

Ruling from the Rood: The Passion Narrative in the Fourth Gospel

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It is a mystery to me, sometimes, how it came to be that the Gospel of John was included in the New Testament; how it came to be that early Christians decided to add it to the small pile of other literature they selected out of the much larger group of documents which Christians had written to celebrate and explain their faith — there were over forty Gospels at least — how it was that those early Christians invested the Fourth Gospel with unique, normative authority for the faith and life, the worship and work of the Church.

It is not that the Gospel of John is not spiritual enough. Far from it! The Fourth Evangelist composed such a simple, compelling version of the ministry and the faith and the resurrection of Jesus, such an uncomplicated and winsome portrait of the one who was perfectly at one with God, that it is impossible to read it without being moved and touched. We've all felt that at one time or another.

Nor does the Gospel of John speak persuasively only to those of us who have been schooled in the Christian faith. New Christians, those who have only recently come to Jesus, who are in the early stages of faith nurturing, find the Gospel of John the simplest, the clearest, the most immediately available and comprehensible presentation of who Jesus was, what God was doing through him, and what he would have us do to deepen our discipleship.

It is not, then, because the Gospel of John is not spiritual enough that I wonder sometimes how it came to be in the Bible. It is that the Gospel of John is *so different*—extraordinarily different from the other three versions of the life of Jesus, his public ministry, execution, and vindicating resurrection, which we find in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The first three Gospel writers tell the story of Jesus in sequential fashion. There is a linear development to their narratives. There is a beginning, a middle, a dramatic climax and a conclusion. We like that because when we tell stories that is usually the way we tell them, too.

The Evangelist John does not write like that, though. Rather than linear in movement, I would describe his Gospel narrative as progressing in a series of concentric circles. John would introduce an idea or concept early on, and not make too much of it. It was laid on the table, so to speak. Maybe, even, the intent was so obscure as to be enigmatic. But he would just leave it there and go on to the next stages in the story, only suddenly to take up the motif again in a new context and develop it in a different direction. As we hear that, suddenly it dawns on us, "Aha - That helps explain what he was getting at back there in chapter one." Sure enough, when we go back to the earlier segment it now makes a lot more sense. We find new meaning, we catch his drift better. Then we return to where we left off only to discover three chapters later the same motif used in yet a third way, and developed in a bit different direction. As we grasp that, it sheds even more light on *both* the second and the first times he used it.

John the Evangelist did not do that with just one central concept, or two. There are multiple terms that he interwove and developed in those concentric cycles, playing theme over against theme, or in new settings, or applied to different relationships. Terms such as light and darkness, love, world, water, bread, shepherd, seek, know, lift up, truth - and on and on. So much so that, glad as we are that new Christians find the Gospel of John so simple and so accessible, still we begin to sense why Bible scholars regard the very same document as one of the most complex, most sophisticated and brilliantly creative documents of any we have in the New Testament. Every time I read this Gospel I find new things there, *obvious* things, and I wonder, "Why haven't I seen that before?"

All of this is a rather extended *apologia* for my observation that when we now jump right into the Fourth Gospel's account of Holy Week without listening carefully and repeatedly to all that has gone on before, leading up to these events, we are ill prepared to plumb fully the rich depths before us. But that's all right. There is still a wealth available for us there. If we do our job well we will discover that the next time we go back to read previous stages in the narrative again we will find things there, obvious things, that we had not seen before.

From what I have just described as the unique character of the Fourth Gospel it is not at all surprising that John the Evangelist tells the story of the passion of our Lord differently than anyone else. He devotes fully half of his document to the events of Holy Week and Easter. (By comparison only about one-fifth of St. Luke's Gospel focuses on this same interval.) I am going to reflect on two of the events John included in his passion narratives: Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate and his crucifixion. But first I will outline an overview of the entire passion account in order to set these two events in context.

John's narrative of Christ's passion really begins with that extraordinary, electrifying account of the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11. For with that story not only is Jesus portrayed as the life-giver *par excellence*, this story gives us the first clue that the hour has now come - the hour of Jesus' being lifted up in suffering sacrifice, yes, but also lifted up in glory and exaltation. The immediate result of the Lazarus episode was two-fold: 1) intensification of popular acclaim as news of the event spread rapidly, and 2) crystallization of the hostility of the religious leaders who conspired to execute Jesus.

The next chapter (ch. 12) relates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the occurrence which we will again recall on this coming Palm Sunday. As he came into the city he was hailed by a huge crowd who had gathered because they knew what that event meant about who he was - at least to a limited degree.

In chapter 13 we find the account of the Last Supper - but what a difference! Instead of the majestic fraction of the bread and the pouring and passing of the wine with the moving words "my body - my blood of the new covenant - for you"; instead of that, John's Jesus knelt at his followers' feet with basin and towel, and gave them and us an unequivocal image of the nature, scope and intensity of that servanthood to which we also are called as we serve our servant Lord.

Next comes the longest speech attributed to Jesus in any of our New Testament literature. It is the magnificent "Farewell Discourse," more than four chapters long, and containing such endearingly meaningful messages as:

“In my Father’s house are many mansions.”

“The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, will teach you all things.”

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

and more - much, much more. As we read through it we do not get the impression of someone deeply immersed in existential anxiety, approaching his cruel execution with fear and trembling and understandable reticence. This is a Christ even now glorified, even now exalted, a Christ already vindicated by the One with whom he is one, a Christ who already is confidently in control.

The speech climaxes in chapter 17 with the soaring prayer which has come to be known as Christ’s high priestly prayer, in which he prays to the Father for his followers, his disciples, those who have accompanied him into Jerusalem itself. And he prays for us, too, and for all those others down through the centuries who, having been moved, motivated and convicted by the testimony of Jesus’ disciples, have come to claim the Christ who has already claimed them as his own. Do you remember his prayer for us? - “That we may be one” with that same unity which Jesus knew with God; “as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee.”

After that four-chapter-long extended discourse the pace of events in the passion narrative accelerates markedly. Chapter 18 tells in rapid succession of the betrayal and unrest in the garden, the interrogation by the religious authorities, Peter’s denial out in the courtyard, and the beginning of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate, the description of which continues on into chapter 19. Let us consider each stage briefly.

First the arrest. What we have been schooled by the other Gospels to think of as the night of extended, anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is, in the Fourth Gospel, reduced to a brief interval in an unnamed garden and without agony. Nothing of sighing or beating of the breast, nothing of sorrow unto death, nothing of sweating as it were drops of blood, nothing of agonizing before the will of God can we find in this account. Jesus stands center stage, calm and in control of the action.

Judas is there, of course, but the author spares us the treacherous kiss. Judas’s act of betrayal consists in bringing others to Jesus not to hear him or to follow him but to destroy him. Parenthetically we need to note that Judas is just as much a symbol for all the disciples, including us, as is Peter. We have not really heard this story until we get in touch with that within us which we have in common with Judas.

Jesus’ enemies are there - in force! Officers of the chief priests, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees - representatives of the entire religious establishment - are there. So also, in contrast to the other Gospel versions, are Roman soldiers—*lots* of Roman soldiers - the language used implies between 600 and 1000 of them jammed into that garden. It is an overwhelming assembly of all the imposing types of worldly authority and power. Yet all Jesus had to do was identify himself and they were thrown to the ground in disarray. The authority of Jesus surpasses and overwhelms them all.

Brash Peter impetuously draws his sword to courageously defend his friend, to lay down his life for him as he had promised, only to discover that his friend does not need defending at all. Jesus is completely in charge. Only when Jesus permits it is that awesome array of worldly power able to arrest him. As Jesus had said before, no one is going to take his life, he would give it up on his own. And so he does.

They bound Jesus and took him for interrogation to the religious leaders, but in this Gospel it does not amount to much. Because these leaders do not really know who he is nor from where and from whom he has come, they do not really know what to ask him - or what to ask *from* him. Still, no one formally condemns him. Jesus lays down his own life, because he chooses to.

Interwoven with that account is the story that really interests John the Evangelist even more. While the religious authorities are ineffectively trying Jesus, Peter (and, symbolically in his person, the entire community of faith down through the years) also undergoes trial. Inside, Jesus is interrogated; outside, Peter is questioned. Inside, Jesus stands firm, in control, maintains his integrity in the face of formidable odds; outside, Peter falls apart utterly and denies everything he had come to know about who God is and what God is about in Jesus. The trial of Jesus has little to do with events that matter. The trial of Peter and of all the disciples in solidarity with him matters a great deal. It is also the trial of John the Evangelist's community of faith, and of the church today, and it continues. The outcome of *that* trial is absolutely crucial.

At last we come to the trial before Pontius Pilate. There is a preliminary exchange between Pilate and the Jews who deliver Jesus to Pilate's authority. Pilate would have preferred that the Jews condemn and execute Jesus under Mosaic law. But the Jews, rightly, reminded Pilate that they no longer could execute anyone. Rome had removed that capability and authority from them. "This," wrote the Fourth Evangelist, "was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die." That becomes understandable to us when we recall that Jews would ordinarily execute someone by stoning. Crucifixion was the preferred method of execution of Imperial Rome. Only, at a deeper level, Jesus is once again affirming that he will die because he *chooses* to die, not because others inflict that fate upon him.

It is an allusion back to 12:31-32, toward the beginning of the passion narrative soon after Jesus had entered Jerusalem. He was speaking of his "hour of glory" and said, "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw everyone to myself." Then comes the statement to which the author returned as he introduced the account of the trial before Pilate: "Jesus said this to show by what death he was to die."

This is the first scene of what Professor Fred Craddock (*John*, [Knox Preaching Guides], Atlanta:John Knox, 1982, 133) has taught us to recognize as an elaborately constructed account with seven scenes or episodes in the trial before Pilate.

Scene I - I have just described: Pilate is talking to the Jews outside the Praetorium, trying to get clarity about the charge they are bringing against Jesus, willing to let the Jews handle it, but finally having to take on the case himself because it may require execution.

Scene II - Pilate goes inside and interrogates Jesus about the nature of kingship and truth, resorting to philosophic abstraction and sarcasm before a revelation he cannot grasp.

Scene III - Pilate goes back outside, declaring Jesus not guilty and offering to release him according to the custom at Passover time. The Jews choose the bandit Barabbas instead.

Scene IV - Pilate is back inside, subjecting Jesus to whipping and mocking.

Scene V - Pilate is again outside, displaying the mocked, humiliated, and beaten Jesus, hoping that the religious leaders will think that is sufficient, but without success.

Scene VI - Pilate returns inside to confront Jesus again, claiming power of life and death over Jesus. Jesus tells Pilate that any authority and power which he exercises is a derived authority, and warns him that there is accountability for the way such power is used.

Scene VII - Pilate takes Jesus outside for the last time in another futile effort to release him. When that fails Pilate sits officially in the seat of judgment and manipulates the Jews, whose entire holy history required them to acknowledge the rule of God alone. Pilate coerces them into acclaiming Caesar as their king.

“Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.”

This entire account of the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate is a very complex and artfully crafted account. The Evangelist includes so much here.

I want, however, to focus on one central facet: the exchange between Pilate and Jesus concerning the accusation that Jesus pretended to be a king.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate demanded. And, later, “So you are king?” The point is, *Pilate asks precisely the right question!*

“Yes!” we want to call out. “Yes, you’ve got it right!” Pilate asks the question which the religious leaders could not bring themselves to ask. It is the question which can lead to acknowledgement of Christ’s right to rule - to rule in our lives, to rule in our relationships, to rule our churches, rule our nation, and the world. He was asking the right question - but he was asking for all the wrong reasons. If Pilate knew what he was asking, and to whom he was asking it, he would have fallen to his knees before that majestic, royal presence. Pilate’s presuppositions prevented perception. Instead of allegiance he offered sarcasm and vague abstractions.

That raises *the central question* of this account. Just who is judging whom. Or, better, who is the judge, and who is on trial?

It is a supreme example of that kind of ironic paradox which the Fourth Evangelist successfully exploited so frequently in his narrative. When Jesus is judged and condemned, the authority of this world who is seeking to judge is thereby judged and condemned.

The truthful authority of Jesus is uncontestable. John the Evangelist has built his case carefully at various points in the previous part of the narrative:

The Word which became flesh and dwelt among us is *grace and truth*.

Jesus’ authority is anchored in *the truth* which is word of God.

To dwell in Jesus’ word is to *know truth*.

If you know him who is *truth*, that truth shall make you free.

Jesus is the way, *the truth* and the life.

In this trial scene Pilate represents the authority of this world. He sets himself to judge the One who is truth. In such a situation there are actually only two options:

- 1) acknowledge the truth, believe and be saved for eternal life;
- 2) condemn the truth, and thereby display that you yourself are already condemned.

When Pilate, judging Jesus, asks, (with typical Johannine irony), “What is truth?” he discloses that he has not come to the light, that he still is in darkness, and that, therefore, he is being judged. At the very least he should have asked, “*Who* is truth?” When he got both that question and its answer right he would know the answer to his

other question, “Are you king?”

Recall how John drills the irony of that wilful misunderstanding home. It is Pilate who orders the inscription nailed to the cross, adamantly resisting the protests of the religious leaders. It is Pilate who becomes the petulant, stubborn, unwilling witness to who Jesus is: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” He even has it written in all three widely known languages, so that anyone in the entire world who has eyes to see can know King Jesus, exercising his regal authority there on the cross, even if Pilate himself does not know it.

Finally we turn to the Fourth Gospel’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus. By now we know not to be surprised to discover how very different this version is from those we read in our first three Gospels.

The first thing we cannot help but notice is the brevity of the Fourth Evangelist’s rendition. It takes him only fourteen verses to tell of the execution of Jesus on Golgotha - far shorter even than the account in Mark’s Gospel which is the shortest of the other three.

Note what John omits. There are no multitudes following Jesus on the *Via Dolorosa*, no passersby, no mocking, no taunts, no conversations with the other two crucified criminals, no darkness, no earthquakes, no indication of how long Jesus was on the cross, no rending of the veil which hid the holy of holies in the temple.

John’s approach to this portion of his narrative warns us to refrain from imposing an aura of melancholy onto the canvas. We are not to supply sorrow to the scene. The Fourth Evangelist is not interested in evoking either our pity or our tears. Instead he wants to evoke our allegiance; he wants to strengthen our faith. He is interested in emphasizing the meaning of the event.

That meaning clusters around two motifs which he has carefully cultivated during the prior unfolding of his narrative:

- 1) The Good Shepherd, Jesus, gives his life for his sheep;
- 2) Jesus is enthroned as King on the cross.

Let us consider these two themes which receive climactically dramatic expression in the story of the crucifixion.

1) John had developed extensively the motif of the Good Shepherd as an image for Jesus in chapter 10. Now he returns to exploit it. Earlier he had quoted Jesus as saying, “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, caring for them ‘til the end.”

That is exactly what takes place here. Jesus gives his life in perfect conformity to the will of his heavenly Father. His life is not taken from him. He offers it as cultic sacrifice given for the life of the world.

Because he is laying down his own life, Jesus carries his own cross to the Place of the Skull. There is no need for the assistance of Simon of Cyrene here. Jesus does not scream out the cry of dereliction. He says, “I thirst,” only to fulfill scripture. At the moment of dying he simply bows his head and gives up his spirit - the picture of serene, confident, regretless self-giving.

Even the act of entrusting his mother and “the beloved disciple” to each other is not a scene primarily intended to evoke pathos. It is a dramatically concrete instance and example that the Good Shepherd cares and provides for his own until the very end.

The very last words the crucified King speaks, “It is finished,” mean more than “My life is ended.” That was a technical phrase in cultic vocabulary used to signal the

conclusion and completion of religious rites, especially sacrifices and initiations. It is better understood as heralding the Son's obedient completion of the demands of his special "hour" of death which is also his hour of glory.

2) The second major theme in John's account of the crucifixion is the enthronement of Jesus on the cross. As we saw earlier this theme of kingship was prominent in exchanges between Jesus and Pilate during his trial. He had falsely been accused of claiming royal identity and authority in competition with the authority of Caesar. Pontius Pilate's interrogation had focused upon this issue. The Jews' insistence that only Caesar was king forced his hand to condemn Jesus.

That set the stage for much that occurred. The mockery by the Roman soldiers, who provided a robe of royal purple and a crown of thorns, and who offered sarcastic praise, played off the title of the accusation "King of the Jews." As we saw, that is the charge Pilate posted on the pillory, announced in three languages so the entire world could read - and the irony of it is unavoidable.

Beyond that irony is an even greater one - an irony John wants his readers to hear and understand with deep discernment. Those who insist that the pretender to royal identity and kingly authority be crucified have, unwittingly, enthroned him.

Earlier, you recall, Jesus had said, "'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw everyone to myself.' He said this to show by what death he was to die" (12:32f). That is exactly what occurs now. The crucifixion of Jesus is the lifting up of Jesus. It is the glorifying of Jesus in the fullest sense. He is enthroned by his execution; he is glorified by his executioners.

That is the message John the Evangelist wants us to hear. God is absolutely sovereign. He rules over *all* human affairs. Because of that, even the very worst we do - by unbelief, by irreverence, by exploitative misuse and oppression of one another - even the worst we do to God himself, God uses to glorify and lift up King Jesus.

During Easter week, as we reflect, and recognize much of all of this within us and repent - the passion narrative of John the Evangelist gives us crucial reassurance. "Look at the cross! Behold your King! And be comforted knowing that King Jesus takes care of his own no matter what, caring for them until the end."