they disagreed, sometimes bitterly, about these matters, a theological disagreement that colored the way historical events were remembered. What we have in John's passion narrative is a complex entanglement of theological

and political reflection, written in the context of a highly charged argument between a local Christian community and the synagogue down the street.

Nevertheless, if it is possible to bracket some of these historical questions, it may also be possible to appreciate the subtlety of John's account of the meeting between Jesus and Pilate. John's Gospel—perhaps surprisingly for the “spiritual gospel”—exposes both the hypocrisy of the religious leaders preparing to celebrate the Passover according to the law of Moses and the hypocrisy of Pontius Pilate, who, in theory at least, stands for the grandeur of Roman law in which criminal justice is not perverted by mob rule.

To do this, the evangelist constructs a seven-scene play in 18:28–19:16. It all happens at the Praetorium, Pilate's headquarters, which includes the governor's residence, military barracks, and an outdoor courtyard used as a court of judgment. There, at least as John tells it, two worlds collide. Outside are Judean religious leaders who want Jesus killed but lack the power to do it themselves under Roman rule; inside is Pilate's prisoner, brought early that morning from Caiaphas. Outside the religious leaders and crowds shout their demands up to Pilate; inside Pilate and Jesus engage in rational, even philosophical discourse. John shows Pilate's indecision by having him move back and forth between the two worlds: outside and inside, outside and inside.

At the end of the seven scenes, the Judean religious leaders—who do not enter the Praetorium, so as not to defile themselves ritually—end up saying, “We have no king but Caesar,” probably John's allusion to a Passover hymn that says to God, “We have no king but Thee.” They have, in effect, defiled themselves anyway. And Pilate, who at the beginning insisted that serious charges be brought and proved, caves to pressure to kill a man of whom he himself has said three times, “I find no case against him.” So Roman “justice” is exposed for the farce it is.

This week's passage occurs in the second scene, inside the Praetorium. The first conversation between Pilate and Jesus does not go well. Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Some commentaries stress *you*, reflecting a tradition that Pilate is not impressed by Jesus' appearance. Perhaps Jesus isn't much to look at, or perhaps this insult is a form of intimidation.

Jesus answers Pilate's question with a question: where did he get his information? Pilate implies that others have told him about Jesus. Why should he care? He's not

Jewish. He asks, "What have you done?" Jesus again does not answer Pilate's question, instead stating twice that his kingdom is not from this world: if it were, his followers would be fighting for him.

Pilate, who only knows of one world, can hardly appreciate Jesus' argument, but he grabs hold of what he can understand: "So you *are* a king?"

Once again, Jesus and Pilate are talking past each other: Jesus responds, "*You* say that I am a king." The implication: what *I* say about myself is, "for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Although the assigned reading ends here, some preachers will want to add the first part of verse 38, Pilate's question—is it bored? frustrated? cynical? disgusted? curious?—"What is truth?"