



## **Luke 22:66-23:25**

**“Who’s On Trial Here?”**  
(17<sup>th</sup> in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

March 24, 2013  
(Palm/Passion Sunday)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
211 North Main St.  
Greenwood, SC 29646

Church Office: 864-229-7551  
Church Website with sermon manuscripts: [www.msumc1.org](http://www.msumc1.org)  
Email: [PThrailkil@aol.com](mailto:PThrailkil@aol.com)

**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

LUKE 22:66-23:25  
"WHO'S ON TRIAL HERE?"

**1. vv.66-71 VERDICT OF THE SANHEDRIN, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PEOPLE.**

Sanhedrin: Concern Over Religious Claims, 71 Members

**TRIAL NO. 1**

**a) v.66 The Gathering Of The Sanhedrin.**

66 When day came, Luke Has 4 Trials: Sanhedrin/Pilate/Herod/Pilate  
the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes; 9:22, Early Friday  
and they led him away to their council, Did Not Seek Martyrdom

Questions Are From Whole Assembly

**b) vv.67-69 First Interrogation: Christ And Son Of Man.**

See Satan (4:3-9)

and they said, (67) "If you are the Christ (i.e. Messiah), tell us.

2:11, 26, 9:20, Title: Messiah

God Uphold Their Freedom To Oppose Him

But he said to them,

Neither Affirms Nor Denies

68 "If I tell you, you will not believe;/ and if I ask you, you will not answer.

Rebukes Falseness, Unbelief

69 But from now on the Son of man shall be seated

Apostles Will See, Veiled Reference To Resurrection

at the right hand of the power of God."

9:31, Title: Son Of Man

Mysterious Claim: Secret Divine Vindication (Acts 2:23-36, 5:51; Dan. 7:13, Ps. 110:1)

**b') v.70 Second Interrogation: Son Of God.**

Communion With God, Special Relationship

70 And they all said, "Are you the Son of God, then?"

//Messiah, Not On Their Terms, Title: Son Of God

Martyrdom Not To Be Sought: No Lust For Death, By-Product Of Surrender

And he said to them, "You say that I am."

On Your Own Lips! Evasive (General Cultural Practices)

1:35, 3:22, 38; 9:35, 10:22-23

**a') v.71 Decision Of The Sanhedrin.**

71 And they said,

"What further testimony do we need?"

We have heard it ourselves from his own lips."

Enough For Charge Of Sedition

Transfer

**2. 23:1-12 APPEARANCES BEFORE PILATE AND HEROD: INNOCENCE AFFIRMED.**

**TRIAL NO. 2**

**a) vv.1-5 Appearance Before Pilate, A Temple Murderer (Lk. 13:1ff.).**

//b. T. Sanh. 43a

Charges Are Specifically Political: False Witness

**1) vv.1-2 Formal And False Political Accusations (3).**

18:32 (Son Of Man Handed To Gentiles)

1 Then the whole company of them arose, and brought him before Pilate.

13:1 On Brutality

2 a And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man *perverting our nation,*

Lead Astray. 20:21-25

b and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar,

Not So, 20:23, 25

c and saying that he himself is Christ a king (i.e. an anointed king)."

But Not As They Think, 22:67-70

6:7, 11:54, 9:44, 18:32

**2) v.3a Pilate Speaks To Jesus.**

3 And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

23:38, Title: King Of Jews

**3) v.3b Jesus' Answer: Evasive.**

And he answered him, "You have said so."

Your Confession, Not Mine

**2') v.4 Pilate Speaks To Jewish Leaders.**

INNOCENT (4x = 23:4, 13-15, 22)

4 And Pilate said to the chief priests and the multitudes,

"I find no crime (charge) in this man."

Potential Popular Unrest Against Rome: Troublemaker

**1') v.5 Additional Ad Hoc Summary Accusation To Prevent Release (1).**

5 But they were urgent, saying,

Range Of Teaching, Galilee = Hotbed Of Revolution, False Witness Again

d "He *stirs up the people,*

Keep Imperial Order, Unrest Around Him

teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place."

Enough To Block Release

Transfer

**b) 23:6-12 Appearance Before Herod, Murderer Of John The Baptist (L Only).**

**TRIAL NO. 3**

**1) vv.6-7 Herod And Pilate.**

**Killed Galileans, Herod: 3:1-3 18-19; 9:7-9, 13:32-33**

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

**Hotbed Of Rebellion**

And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod,

who was himself in Jerusalem *at that time*.

**Ps. 2:1-2, Passing The Buck, Avoid Issue  
Back In His Lap In 23:13**

**2) v.8 Glad Response Of Herod.**

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him,

**9:7-9**

because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him.

**Thaumaturge**

**No Long Defense Of His Teaching/Actions**

**3) v.9 Herod's Question And Jesus' Silence (Is. 53:7, 1 Pt. 2:25-27).**

So he questioned him at some length; but he made no answer.

**Murderer Of Prophets**

**Is. 53:7, 2 Macc. 7:2, Macc. 6:1, 10:23 9(Jewish Martyrs)**

**2') vv.9-11 Hostile Response Of Herod And Others (9:22, 18:32).**

The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

**Agitation //v.5**

And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him;

**22:63-65**

then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate.

**Parody, Radiant/White Robe**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Witness To Jesus' Innocence, Dt. 19:15**

**1') v.12 Herod And Pilate.**

**Ps. 2:1-2, Acts 4:25-28, Treated As Equal**

And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other *that very day*,

**Pilate's Strategy Failed: Punted**

for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

**Forces Of Darkness Are Merging**

**Pilate Treated Herod As Equal**

**2') vv.13-16 APPEARANCES PILATE/HEROD REVIEWED: INNOCENCE AFFIRMED.**

**Open-Air Meeting: TRIAL NO. 4**

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers *and the people*, (14) and said to them,

**LEGAL**

"You brought me this man as one who was *perverting the people*;

**Ex. 5:4, Num. 15:39, Arrest (1)**

**Charge, False Prophet (2)**

and after examining him before you,

**Interrogation (3)**

*behold*, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him;

**Verdict (4)**

**2 Witnesses = Dt. 19:15**

neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us.

**Supporting Verdict (5)**

*Behold*, nothing deserving death has been done by him;

**23:4, Move For Acquittal (6)**

**Not Killed For His Crimes But For Ours!**

I will therefore chastise (lit. *educate*) him and **release** him."

**Beating + Judicial Warning (7)**

**3 Attempts To Release: 23:16, 20, 22**

**1') vv.18-25 VERDICT OF THE SANHEDRIN AND THE PEOPLE.**

**Jewish Freedom Fighter: Zealot Murderer**

**a) vv.18-19 Contrast Jesus And Barabbas (son of the Father!).**

**Who Perverted The People?**

But *they all* cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas"—

**Further Agitation**

a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder.

**Acts 3:14**

**Innocent Man Condemned, Jesus Dies As Righteous Martyr**

**b) v.20 Pilate's Resistance And The Call For Crucifixion.**

Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to **release** Jesus;

**Jerusalem Destroyed By Such in 70A.D.**

but they shouted out, "Crucify, crucify him!"

**19:44**

**b') vv.22-23 Pilate's Resistance And The Call For Crucifixion.**

A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done?"

**Acts 3:13-14**

I have found in him no crime (cause) deserving death;

**1 Pet. 3:17-18**

I will therefore chastise him and **release** him."

**Pilate Capitulates To A Mob**

But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified.

And their voices prevailed.

**Fulfills "Hand Over" Prophecies Of 9:44, 18:32; God Is Sovereign**

**TRIAL No. 5?**

**a') vv.24-25 Contrast Jesus And Barabbas.**

**Even After Declaration Of Innocence**

So Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be granted.

**Acts 3:13-14, Corrupt And Vacillating**

## Luke 22:66-23:25 ..... 4

25

He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, whom they asked for;  
but Jesus he delivered up to their will. **Final Rejection Of Innocent Prophet By His People, Guilty Released = Us!**

### A Brief Treatment Of Luke 22:66-23:25

The five paragraphs cover four semi-official trials of Jesus: 1) 22:66-71 the Sanhedrin, 2) 23:1-5 Pilate, 3) 23:6-12 Herod, 4) 23:13-16 Pilate again. But it is the last audience- the mob- who tip the scales towards crucifixion, so their appearance may be regarded as the fifth and fatal trial (23:18-25). Everyone is guilty except Jesus, and that is Luke's intent. As they pass judgment on him, they speak a hidden verdict over themselves, and soon enough the risen Jesus will be their judge!

My read of the surface structure is a 1-2//2'-1' concentric pattern. In the first and last scenes (22:66-71//23:18-15) the Sanhedrin and people pronounce their verdicts; in the two middle scenes (23:1-5, 6-12//23:13-16) hearings before Pilate and Herod are offered (23:1-12), then reviewed (23:13-16). Jesus' judicial innocence is a unifying theme (23:4, 14, 15, 22). Three christological titles in the first scene (*Christ, Son of man, Son of God*) are parallel to three uses of *release him/Jesus* at the end (23:16, 20, 22). The Sanhedrin are present and agitating in each scene (22:66, 71; 23:1, 5; 23:10, 13, 18, 25). *The people* are added to the hostile chorus in v.13. Luke has taken great care in his composition!

The first hearing is early Friday before the Council. Two interrogations form the scene (b. vv.67-69 // b' v.70). Jesus refuses their demand to accede to the political understanding of *Messiah* and issues two warnings, the first about their lack of integrity (v.68), the second about his coming status as judge after God's vindication (v.69). When they shift titles to *Son of God* in the second interrogation, he does not deny the title but responds obliquely, "You say that I am." Jesus fills old messianic titles with new content. His minimal claims are enough for them (v.71). The irony of *I am* being God's name is not lost (v70b).

In the second trial we hear the charges. Jesus is a false prophet and threat to Roman taxes and order; all are untrue (see 20:21-25, 22:67-70). Pilate centers on the relevant issue, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus is again oblique, "*You* have said so," which Pilate takes as a denial, thus, "I find no crime in this man." A fourth charge is urgently added to rouse Pilate's fear, "He stirs up the people... even to this place." Pilate sees their animus and kicks the case to King Herod who rules Galilee. In trial three Jesus neither use miracles for entertainment nor speaks to Herod whose corruption was exposed by John the Baptist. Jesus' non-cooperation leads to an angry repetition of charges and mockery, to which a royal cloak is added. The message back to Pilate is, "If you seek our king, this is what we offer, a silent fool!" Verse 12 on a new friendship is Luke's way of indicating that dark forces are now joining hands against Jesus.

The fourth paragraph (23:13-16) is crucial to Luke. Pilate lectures "the chief priest *and* the rulers *and* the people" that their trumped-up charges are empty. We find- after the fact- that Herod has the same opinion (v.15). Jesus is not guilty of anything deserving death; on this Pilate and Herod agree. Perhaps a beating will warn Jesus and satisfy his critics (v.16), an offer made a second time (v.22). Pilate's verdict of beat-and-release will soon reverse as he abandons justice and delivers Jesus "up to their will." Forces visible and invisible are too potent for even the most powerful man in Jerusalem to resist. Evil is looking for a kill, and God in providence is bending free decisions towards Jesus' rendezvous with suffering, death, and a surprise! The last paragraph is ugly. The Sanhedrin wants Jesus dead; Pilate and Herod are known killers, as is Barabbas, and now the crowds chooses a Jewish freedom fighter over Jesus- an innocent man they want crucified. The opening words of Andrew of Crete's ancient hymn apply here, "Christian, dost

thou see them, On the holy ground, How the power of darkness, Rage thy steps around?" Yes, we do.

## WHO'S ON TRIAL HERE?

*"I find no crime in this man."*

Pilate repeatedly affirmed the judicial innocence of Jesus.

L U K E 2 3 : 4

**T**he one, true, living and Triune God has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth. Sent by the Father, accompanied by the Spirit- and with his mother Mary's consent, God the Son moved into the neighborhood, joining himself to our flesh and all its limits, crawling inside our skin to get close enough to make a difference. Thirty years hidden in nowhere Nazareth was followed by three years of extraordinary public activity, climaxing in the unjust crucifixion of an innocent Jesus, then the reboot of all he was in a surprise resurrection so his work is now completely free and outside the reach of human cruelty.<sup>1</sup> Jesus' life is the event that changes everything.

Jesus is God with a human face, acting out at ground level what new life looks like when God shows up with very little warning.<sup>2</sup> He comes to set life right in the middle of a battlefield, to give hope and form a new community of his followers. To do business with him is to do business with God, not some junior partner, not some vague divine principle, not God at arm's length but God with arms and legs and eyes and teeth, a scraggly beard and a hick Galilean accent. As the creeds later define with precision, "Jesus is one person in two natures- undivided and unconfused, fully God, fully human as a man, the second person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son assuming

---

<sup>1</sup> For fresh thinking on the resurrection and its massive implications, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Old Testament texts seen as prophecies concerning Jesus are clarified only in retrospect. The details of his life are a magnet drawing certain passages to itself like iron filings. Rereading the Old Testament in light of Jesus served to highlight the continuity of God's purposes in which the church is now the faithful continuance of God's people.

---

flesh as Jesus the Messiah.”<sup>3</sup>

That is the central confession of Christian faith concerning Jesus’ identity. This is who was crucified. Not one more deluded upstart dreamer who found himself ground up in the cogs of real world power, but this one, this unique one, God the Son, a Jesus not guilty of any of the crimes he was wrongly charged with.

But even beyond judicial innocence he was sinless. Jesus never once violated the will of God, not just outwardly but inwardly, never once visited his anger or hurt on another person, never rebelled but lived within human limits in perfect love,<sup>4</sup> like us in every way but one. He does not share our inherited spiritual disease of independence and rebellion against God. Jesus lived aligned with the deepest grain of the universe, not cross-grained as with all of us. No sin in him, no greed out of fear, no lust that uses and disposes of another, no shame because of failure and lack, no envy, no addictions or compulsions, no points of compromise for Satan to exploit, just utterly open to God and people in disarming innocence. Not naivete, but innocence, and those are different qualifiers. His is a perfect life, a clear window into God and a mirror of who we were made to be. Our great physician is a perfect specimen, his life a thing of beauty and unending fascination, no matter what his appearance may have been. There is no one like Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Some in our day see Jesus as a noble but tragic teacher who left behind a body of ethical instruction to which his followers bear imperfect witness. The church is just one more religion attached to an ancient teacher: Muslims to Mohammed, Buddhists to Buddha, Christians to Jesus. Sociology and history explain all. No differences, all basically the same. But the church is not satisfied with reconstructions that ignore our central claim, that the man Jesus is the history of God in time. His trial, therefore, is not just the disposal of another foolish pretender to the Jewish throne; it is the confrontation of God with the corrupt religious and political systems of this world and the individuals embedded in them. In Jesus God submits

---

<sup>3</sup> Summarized from the Chalcedonian definition as found in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York, NY: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 864.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 4:15, “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin.*”

<sup>5</sup> See John Ortberg, “None Like Him,” [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/September/none-like-him](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/September/none-like-him).

---

to cruel, unjust, and violent treatment that the world might know how far God will go to expose our sin and offer us a new relationship. In Jesus God exposed to the worst of what we have become and on the cross prays, “Father, forgive these ignorant people. They do not know what they are doing.” Sin makes us blind, and then it makes us stupid, and then it makes us mean. John Donne, the English preacher and poet, concluded that the passion of Jesus- his suffering with and for us- was not just something at the end of his life but the whole from start to finish. He wrote:

“The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then the straws were almost as sharp as the thorns after, and the manger as uneasy at first as the cross at last. His birth and death were but one continual act, and his Christmas Day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of one and the same day.”<sup>6</sup>

What this means on a practical level is demonstrated in a reminiscence of the late Dr. D. James Kennedy, who in a sermon told this story:

“I remember years ago talking to a man in his home about Christ and asking him who he thought Jesus was.

He said, ‘Oh, He’s a wonderful man, the greatest who ever lived, the most loving and gracious person to walk the earth.’

I said, ‘Let me tell you something that will startle you. According to the Scriptures, and the historic Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter of Galilee was and is the eternal Creator of the universe, the omnipotent, omniscient, and Almighty God.’

His eyes filled with tears and this man said, ‘I have been in church all of my life, and I have not heard that before. But I have always thought this is the way it ought to be- *that God ought to be like Jesus.*’<sup>7</sup>

God *is* like Jesus, because Jesus is the mystery of God among us, the Son’s

---

<sup>6</sup> Constance and Daniel Pollock, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1996), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Edited, Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustration, & Quotes* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2000), 486-487.

---

visible enfleshment come to bring his Father’s light and love in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is no lone ranger; he is sent and accompanied and backed by ultimate authority. There is no Christian faith without this radical claim.

So as we briefly review the four trials of Jesus found in Luke 22 and 23, remember who Jesus is, and you will see what a monstrous web of deceit and lies it took to deliver him to the cross. It was a religious, political conspiracy and miscarriage of justice. It was the will of a mob and the weight of the accumulated sins of the human family that drove the process. God used the free decisions of men, backed as they were by the blind animosity of the Evil One, to fulfill the word of Jesus that he would be rejected by his own, delivered to the Gentiles, abused and finally crucified as an innocent man.<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Sayers, the English novelist, bridges the gap between then-and-there and here-and-now:

“God was executed by people painfully like us, in a society very similar to our own... by a corrupt church, a timid politician, and fickle proletariat led by professional agitators.”<sup>9</sup>

This is what we do when God shows up in person; we slander and execute him for personal convenience. We don’t want to change. We don’t want to repent. We would rather have our way than follow his. This is what sin looks like, and why only God in Jesus could fully expose all the stupidity and horror of it.

**TRIAL NO. 1, BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN (22:66-71)**

It would be wrong to call the dealings with Jesus a *trial* in the modern sense. It all occurred on a Thursday evening and early Friday morning, the death sentence carried out by 9:00am. The next day beginning at sundown was Passover, so things moved quickly. It was more a series of back-and-forth administrative procedures than a trial in the formal sense. This was not the *O.J.* trial or an episode of *Law And Order*. It was men with power getting rid of a troublemaker. Such was the deep and fundamental threat Jesus posed.

It was early Friday, according to Luke, when Jesus was taken from the home

---

<sup>8</sup> Luke 9:18-22, 9:44, 18:31-33.

<sup>9</sup> “The Man Born to be King,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 39, No. 12.

---



of the high priest to appear before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, a body of seventy-one who dealt with religious issues under the watchful eye of Rome.<sup>10</sup> Jesus now faces the religious leaders of his people with whom he's had an increasingly hostile relationship. It is important to Luke that Jesus did not actively seek martyrdom.<sup>11</sup> If it was the will of his Father, so be it, but he would not inflame his opponents and goad them into killing him. He had no death wish. Life is a good gift and not to be thrown away. So Jesus honored the gift of life even as he prepares to offer it back to God. The early church followed Jesus' example and taught those under threat of death not to throw their lives away if death could be avoided without denying the faith. *Be evasive and non-confrontive where you can* was the wisdom.

In his answers to their questions Jesus is direct in some cases, evasive in others. He is clear about two things, however. They are exercising bad faith, verse 68: "If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I ask you, you will not answer." And secondly, his future is secure because he will be utterly vindicated, verse 69: "But from now on the Son of man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God."<sup>12</sup> That is a veiled reference from Daniel 7 and Psalm 110 to the resurrection and ascension. Whatever they do to him, whatever the pain, Jesus is confident what God will do; the tables will be turned, and he will end up as their judge.

"Are you the Son of God, then?" they asked. "You say that I am," he replied indirectly. He is *Messiah*, but not as they understand it. He is *Son of man*, but not in a way they expect. He is *Son of God*, to which they are blind and angry. The three titles Luke introduced into this brief scene- *Messiah*, *Son of man*, and *Son of God*- are all exalted titles that fulfill different aspects of Jewish expectation. The Messiah is anointed by God; the Son of man is a mysterious title from the Book of Daniel that points to the Judge at the end of history; the Son of God is one who shares a special intimacy with God. They have a set of expectations that go with these titles; Jesus

---

<sup>10</sup> For a review of the knotty historical issues, see Paul L. Meier, "Who Killed Jesus," *Christianity Today*, April 9, 1990; Darrell L. Bock, "Why Jesus 'lost' his trial," *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1998; Craig Keener, "Heroes and Leaders," *Christian History*, Summer 1998; Ted Olson, "On Jesus Death, Beware Of Reading The Text Literally," 2/1/2004, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/februaryweb-only/2-9-13.0](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/februaryweb-only/2-9-13.0).

<sup>11</sup> See Charles Talbert, *Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 212-218 for a discussion of Jesus as the model martyr.

<sup>12</sup> On reading Daniel 7 as vindication, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 124ff.

---

has another. They expect them to be fulfilled with military might and royal kingship; Jesus fulfills them not by asserting himself but by surrendering and trusting God for vindication. Even his indirect acceptance of title Son of God is enough for them to judge him, verse 71: “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips?” Jesus is a blasphemer they say, one who claims a relationship to God available to no one else, in a category all by himself. He deserves to die, and since we do not have authority in such matters, we’ll pass him on to Pilate who does. Jesus is here formally rejected by the religious leaders of his people. What he offers, they cannot accept. They are entrenched, blind, and serve as perpetual reminders that any religious institution can become corrupted and opposed to the purposes of God: a local church, even a whole denomination. Sin dwells in the *we*, not just in the *me*. Trial No. 1 comes to an end.

**TRAIL NO. 2, BEFORE PILATE (23:1-5)**

His name, along with that of Mary, are two names other than Jesus that made it into the Apostle’s Creed, “Born of the *Virgin Mary*, suffered under *Pontius Pilate*.” One gave him life, one death. Mary and Pilate are the bookends of Jesus biological life.

It was not easy being the chief Roman officer in a volatile place like Palestine, especially not at Passover when nationalistic passions ran high in Jerusalem. His primary job was keeping order, administering justice, and collecting taxes.<sup>13</sup> On one occasion he had his soldiers slaughter a band of Galilean pilgrims in the temple compound.<sup>14</sup> Pilate was capable of strategic brutality and condemned others to the cross before Jesus showed up. The fact that the Sanhedrin forwarded Jesus to Pilate was a sign they wanted him dead, and if portrayed as a false Messiah, perhaps Pilate will string him up for us. Let the blood be on his hands!

The charges the Sanhedrin brought were three: perverting the nation as a false prophet, forbidding taxes, and claiming to be the anointed Jewish king. All three were politically loaded and calculated to get Pilate’s attention. He picked the overt one and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Again, Jesus’ answer was indirect, because an simple Yes would be misunderstood, “*You* have said so.”

---

<sup>13</sup> For an historical review of this period, see Ben Witherington, *New Testament History: A Narrative Approach* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2001), 107-159.

<sup>14</sup> 13:1-9.

---

Throughout the trials Luke is clear to emphasize Jesus was innocent. Four separate times Pilate pronounces him so.<sup>15</sup> Jesus is not guilty of the charges. He is a threat to Jewish religion as then practiced, but no immediate threat to Rome. He is no freedom fighter, and his twelve are not co-conspirators. This was important for the early Christians for two reasons, the first being that the cross was a form of death reserved for criminals and rebels. If Jesus was guilty, then he was not innocent; and if he was not innocent, then he was not sinless; and if he was not sinless, then he could not be the sacrifice for our sins; and if he is a sinner like us, then he is not the Son of God but a fraud. His innocence is not just judicially but theologically important. And secondly, it was no advantage to their message around the Mediterranean basin for it to be misunderstood as an immediate threat to Rome. When questioned they could say:

“One of your own procurators, Pontius Pilate, found him innocent of the political charges brought against him. What more do you want? That Pilate eventually gave in to a mob shows weakness of character, but his verdict of not guilty still stands.”

The judicial innocence of Jesus on specific charges is thus both theologically and evangelistically important.

At this point the drama is high. Jesus could have been released. But an additional charge was quickly offered by the Sandedrin, one calculated to stir fear in Pilate. Galilee was a hotbed of revolution, and that was the last thing Pilate needed at Passover. An uprising would be hard to control, verse 5: “But they were urgent, saying, ‘He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from *Galilee even to this place.*’” The message was, “A mob is gathering at your doorstep. Better safe than sorry. What would the Emperor think if he knew you had warning from us and did not act?” It’s a half-truth that places Jesus back under a political cloud.

I remember during the 1960's hearing men and women at drug store counters in Cheraw and church suppers at First Methodist refer to Martin Luther King as just such a troublemaker and even spread the rumor he was about to sponsor a race war. I was twelve and thirteen; I remember well the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach and not knowing what to say. I remember the glee of some when they heard he'd been shot. We are not so far removed from the strategies of slander and innuendo as

---

<sup>15</sup> 23:3b, 14, 15, 22.

---

we might think. It's what we do with people who trouble our conscience. We listen and repent or find a way to get rid of the messenger.

**TRIAL NO. 3, BEFORE HEROD (23:6-12)**

The bare mention of *Galilee* gave Pilate a potential out. That was Herod's territory, and he was in town at the Herodian palace for Passover. Let a Jewish puppet-king deal with a Jewish matter. Pass the buck. So Jesus is carried for a third hearing, this time before Herod, the one who had John the Baptist beheaded for criticizing his marriage arrangements. Jesus moves from one who murdered Jewish pilgrims to one who murdered a Jewish prophet. The innocent one appears before the violent.

It is interesting that whereas Jesus gave answers to both the Sanhedrin and Pilate, he is silent before King Herod who hopes to see a miracle. He sees Jesus as a magician with a few tricks in his bag. Question after question he asks, and to each the answer is silence. Jesus will not dignify the man who killed John because of a drunken promise made to a dancing girl.

It was then the mood turned ugly. Members of the Sanhedrin shouted accusations. Herod and his soldiers treated the prisoner with contempt, finally draping him in a magnificent robe to mock his kingship. An honest man, an innocent man, the Son of God and God the Son quietly allows them to vent their hatred and fear and ignorance. He absorbs it without a word, fully aware of the dark energy that excites their unholy passions. A mob is forming as they move from venue to venue. No one changes. No one is humbled. Some have seen verse 12 about the friendship between Pilate and Herod as a good thing. It is not. It is the coalescing of the forces of darkness against Jesus. First the Sanhedrin, then Pilate, now Herod; he is paraded before all the authorities. But who's really on trial here? Might makes right for them, and right makes might for him. He is who he is, and long after they and the systems they represent are gone, he still rules.

Jesus sits in judgment wherever religion and power are corrupted and used against the innocent, whether in Jerusalem or Moscow or Washington or Greenwood. Keeping our churches and our judicial system linked to truth and not just power is a constant battle. Corrupt the church and you corrupt the people- as we are now doing; corrupt the courts and you corrupt the nation- as we are now doing. Yes, these men are responsible for their choices. To bring false charges, to give into the will of a mob, to treat a man's life as a game: all are serious sins. But behind their free

---

decisions and goading them on step by step is a dark presence, one who more than anyone wants Jesus dead and gone, one who has already compromised Judas.

**TRAIL NO. 4, BACK BEFORE PILATE (23:13-16)**

The primary purpose of the fourth trial, the second before Pilate, is to clearly establish the innocence of Jesus, and it's only here, in the speech of Pilate to the Sanhedrin and the people that we find an ordered judicial review in seven parts: arrest, charge, interrogation, verdict, supporting precedent, move for acquittal and judicial warning.<sup>16</sup> At this critical juncture, Luke emphasizes that Pilate- brutal man that he was- followed procedure, if only in this matter alone.

“Behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges: perverting the people and fomenting rebellion. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to me. Behold, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore chastize him and release him. Perhaps that will educate him for taking up our valuable time this important Friday.”

Pilate was willing to treat Jesus as a foolish Jew who needed a painful warning, not as one deserving the ultimate humiliation of the cross as a political criminal.

Once before we have seen Jesus almost released. There the Sanhedrin came up with additional charges to play on Pilate's fears. Now the darkness breaks through the surface of decorum. It was the chant of a mob, “Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas.” Barabbas, whose name- ironically- means *son of the Father*, was likely a Zealot, a Jewish freedom fighter and murderer, to the Romans a terrorist. Jesus died in his place, a one-for-one replacement. He was freed because Jesus was killed. He was the only one to confess in a concrete sense, “Jesus died in my place.” Three times Pilate pronounces Jesus innocent, and three times seeks to release him, but that is not what the crowd wants, “Crucify him. Crucify him.”

The second half of verse 23 tips the scales, “And their voices prevailed.” The truth is a casualty as Pilate decides keeping peace at Passover is his priority. Better to sacrifice one crazy Jew than have the whole city in an uproar. Convenience above

---

<sup>16</sup> Jerome Neyrey, *The Passion According To Saint Luke* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 81, as noted in Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 116, note 23.

---

conviction; it's always a dangerous path. It can lead a nation to approve abortion or a government to propose a lottery. It can cause a preacher to avoid the hard truths of the Bible for the sake of popularity and benefits. It keeps many of us on the sidelines of non-involvement when there are issues that need our energy. Pontius Pilate is the patron saint of those who put peace-keeping above truth-telling and who value convenience over conviction. They hold office and power, but they are not true leaders. They sell out to polls and focus groups; the will of the people is their will. Like a weather vane they turn with the prevailing winds, and some of them are bishops. Whatever the culture wants it gets, and the ethical tradition of the church is sidelined as old-fashioned and irrelevant in these new days and modern times. "So Pilate gave sentence that their demand be granted." And every time the Creed is recited the church is saying to itself, "This is not the kind of person you want to be." Who is judge here? It's not the Jewish Council, not Pilate and not Herod. The judge is Jesus, and all who pass before him are found guilty. Every person in this account has already stood before the one they condemned. Herod died, Pilate died, all seventy-one members of the Sanhedrin died; every voice that cried "crucify him" has been silenced by death. The one you helped kill is the one who decides your destiny! Who really is on trial here? Not Jesus. It's everyone else.

### CONCLUSION

Several years ago I asked and answered a question, Who killed Jesus? There is no simple answer. I find at least seven layers, so follow along carefully.

1. The Roman death squad who pinned him to the cross with rope and nails were the ones most directly responsible for his actual murder. If fingerprints are what you seek, here they are.
  2. Only Pontius Pilate had the power to issue the death sentence so his was the official approval. Is authority counts, here it is.
  3. King Herod allowed violence against Jesus and sent him back to Herod dressed as a Jewish king to see what Pilate would do. If issuing a *friend of the court* brief counts, here it is.
  4. Then there was the mob who cried out for his death and applied public pressure to Pilate. Here the scaled were tipped. If popular pressure is culpable, here it is.
-

5. It was the Jewish religious officials who first arrested him, then turned him over to Pilate and were agitators at each subsequent trial. If the hand of one is the hand of all, then this layer is critical.
6. Then there was Judas, who betrayed Jesus as an insider. No doubt here, though with him there were many unintended consequences.

These are all historical characters. But Luke is clear that behind Judas' treachery which started the process, Satan is at work. There is an invisible dimension of coordinated evil which drives the passion of Jesus, so that gives us our seven. And over all this is the guiding providence of God who used the free decisions of multiple individuals and groups to deliver the innocent martyr Jesus- who is also Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, and King of Israel- to his death. The Lord came in person to show his love for all by taking into himself, and thus into the divine heart, the depths of our sin, evil and hatred. He came to disable all that keeps us away from God.

Satan drove the process out of malice, supplying dark inspiration. Religious and political officials used the legal system to rid themselves of a troublemaker. Judas received money, and the death squad carried out the orders. Therefore, to continue, as some have across history with disastrous results, to blame *the Jews* in a wholesale fashion is both a historical and a theological error with disastrous consequences, as shown in the long history of anti-Semitism in the church. This is a great sin against God's historic people and demonstrates how readily we seek a *scapegoat* to relieve ourselves. The death camps of Nazi Germany are the end result of this kind of erroneous thinking.

But the best and final answer to the question, Who killed Jesus? is the personal one, and so we arrive at eight layers instead of our original seven. I killed Jesus; it was my sin and my need for a Savior that made his death a necessity. All are culpable, and we are all offered pardon and a new life through One who loved us enough to die and rise for us. The church is called to stand against irrational hatred and prejudice, and to stand with its victims. And when we do, we stand with Jesus.

This is the gospel and the demand of righteousness. Both need our attention.

---