

4. Jesus was brought before the entire Sanhedrin (“Council”) for Israel’s high court to ratify the finding of Caiaphas, Annas and the other priests and rulers. They, too, agreed that Jesus was guilty of a capital offense and they led Him away to the Roman Praetorium to seek Pilate’s consent for His execution. All four gospel writers recorded Jesus’ trial before Pilate, though, here as well, their accounts differ in their details (cf. Matthew 27:2ff; Mark 15:1ff; Luke 23:1ff; John 18:28ff). Among those differences, the most significant ones are Matthew’s treatment of Judas’ death (27:3-10), Luke’s account of Jesus’ appearance before Herod (23:6-12) and John’s mention that the Jews refused to enter the Praetorium out of concern for their ceremonial purity (18:28).
 - a. But all four are consistent in emphasizing Jesus’ *kingship* as the focal point of Pilate’s questioning. Matthew, Mark and John imply that Pilate was already aware of this claim when Jesus appeared before him, but Luke’s account has the Jews presenting this claim as part of their charge against Him (Luke 23:2). In their interrogation the Jewish rulers focused on the claim that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, but they understood that this identified Him as the regal Son of David in whom Yahweh was restoring David’s (and Yahweh’s) throne and kingdom. To say *messiah* is to say *king of Israel*, but Pilate wouldn’t have made this connection. Thus Luke recorded that the rulers, when they presented Jesus to Pilate, described Him as a man who was claiming to be “*the Messiah, a king.*”

This introduction had a larger purpose than clarifying for Pilate the meaning of the Jewish concept of “messiah.” The Jews wanted Pilate to view Jesus as a self-proclaimed king, and therefore a threat to Rome’s authority. The previous century had taught the Romans that the Jewish people were peculiar in their zealous commitment to their deity and it was best to allow them space to continue their worship according to their own traditions. Caesar was willing to tolerate Judaism and its practice for the sake of order and stability in this backwater province, but he wasn’t about to allow a competing power. Israel’s rulers were painfully aware that they “ruled” under Rome’s authority and permission; they were vassal authorities accountable to Israel’s one king, the Roman Caesar. They knew Pilate wouldn’t be the least bit concerned with Jewish matters (18:28-31); he would, however, be forced to take action if they could convince him that this Galilean was a rival king who threatened Caesar’s rule in Israel (19:12).

This is why all of the gospels focus Pilate’s interrogation on the claim of kingship – specifically that Jesus was the “King of the Jews,” a title that signified *Messiah* to the Jews, but only a *rival king* to the Romans (cf. Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33). The Jews wanted Jesus executed because they believed Him to be a false messiah who threatened Israel’s well-being and their own authority and power; they hoped to achieve their goal by convincing Pilate that Jesus was a threat to Roman sovereignty. Israel’s rulers had their own reasons for seeking a Roman execution (public crucifixion by Rome would prove once and for all that Jesus wasn’t Israel’s Messiah), but John saw in it another proof that Jesus wasn’t being subjected to powers and circumstances beyond His control; all of this was precisely ordained (18:31-32; cf. 19:10-11, 31-37).

After summoning Him into the Praetorium (Pilate's residence in Jerusalem), Pilate asked Jesus if the charge against Him was true; was He indeed this "King of the Jews"? The Synoptists recorded only a bare confirmation, but John provided a more extensive account of the Lord's response (18:34-37). In John's account, Jesus answered Pilate with His own question (the King interrogating the king; 19:10-11). Some believe He was attempting to change the subject or avoid answering, but He was actually highlighting the critical issue of *truth* underlying the question: Was Pilate asking because he was seeking to know the truth about Jesus, or was he simply seeking to resolve a dispute? Pilate's response provided the answer: He had no interest in Jewish religious notions or concerns; it was Jesus' own countrymen who'd gotten him involved and everything he knew about Him had come through their accusations. But it was clear His accusers were greatly distressed over Him; what had He done to create such a furor?

Jesus' reply underscores the fact that Pilate found the whole situation absurd and puzzling. The man standing before him was accused of claiming to be Israel's king, but all he saw was a simple, unimpressive Galilean peasant. Even Herod, Caesar's puppet ruler whom Pilate greatly disdained, exhibited the *trappings* of royalty, authority and power. How could someone like Jesus make any pretence of being a king and what sort of kingdom could such a man presume to rule over? Jesus' answer was consistent with His appearance: He didn't resemble a king, but neither was His kingdom "of this world" (18:36a). Many have understood this as referring to *heaven*. That is, Jesus was saying that His kingdom exists in the heavenly realm and pertains to that realm, not the earth. This view is especially prominent among Christians who regard everlasting existence in heaven as their destiny. But Jesus was asserting that His kingdom doesn't *originate* in this world, not that it doesn't *pertain* to this world; it is a kingdom whose source and nature lie outside the natural realm; it is a kingdom of an otherworldly sort.

This is evident from His elaboration: The very proof that His kingdom isn't of the sort that Pilate knew is the fact that His followers weren't taking up arms in His defense (18:36b). Earthly kingdoms – wherever they exist and whoever presides over them – are *always* characterized by the exercise of human might. They are established in this way and this is how they are sustained. Pilate knew this to be true of the Roman Empire, but he also understood that what was true of Rome was true of every kingdom and empire in the history of the world. But now he was faced with a man who didn't in any way resemble a king telling him that He ruled a kingdom unlike any kingdom Pilate had ever known or imagined.

All of this must have been very baffling to him, but his interest lay elsewhere. Pilate's concern was to get to the bottom of the charges against Jesus and get this matter resolved without further incident. Feast times posed a heightened security threat because of the mass influx into Jerusalem; indeed, this was the very reason Pilate was in Jerusalem rather than his palace in Caesarea. The last thing he wanted was for this foolishness to get out of hand. He didn't care about this Galilean peasant's delusions, he just wanted to diffuse the situation.

And so, rather than asking Jesus to explain His statement, Pilate merely repeated his question (18:37). This time Jesus answered forthrightly, but so as to again turn to the matter of truth: Yes, He was a king, but not of the sort imagined by either Pilate or those accusing Him. *Israel's rulers and Rome's governor had different perspectives on Jesus' supposed kingship, but they agreed on the nature of kingship and so also on the falseness of Jesus' claim.* The Jews sought liberation from Roman authority and subjugation, but at the hands of a messianic deliverer who'd establish his own throne and kingdom in the same way Caesar had. They sought deliverance from the kingdom of Rome, but to become subjects of an Israelite kingdom of the same essential sort; they had no concept of or interest in a king and kingdom that are not "of this world."

Pilate couldn't "wrap his head" around Jesus any more than Israel's rulers could. Neither pagan Roman nor pious Jew could grasp the truth of Jesus the Messiah, but this wasn't going to deter Him. He'd come into the world to testify to the truth – *to bear witness to the truth of the true and living God and His purposes by embodying that truth in His own person, words and works* (a central theme in John's gospel; cf. 1:14-18, 3:31-33, 4:19-24, 7:14-29, 8:12-47, 14:1-11). Jesus embodied the truth, but not the world's "truth." Thus He insisted that He could be known only by those who are *begotten* of the truth. Pilate doubtless intended his response ("What is truth?") as a sneering dismissal of an absurd claim (cf. 19:1-3), but he actually proved the truth of Jesus' words; he, too, was not "of the truth."

- b. The Synoptists didn't record this private exchange, but instead emphasized Jesus' silence in the face of the accusations hurled against Him and Pilate's amazement that He offered no explanation or defense (ref. Matthew 27:12-14; Mark 15:3-5; cf. also Luke 23:2-3). Harmonizing the four accounts, it appears the scene Matthew and Mark described occurred before Pilate entered the Praetorium and asked that Jesus be brought to him for private interrogation away from the clamoring chorus of accusing voices (cf. John 18:28-33).
- c. All of this convinced him that, whatever offense Jesus might have committed, He'd done nothing deserving of death (18:38; cf. Luke 23:4). When Pilate learned that Jesus was a Galilean, he happily dispatched Him to Herod Antipas who also was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod had jurisdiction over Galilee and this allowed Pilate to make Jesus his problem. Again, Luke is the only gospel writer who recounted this episode, and then only briefly (23:6-12). He recorded that Herod was pleased to see Jesus because he'd heard about His miraculous signs and had wanted to meet Him for a long time. And so he questioned Him at length, not because he was interested in who Jesus was or the charges the Jews were bringing against Him, but because he hoped to provoke Him to perform for his amusement. Fully aware of Herod's design, Jesus remained silent while the king and his soldiers made sport of Him. Finally exasperated and ready to move on to the next entertainment, Herod mockingly directed that this pathetic "king" be dressed in a regal robe and sent back to Pilate. Jesus' silence underscored that Herod, like the nation he represented as "king of the Jews," lacked ears to hear.

- d. Jesus' return to Pilate commenced the second phase of His Roman trial (18:39-19:16; cf. Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25). The central feature of this second phase was Pilate's repeated attempts to release Jesus, being convinced that He'd done nothing deserving of death. All four gospel writers emphasized Pilate's insistence to the Jewish rulers and crowd that he found Jesus innocent of capital offense. Luke went further, noting that Pilate also pointed to Herod in support of his own verdict of innocence (23:13-15). When this didn't satisfy them, Pilate appealed to the tradition of releasing a Jewish prisoner during the Passover feast. Faced with the choice of a pathetic and deluded, yet obviously harmless, Galilean or a notorious insurrectionist and murderer, the rulers and people would surely choose Jesus. But they weren't having it and began shouting with increasing ardor that Barabbas should be released to them. The sharp contrast between these two men and the Jews' preference for Barabbas is often treated as a demonstration of how much they hated Jesus and were determined to see Him executed. But there is a far more profound significance to this scene, evident in the way Pilate identified Jesus in relation to Barabbas ("son of the father") (ref. Matthew 27:15-17, 22; Mark 15:6-9, 12): *Israel was here confronted with two radically different messianic visions – of the Messiah, His kingdom and rule and how His kingdom was to be established. Barabbas, who likely was a Zealot, represented Israel's national vision; Jesus embodied Yahweh's vision.*

The people of Israel – represented in the rulers and crowd – saw in Israelite patriots like the Zealot sect a reflection of their own zeal for the promised messianic kingdom which they envisioned as the triumphal and glorious fruit of armed struggle as it had been with David's kingdom. The furthest thing from their minds was that this kingdom and its king were even then among them and about to be established in supreme power through an ignominious work of submissive self-giving. The messianic kingdom was coming, not by victorious swords raised against Roman forces, but by the defeat and death of a Roman cross.

Thus the rulers' and people's enthusiasm for Barabbas' release and Jesus' death symbolized the nation's rejection of Jesus' way of bringing in the kingdom; they were waiting for a warrior messiah to raise an army against Rome and lead them to freedom and a restored, sovereign Israel. They sought a natural kingdom – as it were, the resurrection of David's former kingdom, not the kingdom Yahweh promised; not the kingdom of David's greater son. Ironically, it was *Rome* that continued to resist Messiah's death while *Israel* remained steadfast in demanding it (Matthew 27:20-25; Mark 15:11-15; Luke 23:17-25). Even Jesus' near-fatal scourging couldn't appease them; they wouldn't rest until He was crucified.

Jesus had proclaimed through agonized tears that the covenant house had missed the day of its visitation. They missed it when they renounced their Messiah and so also their covenant God. But their apostasy wasn't unwitting. Confronted with Yahweh's messianic King by the pagan power ruling over them, the sons of the kingdom were instant in assigning their allegiance: "*We have no king but Caesar*" (19:12-15; cf. Matthew 27:24-25).