



“Were You There?” (John 18–19): Telling the Story of Jesus’ Trial —and Ours

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The Christian message that we preach and the faith that we share can be summed up in short creedal statements. According to the Apostles’ Creed, Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate; he was crucified, died, and was buried; on the third day he rose again. Yet those creedal statements outline a story, which includes a plotline and key characters. There is a narrative flow that is reflected in the faith statement. The problem is that the story is a troubling one, with Jesus’ crucifixion at its center.¹

It is easier to proclaim the gospel through the Christmas story, telling of the birth of a baby and angels announcing peace on earth. The gentle strains of “Silent Night” are far more appealing to most ears than “suffered, died, and was buried.” The story of crucifixion takes us through scenes of anger and brutality, of hostility and disgrace. Instead of simply celebrating life, it confronts us with the reality of death. The narrative sounds too much like the world in which we live. And that, of

¹This essay is adapted from the Aus Lecture, “Telling the Old, Old Story in a New, New Time,” presented jointly with Rolf Jacobson at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, in March 2013.

The scenes leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion are an essential and yet troubling part of the Christian story. Focusing on the major characters provides a way to tell the story in ways that engage modern listeners and allow the gospel to be heard. In the end, it is God’s story of self-giving love that brings redemption out of tragedy.

course, is the reason the story needs to be told. We see in it the tragic dimensions of human life and the character of the God who meets us there in grace.

What follows is an experiment in telling a part of that troubling story. The basic elements are taken from the account of Jesus’ trial in John 18–19. The explicit purpose of John’s Gospel is to tell the story of Jesus in order that readers—who live long after Jesus’ ministry has ended—might believe and have eternal life (John 20:30–31). The Fourth Evangelist introduces a remarkable cast of characters, each of whom is unique and yet exhibits traits that readers might see in themselves.

What I want to do here is to retell the story of Jesus’ trial by focusing on the main characters.² Part of the challenge is to remain faithful to the Gospel’s narrative, drawing on the traits that the Fourth Evangelist includes when portraying the individuals and groups that meet Jesus. A good retelling should develop aspects of the characters in ways that retain a clear connection to the text.

Another part of the challenge is to invite listeners to see something of themselves in the people who play a role in the Gospel. Rolf Jacobson has noted that we all form stories about ourselves.³ We develop narratives of our lives that include certain themes that help us make sense of our experiences and give us a sense of identity. The stories that we tell about ourselves may be similar to those that others would tell about us, but there may also be significant differences. And when an experience does not fit the stories we have fashioned about ourselves, either the storyline must push that experience into the background or the storyline itself must change.

Adapting that idea, I want to consider each of the main players in John 18–19: Peter, the Jewish leaders, Pilate, and God. In each case I will focus on a particular trait that is both congruent with the Gospel narrative and accessible to a modern listener. The exercise takes up the question that is asked by a familiar song:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, oh, oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?⁴

The point of asking the question is to invite people into the story, which includes both judgment and redemption. We will find that each figure has a storyline that has emerged throughout the Gospel, and as the crucifixion approaches, several of those storylines break down. In the end it is God’s story that has a future to it, because God is the one who turns this story of tragedy into the story of new life.

²Recent studies of character portrayal in John’s Gospel include Christopher W. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (London: T & T Clark, 2013); Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, eds., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

³See Rolf Jacobson’s “We are Our Stories: Narrative Dimension of Human Identity and Its Implications for Christian Faith Formation,” *Word & World* 34/2 (2014) 123–130.

⁴The full text of the hymn is widely available, for example in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) #353.

PETER AND THE STORY OF LOYALTY

We will take up John's narrative with the scene in Gethsemane where Jesus is arrested. John tells us that Jesus "went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered" (John 18:1).⁵ It says that "Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons" (18:3). Then Jesus stepped forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he'" or literally "I am" (18:4–5). As the story goes on, the question is repeated and the same answer is given. Jesus says, "I am... I am... I am" (18:5, 6, 8). There is a brief skirmish in which Peter pulls out his sword, but in the end the soldiers arrest Jesus, bind him, and lead him away (18:10–14).

The first character I want to consider is Peter. John tells us that after Jesus was arrested, Peter and another disciple followed along as Jesus was taken to the high priest's house. What happens there is part of Peter's story, which has been unfolding throughout the Gospel. If we consider all the places that Peter is mentioned in John's narrative and try to discern an element of continuity, we might summarize it in one word: loyalty.

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John has portrayed Peter as a person for whom relationships matter. Time and time again, we see that his commitments to his relationships are what drive his story. Peter met Jesus in chapter 1 of the Gospel, where he formed a bond with Jesus that gives shape to his life. You can see the story unfolding when Jesus offends people by calling himself the bread of life, whom people must eat; there are many who turn away from Jesus, but Peter does not. This relationship matters. So when Jesus asks if he and the others also wish to go away, it is Peter who says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:68).

Peter makes mistakes, of course; everyone does. But for Peter the mistakes are made with the best of intentions. They continue his story of loyalty. At the Last Supper, we see Jesus the teacher taking on the role of a slave by washing the disciples' feet, and Peter tries to stop him, saying "Lord, do you wash my feet?" with the implication that Jesus should not do so (13:6). It may have been the wrong answer, but it was given for the right reason—Peter respects Jesus so highly. And when Jesus speaks of going away, Peter responds that he will follow Jesus no matter what, even laying down his life for Jesus (13:37).

⁵Several biblical translations, including sometimes the author's own, are used in this article.

This story of loyalty continues in the garden, as Peter pulls out his sword and tries to fend off the opposition (18:10). Then it continues as Peter makes his way to the high priest’s house. He is joined by another disciple, who is known to the high priest, and that disciple is able to enter and to obtain access for Peter. Here the plot thickens. There is a servant girl at the door—a servant girl and not a centurion or a police officer, but a servant girl—and she asked Peter if he was one of Jesus’ disciples too, and the answer came out: “I am not” (18:17). Given Peter’s penchant for loyalty, you think you must have heard incorrectly, but then some of the other slaves in the courtyard repeat the question, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” and the same incongruous answer comes out, “I am not” (18:25). So Peter is asked again, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” and the answer comes out in the negative (18:26–27). Peter has established a haunting refrain: I am not... I am not... I am not who you think I am.⁶

The story wasn’t supposed to end like this. Peter’s loyalty was supposed to continue to the end. Relationships matter. So why does it fail here? Was it fear? If so, then why didn’t he abandon Jesus in the garden, under the blazing torches of the soldiers with their weapons? Why break down now, in the shadows, when the only people looking on are the household help? The story of loyalty becomes the story of denial. The story of commitment becomes the story of failure. You can’t really take comfort by trying to rationalize Peter’s actions, as if he simply did what any one of us would do. That only makes the story more painful. He is not exceptional. He is all too typical of the story of human relationships that were not supposed to end this way. And when they fail, the noble stories we tell about ourselves break down. Like Peter we must say “I am not... I am not... I am not who you think I am.”

THE JEWISH LEADERS AND THE STORY OF PRINCIPLE

The next scenes involve the Jewish leaders, who present special challenges for our retelling of the Gospel story.⁷ On the one hand, many modern listeners will find it hard to relate to this group. Common impressions of them are often quite negative; they assume that the authorities are either unscrupulous or overly legalistic. From that vantage point, it is much easier to fault them than to identify with them. We might insist that their story is not ours. On the other hand, many modern readers are rightly disturbed by the moments in history when Christians have all too easily blamed the Jews for Jesus’ death. Given the

⁶Peter’s repeated insistence that “I am not” a disciple stands in sharp contrast to Jesus’ repeated affirmation, “I am.” As these scenes stand side by side it emphasizes the difference between Jesus’ integrity and Peter’s loss of integrity at this point. At the same time, the context of John’s Gospel might suggest that Peter’s denial is actually an ironic truth. If a disciple is one who continues in Jesus’ word (8:31–32), then Peter actually is not a genuine disciple at this point. His path of discipleship begins anew when he has the opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus three times in 21:15–19.

⁷On the role of the group called “the Jews” in John’s Gospel, see Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John: Text and Context* (Boston: Brill, 2005) 20–44; Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

divisiveness that could emerge from this aspect of the story, it might seem best to pass by it in silence.

As an alternative, I want to ask how we might actually help modern listeners see something of themselves in the Jewish authorities. Few of us want to be seen as legalists, but most of us would like to be known as having principles. Our principles involve a commitment to doing what is right, to being true to our own convictions. And that offers a way to consider the role of the Jewish authorities in John's Gospel.

Tensions have been building because, in the eyes of the Jewish authorities, Jesus seems to be so indifferent to matters of principle. Jesus will stand teaching in the temple as if he has some God-given right to do so. But everyone knows there are procedures involved, and Jesus seems to think he is above it all. One might simply try to ignore his attitude, but his conduct is practically designed to provoke opposition. After all, he heals on the Sabbath, when no work is to be done, and when challenged he claims that he is working at one with God (5:16–18; 7:14–24). But everyone knows the principle: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4). The authorities know that there is one God—and that Jesus is not God (John 10:30–33).

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The problem is that it is hard to live by principle in a world where the lines are often blurry, and black and white merge into gray. Jesus' popularity made it difficult to write him off, and yet the Roman administrators were going to get nervous if they thought that Jesus was fomenting some overthrow of the government. If the Romans thought they needed to use force to stop the movement, it could get ugly for everyone. As the council put it, they could “come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (11:48). But Caiaphas pointed out that there was a principle involved: the greatest good for the greatest number. It would be better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish. So stop Jesus, and save the people (11:49–50).

After Jesus was arrested, the Jewish leaders accompanied him to Pilate's headquarters. It was the day of preparation for Passover, the day when things were being made ready for the Passover meal that would be eaten that night. They did what was right by not going into Pilate's headquarters, since there they could conceivably become unclean and then could not eat the Passover meal (18:28). When Pilate asked them why they didn't deal with Jesus themselves, they again did what was right. They said, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death” (18:31). Under Roman administration, it would be right for the ruling power to pronounce the sentence. When Pilate needed a reason to take action, they said, “We have a law

and by that law it is right for him to die, because he has made himself the Son of God” (19:7).

The day dragged on as Pilate went through the motions of a hearing, and the Jewish leaders waited impatiently, because when the sun set, the Passover would begin. It would be celebrated with food and prayers that commemorated Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt:

From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.
Beside you we have no king, redeemer, or savior;
No liberator, deliverer, provider;
None who takes pity in every time of distress and trouble.
We have no king but you, O God.⁸

Pilate’s voice intrudes into the scene: “Shall I crucify your king?” (19:15). What a question! Isn’t that obvious? Get on with it. Crucify him. And if kingship is such an issue for you, fine—“We have no king but the emperor” (19:15). And there we have said it. Principle says we have no king but God. And pragmatism says we have no king but the emperor, the man who would take God’s place. The emperor was the one person in the empire who was on the fast track for divine status.⁹ The story of these leaders was supposed to be the story of principle, of doing what was right. In the end, they get their way. And what did it cost? Only their principles. In the effort to maintain their integrity they lose it. While imagining they were true to their convictions, they sell out.

PILATE AND THE STORY OF AMBITION

This brings us to the third person in the story: Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. If Peter was spinning a story of loyalty and the Jewish leaders a story of principle, then Pilate gives us a story of ambition.¹⁰ Pilate was the most powerful man in the country, and you don’t get to that position by chance. It takes connections and networking, and when it pays off, it is grand. Pilate was accountable only to Rome and he stood above everyone else in the province. He was in charge of the military, he was in charge of the finances, and he was in charge of the judicial system. In the United States, we distribute those roles among the various branches of government. Not so here. Pilate had it all.

The whole Jesus affair was something of a nuisance for Pilate, one of the endless stream of issues that needed some action before he could seek a more pleasant diversion elsewhere. Pilate’s initial impression was that Jesus was a hapless figure

⁸The text is adapted from Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 135.

⁹Roman emperors were formally deified at their deaths, although imperial cults sometimes included living emperors in divine honors. After Julius Caesar was deified in the first century B.C.E., the title “son of god” or “son of the deified” was used for the emperors who succeeded him. See S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁰On the way Pilate is depicted in John and the other Gospels, see Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

who posed no threat. But charges were made and Pilate goes through the motions. He asks, “So you are a king?” and Jesus replies, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37). Good God, what is truth? (18:38). Jesus seems more like a would-be philosopher than a threat to national security. But hardly one worth listening to.

Here the plot thickens. Pilate may not discuss the truth with Jesus, but Pilate does know the truth—at least to some extent. Pilate knows one very important truth, which is that Jesus is an innocent man. And Pilate will declare that truth again and again in the story. Three times he says, “I find no case against him” (18:38; 19:4, 6). And what Pilate says is true. So if he is the most powerful man in the country, and if he knows that Jesus is innocent, is he capable of acting in accordance with what he knows to be true?

Now the story unfolds like an intricate chess game. Pilate makes a move—Plan A. When he says that he finds no case against Jesus, he proposes that Jesus simply be released, as was customary during the holiday. But Plan A fails. The other side blocks and wants a terrorist released instead (18:40). So on to Plan B. If release won’t work, how about trying to placate the opposition? Pilate orders a beating, which leaves the prisoner battered and bleeding. And the soldiers add the poetic touch of putting the crown of thorns on Jesus’ head. Pilate says again, “I find no case against him.” So is this brutality enough? Is that degradation enough to let him go? But the answer comes back negative. Finish what you started. You’ve begun the brutality, go ahead and finish the course. Have him crucified (19:1–7).

This is not the way the story is supposed to be going. Pilate tells Jesus, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” (19:10). But that comment only leaves us wondering. If Pilate has the power to release Jesus, and if he knows that Jesus is innocent, then why doesn’t he do what is true? Or is Pilate’s story of being in control simply an illusion? The leaders’ words intrude on Pilate’s ear: “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Every man who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor” (19:12). And that is the finishing touch. Without the emperor, there is no career. Without the emperor, there is no hope for ambition. Without the emperor, Pilate’s future collapses. So at the judgment seat Pilate sells out. If it is ambition versus truth, then ambition wins out. The most powerful man in the country proves that he is powerless to do what he knows to be true. Having pronounced Jesus innocent, he hands him over to be crucified (19:16).

GOD AND THE STORY OF SELF-GIVING

The story leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion is disturbing, and one wonders “Why tell it?” Why not skip it and pretend it isn’t there? We tell it because it is an extended exercise in truth-telling. It shows us loyalty, principle, and ambition meeting on a collision course, with devastating results. By unmasking human pre-

tensions for what they are, the story shows us the disturbing character of the world to which we belong, as well as the radical character of love with which God meets it.

You see, God has his own story to tell, and it too leads to the cross. If the cross tells us who human beings are, the cross also tells us who God is.¹¹ And for God, it is the story of giving. What would God give to restore the relationship that human pretensions have shattered? During the Last Supper, Jesus said that “greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). The idea is that people show love by what they are willing to give. In our own settings people might give a gift or send a card. They might give their time and give their tears. So to follow that pattern to the end, then the greatest gift one can give is one’s whole life, one’s whole self. The highest form of love is to give up one’s life for one’s friends.

If the cross tells us who human beings are, the cross also tells us who God is. And for God, it is the story of giving.

Yet God must go beyond even that. God isn’t content merely to reaffirm those friendships that already exist. God is about creating relationship where alienation exists. John tells us that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (3:16). This is not a story in which God simply loved the world of blue skies and golden sunsets, or in which God loved the world of gentle breezes and flowers in the spring. The story of the crucifixion is that God so loved the world that hated him, that God so loved the world that rejected him, that God so loved the world that turned away from him, that he gave his only Son to be crucified in order to bring that world back into relationship with himself.

The cross is the way God evangelizes the world, for in it is God’s radical word of self-giving love, which says, “This is the length to which I will go to have you. This is what I give to make you mine.” In the narrative of the Gospel it is not human loyalty, principle, or ambition that carry the day. Each, in turn, fails. But through God’s loyalty to people, God’s principled commitment to truth, and God’s ambition to redeem the world he created, the stories of people like those we meet in the Gospel can be recast. The promise of life comes as the stories we tell about ourselves are challenged and rewritten in light of the story of God. ☩

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¹¹On the portrayal of God in John’s Gospel, see Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 227–240; Stan Harstine, “The Fourth Gospel’s Characterization of God: A Rhetorical Perspective,” in Skinner, *Characters and Characterization*, 131–146. On the significance of crucifixion in John’s Gospel and its significance for the portrayal of God, see Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 41–47, 108–123.