

“WHAT IS TRUTH?”  
PILATE’S QUESTION IN ITS  
JOHANNINE AND LARGER BIBLICAL CONTEXT

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“What is truth?”<sup>1</sup> It is hard to imagine a more profound question with more momentous consequences. A quest for truth has driven the world’s greatest philosophers and theologians. “What is truth?” is also the question Pilate asked Jesus according to John. Has Pilate therefore gone among the philosophers? Few are prepared to argue this. More likely, Pilate’s question has several layers of meaning, which is why it has intrigued commentators over the centuries and continues to exercise a fascination that pays tribute not so much to the one who originally asked the question but to the evangelist and theologian who wove the question into the fabric of his Gospel concerning Jesus, the Christ and Son of God.

In the following essay, I will take a fresh look at the ramifications of Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” in John 18:38 in the immediate context of John’s account of Jesus’ Roman trial (18:28–19:16a) and the larger context of the Johannine passion narrative (18–19) and the farewell discourse (13–17) and ultimately the entire Gospel.<sup>2</sup> After a few introductory remarks on the concept of truth, I will, first, assess the historicity of 18:33–38a; second, probe the relationship between the passage and major themes in John’s Gospel; and, third, look at the three major characters in 18:28–19:16a. I will close with several observations concerning John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, related to Pilate’s question to Jesus, “What is truth?”

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<sup>1</sup> Or, perhaps, with George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; rev ed.; Waco, TX: Word, 1999) 332: “Truth—what is *that!*!” As Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (trans. Robert W. Funk; ed. Robert W. Funk with Ulrich Busse; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 2.180 (cited in *ibid.*) observes, “If Pilate now asks, when face to face with this truth, the truth that stands before him, ‘What is truth?’, it is clear that Pilate does not belong among those whom ‘the Father has given to Jesus.’” There is a good possibility that Pilate and Jesus discoursed in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the day, which would have provided common ground between Pilate, who spoke Latin, and Jesus, who spoke Aramaic. Cf. Craig L. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 2003) 2.1113: “Presumably Jesus and Pilate converse in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Eastern empire, known to all educated Romans.”

<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 525, reflects the scholarly consensus, dividing John 18–19 as follows: (1) Jesus’ arrest and appearance before Annas, with Peter’s denials (18:1–27); (2) Jesus’ trial before Pilate (18:28–19:16a); and (3) Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and burial (19:16b–42).

## I. WHAT IS TRUTH?

The term “truth” had currency in Greek philosophy, Roman thought, and the Hebrew Bible (including its many uses in the LXX).<sup>3</sup> In Greek philosophy, one of the senses of *alētheia* involved an accurate perspective on reality.<sup>4</sup> Romans similarly spoke of *veritas* as a factual representation of events.<sup>5</sup> In the Hebrew Scriptures, “truth” (*’emeth*, *’emunah*) primarily conveyed the notion of God’s faithfulness.<sup>6</sup> This faithfulness had been revealed throughout the history of Israel and, according to John, found supreme expression in the life, ministry, and substitutionary death of Jesus (1:14; 14:6).<sup>7</sup>

In John’s Gospel, where the importance of “truth” is underscored by 48 instances of the *alēth*-word group in comparison with a combined total of 10 in the Synoptics,<sup>8</sup> the notion of truth is inextricably related to God, and to Jesus’ relationship with God.<sup>9</sup> Is Jesus the Son of God, or is he guilty of blasphemy

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Gen 24:27, 48; 32:10; 47:29; Exod 28:26; Deut. 22:20; 33:8; Josh 2:14; Judg 9:15; etc. Keener, *John* 1.418, notes that ninety percent of the instances of *alētheia* in the LXX translate the Hebrew *’emeth* and concludes that “‘truth’ often includes the sense of ‘covenant faithfulness’ in the Fourth Gospel.”

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Marcus Aurelius 9.1.2. See the discussion in Keener, *John* 1.417–19.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Cicero, *Inv.* 2.53.161. A possible parallel to the present passage is Cicero, *Nat. Deor.* 1.67: *sed ubi est veritas?* (“But where is truth?”) Cited in *Neuer Wettstein: Texte zum Neuen Testament aus Griechenland und Hellenismus*, Band I/2: *Texte zum Johannesevangelium* (ed. Udo Schelle; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001) 795.

<sup>6</sup> On “truth” in the OT, see the paper on this topic presented by Ronald Youngblood at the 2004 ETS annual meeting in San Antonio, TX. There is some debate as to whether *’emeth* and *’emunah* are both to be construed as conveying the notion of faithfulness. Some equate the meaning of these expressions (e.g. R. W. L. Moberly, “אֱמֶת,” *NIDOTTE* 1.427–33; Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* [EBC 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991] 235–36), others steadfastly insist on differentiating between the meaning of the two words (e.g. Alfred Jepsen, *TDOT* 1.309–20; Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* [4th ed.; trans. William Urwick; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895] 627–30). In any case, God is both a God of truth (Exod 31:6) and faithfulness (Lam 3:22–23), and similar conduct is expected of the believer (Ps 40:10–11).

<sup>7</sup> When Jesus spoke to Pilate about a “kingdom” of truth, Pilate most likely would have thought of a kingdom of philosophers (e.g. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.22.49; Plutarch, *Flatterer* 16; *Mor.* 58E), who hardly ever challenged the security of the state. Keener, *John* 1.418, says the “aborted dialogue of John 18:37–38 even suggests that John is aware of competing cultural epistemologies or understandings of truth.”

<sup>8</sup> The breakdown is as follows: *alētheia*: John 25, Synoptics 7; *alēthēs*: John 14, Synoptics 2; *alēthinos*: John 9, Synoptics 1.

<sup>9</sup> For a helpful study of truth in John’s Gospel, see Scott Rupert Swain, “Truth in the Gospel of John” (Th.M. thesis; Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998). See also the fine study by Dennis R. Lindsay, “What is Truth? Ἀλήθεια in the Gospel of John,” *ResQ* 35 (1993) 129–45; as well as S. Aalen, “‘Truth,’ a Key Word in St. John’s Gospel,” *SE* 2 (ed. Frank L. Cross; Berlin: Akademie, 1964) 3–24; D. M. Crump, “Truth,” *DJG* 859–62; Lester J. Kuyper, “Grace and Truth: An Old Testament Description of God, and Its Use in the Johannine Gospel,” *Int* 18 (1964) 3–19; Ignace de la Potterie, “The Truth in Saint John,” in John Ashton, ed. and trans., *The Interpretation of John* (IRT 9; 2d ed.; Philadelphia/London: Fortress/SPCK, 1986) 67–82; David J. Hawkin, “The Johannine Concept of Truth,” *EQ* 59 (1987) 3–13; Anthony C. Thiselton, “Truth,” *NIDNTT* 3.874–902, esp. 879–80, 889–94; Jean Gible, “Aspects of the Truth in the New Testament,” in *Truth and Certainty* (ed. Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel; New York: Herder & Herder, 1973) 35–42; and Geerhardus Vos, “‘True’ and ‘Truth’ in the Johannine Writings,” *Biblical Review* 12 (1927) 507–20. See also James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1961) 187–205; Roger Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth,” in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A.

(cf. esp. Matt 26:59–66; Mark 14:55–64; Luke 22:66–71)?<sup>10</sup> Jesus claims he is the Son of God, and the fourth evangelist’s purpose for writing his Gospel is tied up with demonstrating the veracity of Jesus’ claim (20:30–31). The Jewish leaders, on the other hand, consider Jesus a blasphemer (5:18; 8:59; 10:33–36; 19:7).

In John, then, truth is first and foremost a theological, and perhaps even more accurately, a Christological concept.<sup>11</sup> Rather than merely connoting correspondence with reality, as in Greek philosophy, or factual accuracy, as in Roman thought, truth, for John, while also being propositional, is at the heart a *personal, relational* concept that has its roots and origin in none other than God himself. As the psalmist (Ps 31:5) and the prophet (Isa 65:16) call God “the God of truth,” so John’s Gospel proclaims that God is truth, and that therefore his Word is truth.<sup>12</sup> Jesus, then, is the truth, because he is sent from God and has come to reveal the Father and to carry out his salvation-historical purposes.<sup>13</sup> For this reason the only way for us to know the truth is to know God through Jesus Christ (8:31; 14:6; 17:3).

## II. THE HISTORICITY OF JOHN’S ACCOUNT OF JESUS’ TRIAL BEFORE PILATE

What is the truth about the historicity of John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate? Did John *invent* the present passage, as David Friedrich Strauss believed, perhaps, as Ferdinand Baur surmised, to transfer guilt from Pilate to the Jewish leaders, a view recently revived by Maurice Casey, who repeatedly charges John with “rewriting history”?<sup>14</sup> Did John merely

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Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 287–98; and L. Russ Bush III, “Knowing the Truth,” *Faith & Mission* 11/2 (Spring 1994) 3–13.

<sup>10</sup> On the charge of blasphemy against Jesus and a defense of its historicity, see especially Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge against Jesus in Mark 14:53–65* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000 [1998]).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. Thomas Söding, “Die Macht der Wahrheit und das Reich der Freiheit: Zur johanneischen Deutung des Pilatus-Prozesses (Joh 18, 28–19, 16),” *ZTK* 93 (1996) 48–49.

<sup>12</sup> This belief is also reflected in later Jewish writings, such as y. *Sanh.* 18a: “The seal of God is truth. What is truth? that he is the living God and the King eternal” (Beasley-Murray, *John* 332, citing Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes: Wie er spricht, denkt und glaubt* [2d ed.; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948] 341; cf. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* [orig. ed. 1881; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 261, with reference to Lightfoot).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Beasley-Murray, *John* 331: “Jesus is not speaking of truth in an abstract, or even general way, but specifically in relation to his ministry.” Moreover, as C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2d ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 538, notes, in John, truth is “truth in motion,” entering and addressing the world, and liberating those who are capable of hearing it (8:32). Its ultimate point of reference is not a world of timeless forms but God’s plan of salvation. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 260, notes the association of truth with God (and Jesus’ ministry in fulfillment of God’s covenant promises) in Paul’s letter to the Romans (1:25; 3:7; 15:8).

<sup>14</sup> Strauss and Baur are cited in Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* (trans. William Urwick; New York/London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884) 496. See also Maurice Casey, *Is John’s Gospel True?* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996) 186: “Here, history has been rewritten to put more blame on ‘the Jews.’” See also *ibid.* 183: “. . . we must infer that the whole account has been rewritten”; and *ibid.* 187: “This is extensively rewritten history . . .”

imagine Jesus' interchange with Pilate, as James Dunn argues in his recent book *Jesus Remembered*?<sup>15</sup> Is Andrew Lincoln correct in his contention that it is "not plausible to defend any consistent or detailed one-to-one correspondence between John's narrative and what is likely to have happened in the ministry of Jesus"?<sup>16</sup> Or is John's account historically reliable?<sup>17</sup>

In setting the stage, all four Gospels make reference to Jesus being led from Caiaphas to the governor's palace (Matt 27:1–2; Mark 15:1; Luke 23:1; John 18:28). Only John adds that the Jewish leaders did not enter the palace in order not to defile themselves so that they would be able to eat the Passover, no doubt an instance of Johannine irony. While the Jewish leaders had no scruples about crucifying the one who embodied the very reality to which the Passover pointed, they were scrupulous in their observance of sacrificial law. This historical detail supplied only by John is eminently credible and in keeping with what we know of first-century Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003) 776: "John imagines a debate between Jesus and Pilate, in which Pilate is impressed by Jesus' answers and repeatedly insists, 'I find no case against him' (John 18.38; 19.4, 6)." At least at this point, surely a better title for Dunn's book than *Jesus Remembered* would have been *Jesus Imagined*! Dunn goes on to say that "tensions" "leave the role of Pilate in Jesus' execution tantalizingly obscure" and states that the Gospels' portrait of Pilate is "biased in his favor." He concludes, "At the very least, however, the primary responsibility for Jesus' execution should be firmly pinned to Pilate's record, and the first hints of an anti-Jewish tendency in the Gospels on this point should be clearly recognized and disowned" (pp. 776–77). However, Dunn's conclusion is itself biased and does not rest on a fair and balanced weighing of the evidence for or against the historicity of the account. It is not in keeping with proper scholarly procedure to dismiss John's presentation as "imagined" by way of mere assertion without argument. In fact, as the discussion below demonstrates, a strong case can be made for the historicity of John's account.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, "Reading John: The Fourth Gospel under Modern and Postmodern Interrogation," in *Reading the Gospels Today* (McMaster New Testament Studies; ed. Stanley E. Porter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 132, dismissing Craig L. Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Leicester: Apollos, 2001), as an exercise in "strained argumentation." See also Lincoln's assertion later in his essay that "truth . . . is not to be confused with the factual accuracy of each detail of the Gospel but is the message of its overall narrative" (p. 147). While a thorough response to Lincoln's claim is beyond the scope of this paper, it may be noted that, to the contrary, Lincoln's own reasoning is implausible that a Gospel that by his own admission centers to such a large degree on the question of truth would compromise the truth by telling a story that the author himself knew does not correspond to events in Jesus' ministry. Lincoln's logic, too, that a narrative may be wrong in the details but right in its overall message is far from unassailable.

<sup>17</sup> For positive assessments of John's historicity, see Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 587–88; and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John XIII–XXI* (AB 29A; New York: Doubleday, 1970) 861, who concludes that "John's account of the trial is the most consistent and intelligible we have"; and the similar assessment by Söding, "Die Macht der Wahrheit und das Reich der Freiheit" 37: "[John's] presentation is more plausible historically than the Markan and Matthean one" (though see the false dichotomy between history and theology on p. 38).

<sup>18</sup> Contra Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* 183, who asserts, without substantiation, "Nor is it probable that the Roman governor would come out of the praetorium merely because Jewish authorities both wanted to see him, and declared him and his house unclean." Why is this so implausible? As

At this point, Matthew recounts the death of Judas; neither John nor the other Synoptic writers interrupt their account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate to do the same. John’s Gospel proceeds to narrate the interchange between Pilate and the Jewish leaders when Jesus is handed over to the governor. In John 18:30, the Jewish leaders identify Jesus as an “evildoer,” with no further specifics given at this point (though see later 19:7). Luke specifies beyond this that the Jewish leaders charged Jesus with “perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ and a king” (Luke 23:2; cf. Matt 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:19–26). This fills in a narrative gap in John’s Gospel, where the Jewish leaders are shown to identify Jesus as an evildoer in 18:30 and Pilate asks Jesus in 18:33 if he is the “king of the Jews,” an identification not previously narrated in John’s Gospel. As Luke 23:2 shows, the Jewish leaders had in fact charged Jesus with claiming to be “Christ, a king,” whereby the latter epithet glosses “Christ” in terms of “a king” originally for the benefit of the Gentile Pilate, and in the case of Luke’s Gospel for the benefit of his Gentile readers.

The following question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” is the same word for word in all four Gospels,<sup>19</sup> as is Jesus’ later response, “You have said so.”<sup>20</sup> Apart from this, the Johannine account of Jesus’ first interrogation before Pilate in John 18:33–38a is unique to John’s Gospel. Subsequently, Luke records again the specific charge by the Jewish leaders that Jesus was “stirring up the people” through his teaching throughout all Judea including Galilee (Luke 23:5), at which point Pilate inquired whether Jesus was a Galilean (underscoring Pilate’s ignorance of particulars regarding Jesus). When told that it was so, Pilate, according to Luke, sends Jesus to Herod Antipas, striking an alliance with the Galilean ruler who had previously been a foe (Luke 23:6–12).

Like John, all the Synoptics then record the Barabbas incident (Matt 27:15–23; Mark 15:6–14; Luke 23:17–23; John 18:39–40), with Matthew including also a reference to Pilate’s wife’s dream and her warning issued to her husband to have nothing to do with “that righteous man” (i.e. Jesus; Matt 27:19). The scourging of Jesus, the crown of thorns, the dark red robe, the mock homage of Jesus, all recounted in John 19:1–3, are likewise closely paralleled in the Synoptic Gospels (specifically, Matt 27:28–31a and Mark 15:17–20a). The following narrative John 19:4–15 involving Pilate’s further interchange with the Jewish leaders and with Jesus culminating in the Jewish leaders’ claim that they have no king but Caesar (19:15) is again unique to John’s Gospel.

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discussed below, historical records suggest that Pilate’s position had become increasingly vulnerable, so there is no reason why he would not have come out to the Jews to hear the charges they presented against Jesus. On a different note, the fact that Pilate condemned Jesus to be crucified on the basis of the charges made by “men of the highest standing among us” is confirmed by Josephus, *Ant.* 18.64 (cited in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* 776, n. 71).

<sup>19</sup> *Sy ei ho basileus tōn Ioudaiōn*; Matt 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33.

<sup>20</sup> *Sy legeis*; Matt 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:37. Ernst Bammel, “The Trial before Pilate,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (ed. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 417–19.

Overall, it appears that wherever John's Gospel does overlap with one or several of the Synoptic Gospels, the Synoptics corroborate John's account very closely. Clearly, however, once again John has written his own Gospel, issuing in his inclusion of the material found in John 18:33–38a and 19:4–15. Nothing in these verses is historically implausible or otherwise suspect in terms of its historicity.<sup>21</sup> I believe that John was most likely aware of the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' passion, whether or not John had the Synoptics in front of him as he wrote (I personally doubt that he had).<sup>22</sup> On the basis of those accounts, it is probable that John sought to supplement the information given in the Synoptics, specifically with regard to the nature of Jesus' kingdom. It is intriguing that this topic occupies considerable space especially in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels while it is otherwise virtually ignored in John.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Jesus' comments regarding the nature of his kingdom to Pilate in John's Gospel serve as a functional substitute for the kingdom parables in the Synoptics. Beyond this, the repeated references to truth and the reference to witness in 18:33–38a tie in closely with the larger "truth" and "witness" themes in John's Gospel.

But how are we to assess the historicity of the two interchanges between Pilate and Jesus which are unique to John's Gospel (18:33–38a and 19:4–15)? One important aspect of this evaluation is bound up with what we know of *Pilate's history as governor*. The question then becomes, "Is the way Pilate acts in these Johannine passages consistent with what we know of him from other extant sources (including, but not limited to, the Synoptic Gospels)?" Is there evidence for Pilate's antagonism toward the Jews which is displayed in his comment in 18:35, "Am I a Jew?" (see also 18:31). Is there evidence for Pilate's vulnerability to the charge that if he lets Jesus go, he is no friend of Caesar (19:12)? The answer to both questions is an unqualified, "Yes."

Pontius<sup>24</sup> Pilate, governor of Judea,<sup>25</sup> was appointed to his post by the emperor Tiberius in AD 26 and held this position for about ten years until

<sup>21</sup> See further the discussion below.

<sup>22</sup> Compare and contrast Carson, *John* 571–72, who thinks John knew one or two of the Synoptics; and Brown, *Gospel according to John XIII–XI* 787–91, who believes John wrote independently of the Synoptics.

<sup>23</sup> Though see John 3:3, 5; 12:13–15. For a discussion of the relationship between the reference to the kingdom of God in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus and Jesus' reference to his kingdom vis-à-vis Pilate see Martin Hengel, "Reich Christi, Reich Gottes und Weltreich im 4. Evangelium," *TBei* 14 (1983) 201–16; also in Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, eds., *Königsherrschaft Gottes und himmlischer Kult im Judentum, Urchristentum und in der hellenistischen Welt* (WUNT 55; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991) 163–84. On the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching, see Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture* 565–93; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 383–487. For the use of "kingdom of God" language in Second Temple literature, including the Dead Sea scrolls, see Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* 385–86, n. 13, with further bibliographic references.

<sup>24</sup> "Pontius" appears in the NT only in Luke 3:1; Acts 4:27; and 1 Tim 6:13.

<sup>25</sup> The Synoptists use the generic title "governor" (*hēgemōn*) with regard to Pilate (Matt 27:2, 11, etc.; Luke 20:20). Tacitus, the Roman historian, calls him *procurator* (*Annals* 15.44); Josephus uses the equivalent expression *epitropos* (*J.W.* 2.169). The famous Latin "Pilate inscription," found in Caesarea in 1961, identifies him as "prefect" (*praefectus*) of Judea: [PON]TIUS PILATUS [PRAE]FECTUS IUDA[E]A[E].

AD 36/37.<sup>26</sup> Pilate owed his appointment to Lucius Aelius Sejanus, the commander of the praetorian guard in Rome (cf. Philo, *Gaius* 24 §159).<sup>27</sup> If, as I have argued in my commentary, the date of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion is AD 33 (rather than AD 30), and in light of the fact that Pilate’s mentor Sejanus died on October 18, AD 31, Pilate would have lost his major supporter with the Roman emperor.<sup>28</sup> This would have necessitated that Pilate tread more lightly and would have rendered him more vulnerable with his superiors. Especially if Jesus’ trial took place in AD 33, subsequent to Sejanus’s death, Pilate’s vulnerability to Jewish intimidation makes eminent historical sense.<sup>29</sup>

As to Pilate’s uneasy relationship with the Jews, the Jewish historian Josephus reports several clashes between Pilate and the Jewish population. One such incident involved Pilate’s erection of statues of Caesar in Jerusalem. Since this is the first incident mentioned in the account of Pilate in both the *Jewish War* (2.169–74) and the *Antiquities of the Jews* (18.55–59), it appears the most likely date for this episode is AD 26/27, the first year of Pilate’s gubernatorial tenure.<sup>30</sup> In this incident, Pilate had Roman standards with the embossed figures of the emperor set up in Jerusalem by night, to the consternation of the Jews. But Pilate refused all protests and gave orders for his soldiers to draw their swords. Yet when he saw the Jews’ resolve and willingness to die for their faith, he relented and had the effigies removed. At another occasion, still prior to Jesus’ crucifixion, Pilate did not relent and inflicted a large number of casualties on the Jews (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.175–77; cf. *Ant.* 18.60–62). Luke, likewise, tells of an occasion where some “told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1).<sup>31</sup> These events during Pilate’s gubernatorial tenure add up to the picture of a ruthless, violent ruler torn hopelessly between his subjects and his Roman bosses.

The incident that finally led to Pilate’s removal from office in AD 36, only three years after Jesus’ crucifixion, illustrates very well that Pilate’s position had gotten considerably more tenuous subsequent to Sejanus’s death.

<sup>26</sup> See Harold W. Hoehner, “Pontius Pilate,” *DJG* 615–17. For a treatment of Pilate in John’s Gospel see Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in history and interpretation* (SNTSMS 100; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 163–93.

<sup>27</sup> Paul L. Maier, “Sejanus, Pilate, and the Date of the Crucifixion,” *Church History* 37 (1968) 3–13.

<sup>28</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 525, following Paul Maier, “Episode of the Golden Roman Shields at Jerusalem,” *HTR* 62 (1969) 109–21; Hoehner, “Chronology,” *DJG* 121; *idem*, “Pontius Pilate,” *DJG* 616; *idem*, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 97–98, 105–11; *idem*, *Herod Antipas* (SNTSMS 17; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 172–83.

<sup>29</sup> See also Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 38 §302, where Pilate is shown to be concerned about excessive scrutiny by Caesar. I owe this reference to Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture* 534, n. 62.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects* 106, who says the event took place “[a]lmost immediately after his [Pilate’s] arrival in Judea in AD 26.” Hoehner dates the incident on December 2, AD 26.

<sup>31</sup> This is dated by Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects* 107, to “possibly the Passover of AD 32.” Hoehner also notes that in AD 29/30 Pilate issued coins symbolizing Roman emperor worship but that after Sejanus’s death in the fall of AD 31, emperor Tiberius instructed governors throughout the empire not to mistreat the Jews (Philo, *Leg.* 159–61), with the result that, early in AD 32, Pilate stopped issuing these offensive coins (Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects* 108–9).

The issue at stake was a Samaritan uprising that had been brutally put down by Pilate. Vitellius, the governor of Syria, ordered Pilate to return to Rome to give the emperor an account of his handling of the uprising, and so, as Josephus tells us, "Pilate, after having spent ten years in Judaea, hurried to Rome in obedience to the orders of Vitellius, since he could not refuse" (*Ant.* 18.88–89).<sup>32</sup> These pieces of evidence from Josephus and Luke strongly support the historicity of John's accounts of Pilate's behavior in 18:28–19:16a, including his animosity toward the Jews and his vulnerability to the charge that if he let Jesus go this proved that he was no friend of the Roman emperor.

There is yet another important vantage point from which we may assess the historicity of John's account of Jesus' trial before Pilate, namely how Jesus' pattern of behavior in the two major scenes of interrogation in 18:33–38a and 19:9–11 matches the way he is portrayed elsewhere in this and the other canonical Gospels. Again, as will be seen, on this count as well we come away with a strong indication of authenticity. Specifically, there is, first, the way in which Jesus responds to questions. In the present instance, we find three distinctive ways in which Jesus interacts with Pilate:

(1) by asking a counter-question (18:34: "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?");

(2) by providing an indirect answer that reframes the issue in Jesus' rather than the questioner's terms (18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world") or that takes the conversation in a different direction in some other way (18:37: "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born . . ."); and

(3) by remaining silent (19:10; but see 19:11).

To this should be added, fourth, Jesus' characteristic reluctance to speak about his messianic claims and identity, especially without defining his terms, which pervades both interchanges with Pilate (18:33–38a; 19:9).

In each case, Jesus' conduct is amply corroborated by similar patterns both in John's and in the other Gospels. (1) Jesus frequently asks counter-questions rather than answering a questions immediately (e.g. Matt 15:3; 21:24; 22:18–19; Mark 10:3; Luke 10:26). (2) He regularly provides indirect answers (e.g. Matt 11:4–6; 21:24–27; 22:18–21). In fact, Jesus' very words in John 18:37, "You say that I am . . .," are paralleled in the Synoptic account of Jesus' Jewish trial before Caiaphas (Matt 26:64; Luke 22:70). (3) The Synoptics repeatedly mention that Jesus remained silent when questioned (Matt 26:63; 27:14; Mark 14:61; 15:5; Luke 23:9; cf. Isa 53:7). (4) Jesus' reluctance to speak about his messianic claims and identity is widely known as a characteristic feature of the Synoptic portrait of Jesus and is often identified by the label "the messianic secret."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> As the Roman historian Suetonius documents, the emperor Tiberius could be a ruthless administrator (*Tiberius* 58).

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. the collection of essays in Christopher Tuckett, ed., *The Messianic Secret* (IRT 1; Philadelphia/London: Fortress/SPCK, 1983).



Finally, Jesus’ speaking to Pilate about his “kingdom” provides a strong link with the Synoptics where Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom is one of the major (if not the most prominent) motifs (e.g. the kingdom parables found in Matthew 13 and 18).

Beyond this, of course, it is important to remember how John’s *own* claim to be providing accurate eyewitness testimony is inextricably related to the Johannine concept of truth itself, where testimony is an indispensable component of that concept (such that the true God is most fully and finally known through the Son who bears testimony to him, 1:18; the Spirit’s role is similar: 15:26). It would therefore be the height of incongruity if a biblical writer who stresses the eyewitness character of his account in keeping with the nature of Jesus’ and the Spirit’s roles (compare 13:23 with 1:18) were to invent or “imagine” stories that he knows never took place for the sake of teaching a theological lesson about Jesus that lacks an actual historical core.<sup>34</sup>

For these reasons the historicity of John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate should be regarded as established with a high degree of probability. Both from the vantage point of Pilate’s known political situation and character, and of Jesus’ well-corroborated pattern of responding to questions and discussing his messianic identity, John’s portrait is thoroughly compatible with that of the Synoptics and coherent within itself and with the rest of the Fourth Gospel.

### III. THE ACCOUNT OF JESUS’ TRIAL BEFORE PILATE IN LIGHT OF MAJOR JOHANNINE THEMES

John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, particularly in John 18:33–38a, forms an integral part of at least three major Johannine themes: the trial motif, Jesus’ kingship, and the theme of truth. Regarding the first motif, Bultmann speaks of “the great trial between God and the world” which provides the larger backdrop for Jesus’ Jewish and Roman trials. While Pilate is Jesus’ judge according to the world’s standards, the reader already knows that, in truth, it is Jesus who is the judge who decides over life and death (5:19–29).<sup>35</sup>

More recently, A. T. Lincoln has argued that the “witness” and “judgment” word groups are part of a “cosmic trial” or “lawsuit motif” in John’s Gospel “in which Jesus as God’s uniquely authorized agent acts as both witness and judge.”<sup>36</sup> According to Lincoln, the lawsuits between God and the nations as

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) chapters 9 and 11; C. A. J. Coody, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). I am grateful to Scott Swain for reminding me of this point.

<sup>35</sup> In Jesus’ coming, political dynamics are transcended by spiritual realities and history witnesses the clash of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. Melba Maggay, “Jesus and Pilate: An Exposition of John 18:28–40,” *Transformation* 8 (1991) 33.

<sup>36</sup> Lincoln, “Reading John: The Fourth Gospel under Modern and Postmodern Interrogation” 128, summarizing his thesis in *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), on which see my review in *TrinJ* 22 (2001) 269–72.

well as God and Israel in the Septuagint of Isaiah 40–55 form the background for the Johannine “lawsuit motif.” In the context of the lawsuit, truth stands for the whole process of judging, culminating in the verdict. At the heart of John’s Gospel is the question of whether or not the crucified Jesus is the Messiah (20:31) and whether or not he rightly claimed to be one with God. “Truth” is in essence an affirmative answer to these questions. The reason why John does not record a Jewish trial is because Jesus’ entire ministry is conceived in terms of a trial (1–12).

The second major Johannine theme found in the present passage is that of Jesus’ kingship. At the very outset of John’s Gospel, Jesus is acknowledged as the “king of Israel” by Nathanael (1:49), though it is possible that Nathanael’s understanding of the entailments of this term carried nationalistic overtones.<sup>37</sup> Misunderstanding is even more evident in people’s effort to make Jesus their king subsequent to the feeding of the multitude in John 6 (see esp. 6:14). While the references to Jesus as the “king of Israel” at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in 12:13 and 15 appear to be more positive, the context there reveals that, once again, people do not truly understand the nature of Jesus’ kingship. In fact, the same crowds who acclaim Jesus at that occasion less than a week later join the Jewish leaders in calling for Jesus’ crucifixion.

In contrast to “king of Israel,” which is essentially a positive reference, the expression “king of the Jews,” as used by Pilate, seems to be somewhat derogatory (18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21 [*bis*]; cf. 19:14, 15: “your king”).<sup>38</sup> This may be one reason why Jesus does not directly affirm being this figure when asked by Pilate, not once, but twice, whether or not he is the “king of the Jews” (18:33, 37). While Jesus is therefore reluctant to identify himself as *king* (cf. 6:14)—though he does enter Jerusalem on his final visit to the city in messianic fashion (12:13, 15)—he speaks openly about his *kingdom* (18:36). Even so, the only thing Jesus says about his kingdom is what it is *not*:<sup>39</sup> it is not of this world.<sup>40</sup> This provides Pilate with the information he needs to assess

<sup>37</sup> See Köstenberger, *John* 83–84.

<sup>38</sup> As Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture* 531, points out, the expression “king of the Jews” is used of Hasmonean kings in Josephus, *Ant.* 14.3.1 §36, and of Herod the Great in *Ant.* 16.10.2 §311. P. J. Tomson, “The Names Israel and Jew in Ancient Judaism and in the New Testament,” *Bijdr* 47 (1986) 120–40, 266–89, followed by Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* 262–65 (with further bibliographic references on p. 263, n. 32), argues that “Israel” is the term used by the Jews for themselves, while “Jews” is the expression used by others. This marks Pilate as an outsider.

<sup>39</sup> Reimund Bieringer, “My Kingship is not of this World’ (John 18,36): The Kingship of Jesus and Politics,” in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (ed. T. Merrigan and J. Haers; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000) 170: “Instead of giving a positive answer, Jesus says what his basileia is not. . . . in 18,36 there is no positive description of Jesus’ kingship.”

<sup>40</sup> Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. and compl. Francis Noel Davey; 2d rev. ed.; London: Faber & Faber, 1947) 2.619. Beasley-Murray, *John* 331, says that Jesus in what follows *does* declare what his kingdom is: “it is *the Kingdom of Truth*.” But Jesus does not exactly say this; he first speaks about his kingdom, and then says he came to witness to the truth. What these two statements have in common is their avoidance of focusing on Jesus’ kingship; but it may be best not to conflate Jesus’ two pronouncements into the expression “kingdom of truth” but rather under-

the merits of the Jewish charges against Jesus as a potential threat to Roman imperial power: Jesus’ denial—as well as presumably his harmless personal demeanor and appearance—is sufficient for Pilate to determine that, whatever *religious* motives the Jewish leaders may have had in incriminating Jesus, on *political* grounds he poses no threat to Rome. Beyond this, Pilate is not interested in the purpose of Jesus’ mission, which in the present passage is circumscribed as witnessing to the truth (18:37).

Truth, in conjunction with witness, is a third major motif found in John’s Gospel.<sup>41</sup> While truth and witness are part of the larger Johannine trial theme, it will be helpful to look at “truth” terminology in the Gospel in its own right as it unfolds in the narrative.<sup>42</sup> The first two relevant references to truth, *alētheia*, are found in the prologue, where the evangelist writes that Jesus is full of grace and truth (1:14) and that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17).

In light of the numerous parallels between 1:14–17 and Exodus 33–34, it is highly likely that the phrase “grace and truth” (*charis kai alētheia*) in John’s prologue harks back to the phrase “steadfast love and faithfulness” (*hesed ve’emeth*) in Exod 34:6.<sup>43</sup> While Moses was unable to see God (Exod 33:20–23), the one-of-a-kind Son of the Father has made him known (John 1:18); and while Moses was the mediator of the law (Exodus 34), the fullness

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understand Jesus’ claim that he came to witness to the truth as an affirmation of the superiority of truth over the notion of kingdom, as a loftier dimension in which his kingdom shares but which is an even broader and more universal concept.

<sup>41</sup> As mentioned, John’s Gospel features 46 uses of the *aleth-* word group compared to a combined total of 10 for the Synoptics; the Johannine epistles contain 27 further instances. What is more, as Rudolf Schnackenburg (*The Gospel According to St. John* [New York: Crossroad, 1990] 2.225) points out, “truth” in the Synoptic texts is largely without theological significance (cf. Matt 22:16 = Mark 12:14 = Luke 20:21; Mark 5:33; 12:32; Luke 4:25; 22:59; the same is true for the Book of Acts: see 4:27; 10:34; 26:25). A fuller exploration of the semantic field of “truth” in John’s Gospel would, apart from instances of the noun *alētheia*, also include an analysis of the related adjectives and adverbs *alēthēs*, *alēthinos*, and *alēthōs*, as well as other terms such as the double *amēn* (on which see the excursus in Swain, “Truth in the Gospel of John” 68–75; Crump, “Truth,” *DJG* 860; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII* [AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966] 499–501). However, for our present purposes it is sufficient to limit the scope of our study to the passages which feature the noun *alētheia*. For a brief history of the study of truth in John’s Gospel in the twentieth century spanning the spectrum from Hellenism to a Jewish background see the Excursus: “The Johannine Concept of Truth,” in Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* 2.225–26, discussing works by Büchsel (Hellenistic syncretism), Bultmann (“divine reality” in line with an existential interpretation of John’s Gospel), Dodd (Hermetic literature), Becker (relationship between John and Qumran), and de la Potterie (Jewish background). Schnackenburg also provides a helpful survey of the Johannine usage and semantic categories as well as of the comparative and historical background (ibid. 2.227–37). See also the survey of recent scholarship on truth in the Gospel of John in Swain, “Truth in the Gospel of John” 4–10.

<sup>42</sup> For a survey of the relevant instances of *alētheia* in John’s Gospel see Morris, *Gospel according to John* 260–62.

<sup>43</sup> There are 27 instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where the terms *hesed* and *’emeth* are juxtaposed, half of which are in the Psalms: Gen 24:27, 49; 32:11; 47:29; Exod 34:6; Josh 2:12, 14; 2 Sam 2:6; 15:20; Ps 25:10; 40:11, 12; 57:4, 11; 61:8; 69:14; 85:11; 86:15; 89:15; 115:1; 117:2; 138:2; Prov 3:3; 14:22; 16:6; 20:28.

of God's grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).<sup>44</sup> The subsequent Gospel proceeds to explicate and substantiate this claim.<sup>45</sup>

Tracing the instances of "truth" in the Gospel sequentially, and referring the reader to my commentary on John for a more detailed treatment of individual passages, we read in 4:23–24 that worship of God must be rendered in spirit and truth (perhaps harking back to the phrase "in sincerity and truth" in Josh 24:14)<sup>46</sup> and that John the Baptist came as a witness to the truth (5:33, a passage that parallels and anticipates Jesus' self-reference in 18:37).<sup>47</sup> The climactic (seven) references to truth in the first half of John's Gospel occur in chapter 8, where Jesus exhorts those who had "believed in him" to continue in his teaching, so that they may know the truth, which will set them free (implying that his teaching is truth; 8:32).<sup>48</sup> In 8:40, Jesus identifies himself as "a man who has spoken to you the truth" (cf. Jer 9:5; Zech 8:16; and esp. 2 Chr 18:15; see also John 8:45, 46), in contrast to the devil, who does not stand in the truth, and in whom there is no truth (8:44; cf. Gen 3:4–5).<sup>49</sup>

The next set of references is found in the farewell discourse. Importantly, truth takes on a trinitarian dimension<sup>50</sup> when, in 14:6, *Jesus* is identified as the way, the truth, and the life (cf. 1:14, 17; see also 1QH 4:40: "for you [O God] are truth");<sup>51</sup> the *Holy Spirit* is called "the Spirit of truth" in 14:17; 15:26; and 16:13 (cf. 1 John 4:6; 5:6; 1QS 3:18–19; 4:23), who will guide believers in all truth (16:13; cf. Ps 25:5); and God's [the *Father's*] Word is described as truth (17:17; cf. Ps 119:160; Jer 10:10; see also 2 Sam 7:28; 1 Kgs 17:24;

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Lindsay, "Truth in John" 131–33, with reference to Adolf Schlatter, *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament* (6th ed.; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1982 = 1927) 552 (see also *ibid.* 145, n. 68). As George Ernest Wright notes, "the 'grace and truth' of Jesus Christ (John 1.14) are not abstract virtues but the active *hesed* and *'emeth*, rooted in the covenant conception" (*God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* [London: SCM, 1954] 114, cited in Morris, *Gospel according to John* 261, n. 126; similarly, Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St. John* 1.272–73; 2.228).

<sup>45</sup> See further the comments on 18:36–38 in this section below.

<sup>46</sup> So Lindsay, "Truth in John" 135–37, with reference to Otto Betz, "To Worship God in Spirit and in Truth": Reflections on John 4,20–26," in *Standing before God. Studies on Prayer in Scriptures and in Tradition. In Honor of John M. Oesterreicher* (trans. Nora Quigley; New York: KTAV, 1981) 58–61, who also cites Qumran parallels. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 174–75, adduces Ps 145:18 as a potential parallel.

<sup>47</sup> The close verbal parallel between the Baptist and Jesus "bearing witness to the truth" in 5:33 and 18:37 (noted e.g. by Brown, *Gospel according to John XIII–XXI*) follows a pattern linking Jesus' mission with that of selected followers such as Peter (12:33; 18:32; 21:19) and the disciple Jesus loved (1:18; 13:23; 21:20). See Köstenberger, *John* 599. Raymond Brown, *Gospel according to John I–XII* 224, cites the parallel wording in 1QS 8:6: "witnesses to the truth."

<sup>48</sup> On the politically charged interchange between Jesus and "the Jews" in John 8, see Lincoln, "Reading John: The Fourth Gospel under Modern and Postmodern Interrogation" 138–43; and Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and 'the Jews'* (Carlisle: Pater-noster, 1997).

<sup>49</sup> See the discussion of John 8:30–47 in Lindsay, "Truth in John" 138–40.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Lincoln, "Reading John: The Fourth Gospel under Modern and Postmodern Interrogation" 147–48, who notes that the "truth witnessed to by the Fourth Gospel involves the triune God," citing esp. 15:26.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Lindsay, "Truth in John" 140–41.

Ps 119:142, 151), in which believers are to be consecrated (17:19; cf. 1QS 4:20–21).<sup>52</sup>

John 17:17–19 is also the major passage other than 18:37 where “truth” and “world” are juxtaposed. The term *kosmos* occurs as many as 8 times in the span of 17:14–19, and *alētheia* is found three times in 17:17–19. This suggests that John envisions Jesus’ appearance before Pilate as a paradigmatic instance of one who was not of the world but who was set apart and sent into the world to speak the truth, which is God’s word. Jesus’ witness to the truth served as a model for his followers to emulate (cf. 17:18; 20:21).

These references to “truth” in John’s Gospel set the stage for Jesus’ interchange with Pilate in 18:37–38, which includes the final three references to truth in John’s Gospel. The instances of *alētheia* in 18:37–38, then, provide some closure to the presentation of truth in the Johannine narrative. Jesus’ mission is summed up as bearing “witness to the truth” (cf. 3:11, 32; 7:7; 8:14);<sup>53</sup> everyone who is of the truth listens to Jesus; and Pilate is dismissive of, or at least indifferent to, the truth. Quite likely, the three references to truth in 18:36–38 constitute an *inclusio* with the three references to grace and truth in 1:14–17.

If so, rather than repeating the allusion to God’s covenant faithfulness struck in the prologue, the present passage indicates progression in that, according to the fourth evangelist, truth now has come before Pilate, the Roman, Gentile, governor, which is in keeping with the universal message of the Gospel. As in Luke-Acts, there is therefore a movement from Jew to Gentile.<sup>54</sup> In the context of the entire Johannine narrative, similar to the ending of Luke-Acts, Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” remains open-ended, and still rings through the ages, calling for an answer from every reader of the Gospel.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Lindsay, “Truth in John” 140–43. Thiselton, “Truth” 892, notes that the Greek phrase in 17:17 is identical with the LXX form of Ps 119:142 as found in Codex Sinaiticus (though not the MT and others LXX mss., which read “your law is truth”). The relevance of the references to truth in the farewell discourse for 18:33–38a is affirmed, among others, by Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 534, who notes that in 17:17–19, as in 18:37–38a, there is a triple use of “truth.” Brodie also alludes to the trinitarian dimension of truth in John’s Gospel when he writes that for John, truth, “in practice,” means “the revelation of the mystery of salvation in Jesus, the Son of the Father” and “the possibility of becoming Spirit-led children of God” (p. 535, citing de la Potterie).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. 1 Tim 6:13, which calls this Jesus’ “good confession” before Pilate.

<sup>54</sup> See John 3–4; 11:49–52; 12:20–50, esp. 12:32, 37–40; cf. Acts 1:8; 13:46–48; 28:17–31; Rom 1:14–16. Note in this context the interesting suggestion made by Kuyper, “Grace and Truth” 14, that the reason why, of the phrase “grace and truth” in 1:14 and 17, the word “truth” continues to be used while the word “grace” is not, is that the evangelist “intends to let the word truth carry the full import of the concept within the expression, grace and truth.” In Pilate’s case, of course, grace was available, but not effective owing to the governor’s unbelief (18:37–38).

<sup>55</sup> In another sense, while John “records no answer in words,” Morris (*Gospel according to John* 682) is surely correct that “the whole of the following narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus is John’s answer in action. On the cross and at the empty tomb we may learn what God’s truth is.” Morris makes the same point on pp. 260–61, where he also refers to Alf Corell, *Consummata Est: Eschatology and Church in the Gospel of St. John* (London: SPCK, 1958) 161.

#### IV. THE MAJOR CHARACTERS IN JESUS' TRIAL BEFORE PILATE

While it may appear that the two major characters in the present passage are Jesus and Pilate, a third group of people looms large in the background: the Jewish leaders. It is they who charged Jesus with sedition, and it is they whom Pilate is trying to appease in the way he deals with Jesus. For this reason, a literary investigation of Pilate's trial before Jesus must properly commence with a study of the Jewish leaders.<sup>56</sup>

1. *The Jewish leaders.* The Jewish leaders' hostility toward Jesus grows steadily in John's Gospel, particularly during the second half of Jesus' public ministry narrated in John 5–12. The entire first half of John's Gospel narrates a total of seven signs, directed specifically toward the Jewish people to convince them that Jesus is in fact the long-expected Messiah.<sup>57</sup> Jesus had turned water into wine at the Cana wedding (2:1–12); had cleared the Jerusalem Temple in a startling display of his messianic authority (2:14–22); had healed the centurion's son long-distance (2:45–54); healed the lame man (5:1–15); fed the multitudes (6:1–15); opened the eyes of the man born blind (ch. 9); and raised Lazarus from the dead (ch. 11). Yet at the end of this long string of striking displays of Jesus' messianic identity, the Jewish leaders were more hardened toward Jesus' claims than ever before and ever more determined to kill the one who claimed to be the Son of God but whom they considered to be a mere messianic pretender, deceiver, and blasphemer.

The evangelist's closing indictment of the Jewish nation as represented by its leaders is therefore severe: "Though he [Jesus] had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him" (12:37). As the evangelist proceeds to note, however, in God's sovereign providence, the Jewish leaders' hardening toward God's salvific purposes in and through Jesus fulfilled Scripture, particularly Isaiah's words in Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10 (John 12:38, 40). What is more, as the evangelist makes clear, by its rejection of Jesus as Messiah, the Jewish nation joined the world at large in its sinful rejection of the truth.

The second major unit of John's Gospel (13–21) is consequently devoted to the Messiah's formation and instruction of a new messianic community made up of those who believed in him. While every single member of the Twelve, Jesus' inner circle, was Jewish, it was not their Jewishness that com-

<sup>56</sup> For a perceptive, albeit brief, study of the characterization of Jesus, Pilate, and the Jews in John 18:28–19:16a, plus a list of ironies in this unit, see Mark W. R. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 186–92. Stibbe notes that while Pilate evokes our sympathy, the Jewish leaders evoke the reader's antipathy. They are guilty of hypocrisy (18:28), choose Barabbas over Jesus (18:40), and, according to Stibbe, misquote a Passover hymn when they shout in 19:15, "We have no king but Caesar!" (p. 189).

<sup>57</sup> See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John's Christology," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 87–103, where I provide an inferred Johannine definition of "sign" and argue against including Jesus' walking on the water in 6:16–21 and for including the temple clearing in 2:14–22 as a Johannine sign.

mended these followers but their faith in Jesus as Messiah. What is already implicit in the evangelist’s closing verdict in chapter 12 plays itself out in the passion narrative in chapters 18–19 where the Jewish leaders intimidate the Roman procurator to accede to their wishes and to give his consent to have Jesus crucified.

In his narration of Jesus’ passion, the fourth evangelist seems to presuppose the Synoptic passion narratives. He does not cover Jesus’ formal Sanhedrin trial before Caiaphas (skipping over it in 18:24 and 28) which is recounted in some detail in the Synoptics. At the same time, he recounts Jesus’ interrogation by Pilate in considerably more detail. Why this shift in perspective? It is hard to be certain, but it is possible that the evangelist believes he has already demonstrated the hardening of the Jewish leaders in the first half of his Gospel, culminating in Caiaphas’s statement in 11:49–50 and in the negative verdict of 12:37, so that he focuses his trial narrative on Pilate’s complicity in the world’s rejection of the Messiah which, as mentioned above, also includes Jesus’ rejection by his own people, the Jews.

In lodging charges against Jesus, the Jewish leaders display a shrewd yet deceptive progression from presenting Jesus to the Roman governor initially as a common criminal (18:30).<sup>58</sup> Only later, when Pilate appears inclined to free Jesus, do they reveal the real reason why they wanted Jesus dead: “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God” (19:7). A second tactic employed by the Jewish leaders is that of manipulation and intimidation. When their lobbying for Jesus’ death seems to fall on deaf ears, they tell Pilate, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar” (19:12). Here they frame in political terms—Jesus’ kingship—what they in fact perceived as a religious claim, Jesus’ divine sonship, fully aware that this rendered Pilate vulnerable to his Roman superiors. In the end, the Jewish leaders prevail and get their wish when Pilate delivers Jesus over to be crucified (19:16)—but not before disavowing their own messianic hopes and professing before Pilate to “have no king but Caesar” (19:15) in a massive betrayal of their own religious heritage (cf. Judg 8:23; 1 Sam 8:7; Isa 26:13 where God is said to be Israel’s only king).<sup>59</sup>

Hence, according to the fourth evangelist, the Jewish leaders are the driving force behind the crucifixion of Jesus. On one level, the Jewish authorities emerge as the temporary victors from the present incident. They get their way, and Jesus is handed over to them by Pilate to be crucified. Yet their victory is pyrrhic on several counts. First, in order to gain Pilate’s concession, they pledge sole allegiance to the Roman emperor (19:15). Thus Pilate’s cooperation is secured at a very high cost. Second, prevailing upon Pilate to condemn Jesus to die implicates the Jews in crucifying not only an innocent man, but the God-sent Messiah. By this they incur great guilt (cf.

<sup>58</sup> The word *houtos* (“this man”) likely has a derogatory connotation.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture* 535, n. 65, who also cites the Jewish national prayer, *Shemoneh Esreh*, benediction 11, which reads in an address to God, “May you be our King, you alone,” and notes that “[a]t the Passover, the Jews would have affirmed the unique sovereignty of God” (*m. Roš Haššanah* 1.2).

Matt 27:25) and unwittingly collaborate with Satan in opposing the purposes of God.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast to Pilate, who, as will be seen, lacks spiritual insight to comprehend the true nature of the Jewish case against Jesus and the spiritual dimension of his kingdom, the Jewish leaders are fully aware of the import of Jesus' claim of being the Messiah.<sup>61</sup> While Pilate thus is part of the Johannine "misunderstanding" theme (witness Pilate's repeated ignorant references to Jesus as "the king of the Jews"), the Jewish leaders are shown to reject Jesus in the full knowledge of his actions (the "signs") and affirmations of oneness with God (e.g. 10:30). By his characterization of the Jewish leaders, not only in the present passage but throughout his Gospel, John places the primary responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion squarely on them.

2. *Pilate.* In his dealings with the Jewish leaders, Pilate displays the customary reluctance of Roman government officials to get involved in what he perceives to be inner-Jewish religious affairs (e.g. Gallio; Acts 18:14–15). However, in the ensuing interrogation, nothing seems to go as Pilate has planned, and things increasingly spin out of control.<sup>62</sup> Pilate's first attempt to extricate himself from the situation has him tell the Jewish leaders, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law" (18:31).<sup>63</sup> Yet because only the Romans had jurisdiction to put a man to death, and because it was death that the Jewish leaders wanted for Jesus, Pilate's first attempt to avoid dealing with Jesus, coupled with the Jewish leaders' resolve to have Jesus crucified, fails.

This is followed by Pilate's first of two private interrogations of Jesus narrated in John's Gospel which culminates in Pilate's question, "What is truth?" (18:33–38).<sup>64</sup> The narrative does not explain why Pilate, having been told that Jesus was an evildoer (18:30), asks Jesus whether or not he is the

<sup>60</sup> At a higher level, of course, God uses the Jewish rejection of the Messiah to fulfill Scripture and to accomplish his salvation-historical purposes, but this is not to excuse the Jewish leaders' actions.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Bieringer, "My Kingship is not of this World" 171: "For a brief moment it seems as if Pilate was going to understand that Jesus claims a βασιλεία different from that of the Jews. But, as the inscription 'King of the Jews' which Pilate has put on the cross (19,19) demonstrates, Pilate ultimately remains closed to the religious dimension of Jesus' person and message."

<sup>62</sup> Among the errors of judgments committed by Pilate (as listed by Stibbe, *John* 188–89) are the following: he calls Jesus "the king of the Jews" (18:39), which further provokes the Jewish leaders; he ends up having to free Barabbas, which is hardly what Pilate had intended in the first place; he calls Jesus "the man" (19:5), which may have unwelcome connotations to the ears of the Jews; and he finally brings Jesus out and says, "Behold your king!" (19:14). Most likely, these errors of judgment reveal Pilate's ignorance and ineptitude rather than constituting intentional provocations of the Jews.

<sup>63</sup> The pronouns "you" (*hymeis*) and "your" (*hymōn*) in 18:31 are emphatic.

<sup>64</sup> The fourth evangelist narrates Jesus' Roman trial in seven units, which display an oscillating pattern of outdoor and indoor scenes (18:29–32, 18:33–38a, 38b–40; 19:1–3, 4–7, 8–11, 12–15). R. Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 142, traces the identification of the seven scenes to R. H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Significance and Environment* (3d ed.; London, SCM, 1941) 310. Stibbe, *John* 187, and Keener, *John* 1.1097, propose a chiasmic structure, with 19:1–3 in the center. Pilate's question, "What is truth?" in 18:38a is part of the second scene of the Johannine account of Jesus' Roman trial.



“king of the Jews” (18:33). The answer is, however, intimated in Jesus’ counter-question in 18:34, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Very likely, the Jewish leaders had implicated Jesus as a political threat to Roman imperial rule in Palestine, and it is this charge that Pilate sets out to investigate.<sup>65</sup>

Pilate’s answer to Jesus reveals both a possible anti-Semitic streak (“Am I a Jew?” 18:35)<sup>66</sup> and a hint of impatience: “Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?” (18:35, *Ti epoiēsas*; echoing *kakon poiōn* in 18:30; see also Matt 27:23: “What evil has he done?”).<sup>67</sup> Beyond this, Pilate may also be offended at what he may consider Jesus’ insinuation that he is merely parroting the charge leveled against him by the Jewish leaders. If so, Pilate here asserts his own independent judgment. He is not a puppet but is conducting his own investigation. Ironically, however, Pilate’s verdict does not reflect his own independent judgment (i.e. that Jesus is innocent) but falls in line with the verdict already reached by the Jewish leaders. Hence Jesus’ insinuation proves correct: this is not a true fact-finding mission but a hasty affair in which truth is not served.

Pilate’s interaction with Jesus also reveals that he does not know much (if anything) about Jesus and his claims and actions as they have been narrated in the first half of the Gospel (cf. Luke 23:5–7). Clearly, his assumption is that Jesus must have done something to draw the intense hatred and opposition of the Jewish leaders, and he expects him to confess what it is he has done to attract such antagonism.

Jesus’ answer, however, does nothing of the sort. Rather than confess his wrong, Jesus corrects the impression Pilate has been given by the Jewish leaders regarding the nature of Jesus’ kingship. Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. Jesus indeed has a kingdom, and he is indeed a king, but his kingdom and kingship are tied up, not with political exploits, but with truth. And it is to this truth that Jesus has come to witness. As Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” makes clear (a rhetorical question that expects no answer),<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> See the discussion of the Synoptic Gospels above.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Charles Homer Giblin, “John’s Narration of the Hearing Before Pilate (John 18,28–19,16a),” *Bib* 67 (1986) 227, n. 18; Bond, *Pontius Pilate* 177. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects* 105, notes that Pilate’s mentor Sejanus “was a dedicated anti-Semite who wanted to exterminate the Jewish race,” citing Philo, *In Flaccum* 1; *Leg.* 159–61.

<sup>67</sup> Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John* (orig. ed. 1882; Thornapple Commentaries; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 319, and Westcott, *Gospel according to St. John* 261, detect impatience in Pilate’s question in 18:38a, “What is truth?”

<sup>68</sup> Commentators are widely agreed that Pilate’s question was not sincere but rather flippant. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 2.242, and Leon Morris, *Gospel according to John* 682, n. 91, quote Francis Bacon, who wrote in his essay *Of Truth*: “What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer,” and suggests that Pilate asked the question “wistfully and wearily.” Similarly, J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) 2.612: “perhaps wistful rather than cynical or careless.” F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 354, speaks of a “curt dismissal” of the question by Pilate; John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John* (trans. T. H. L. Parker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 2.168,

he is not the least interested in this kind of kingdom.<sup>69</sup> Pilate did not even want to take up Jesus' case to begin with; he is even less interested in listening to Jesus' elaboration on the nature of his kingdom or on the more precise substance of the truth to which he came to witness.<sup>70</sup> If Jesus does not present a political threat, he ought to be released. In what follows, Pilate never wavers from his conviction that Jesus ought to be released and caves in only to persistent Jewish demands to have him executed (18:38b–19:16a).

In some sense, then, similar to the Jewish leaders, Pilate seems to come out on top of both of the other protagonists, Jesus and the Jewish leaders.<sup>71</sup> Pilate does not give in to the Jews' demands until they have pledged allegiance to Rome, and Jesus is removed as a potential threat to Roman authority in Palestine. Yet, as Alan Culpepper points out, Pilate's, too, is a hollow victory. In fact, it is no victory at all. All of his actions serve the purpose of avoiding to make a decision regarding Jesus. In the end, this strategy failed; the Jewish leaders forced Pilate's hand, and he *made* his decision—against Jesus. Again, Culpepper is correct in noting that everything that follows—the inscription on the cross, the permission to hasten death by having Jesus' legs broken, and the approval of a proper burial—constitutes attempts by

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characterizes Pilate's attitude as "disdainful" and believes the Roman governor spoke in "mockery," "anger," and "indignation," which he takes as evidence that Pilate was "forced to feel some inward pricking." Robert W. Yarbrough, *John* (Everyman's Bible Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1991) 185, likewise finds Pilate's dismissal of Jesus' question "at least skeptical and perhaps sneering." By contrast, Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* 2.619–20, believes that "Pilate is neither indifferent nor sceptical, but simply incapable of apprehending." Similarly, Colin G. Kruse, *John* (TNTC; Leicester: InterVarsity, 2003) 360, says that "Pilate was reduced to confusion." Plummer, *Gospel According to St. John* 319, speaks of "the half-pitying, half-impatient, question of a practical man of the world, whose experience of life has convinced him that truth is a dream of enthusiasts." Westcott, *Gospel according to St. John* 261, too, detects a hint of impatience in Pilate's question. But see cautions registered by Rudolf Bultmann (*Gospel of John* [trans. George R. Beasley-Murray; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971] 656), who says the "question should not be psychologically interpreted"; echoed by Haenchen, *Gospel of John* 2.180; *idem*, "Historie und Geschichte in den johanneischen Passionsberichten," in *Die Bibel und wir: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1968) 2.196–98.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Bultmann, *Gospel of John* 656. Note that both references to truth in Jesus' statement are articular: "to bear witness to *the truth*" and "everyone who is of *the truth*" (18:37) and that Pilate in his question shifts from articular and definite to anarthrous and unspecific: "What is *truth*?" (cf. J. Carl Laney, *John* [Moody Gospel Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1992] 332: "Pilate did not ask what is *the truth*"; similarly, Plummer, *Gospel According to St. John* 319).

<sup>70</sup> While ostensibly *asking* about truth, Pilate in fact sought to *avoid* it. Heinrich Schlier, "Jesus und Pilatus nach dem Johannesevangelium," in *Die Zeit der Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958) 65.

<sup>71</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin, 1990) 174, even credited Pilate with enriching the NT "with the only expression which possesses value—which is its criticism, its *annihilation* even: 'What is truth?'" (cited in Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 270). For Nietzsche, disregard for truth went hand in hand with disregard for human (especially Jewish) life, as when he attributes to Pilate the thought, "One Jew more or less [i.e. Jesus]—what does it matter?" (*Twilight* 174, cited in Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 271). For Nietzsche, any belief in truth enslaves; only when one jettisons the very notion of truth is one truly free (*The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals* [trans. Francis Golffing; Garden City: Doubleday, 1956] 287, cited in Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 270).

Pilate to atone for condemning a man to die who he sensed was innocent. Culpepper’s conclusion regarding Pilate is worth quoting in full:

Like other characters caught between the Jews and Jesus (principally Nicodemus, the lame man, and the blind man), Pilate is a study in the impossibility of compromise, the inevitability of decision, and the consequences of each alternative. In the end, although he seems to glimpse the truth, a decision in Jesus’ favor proves too costly for him. In this maneuver to force the reader to a decision regarding Jesus, the evangelist exposes the consequences of attempting to avoid a decision. Pilate represents the futility of attempted compromise. The reader who tries to temporize or escape through the gate of indecision will find Pilate as his companion along that path.<sup>72</sup>

The parallelism with Nicodemus is particularly evident.<sup>73</sup> Nicodemus, the Jewish rabbi, does not understand the entrance requirement into the kingdom of God—spiritual regeneration. Pilate, the Roman governor, does not comprehend the nature of Jesus’ kingdom—truth. In both cases, their conversation with Jesus ends on an abrupt note with an exasperated question on their part. “How can these things be?” Nicodemus asks, revealing his lack of understanding of spiritual realities. “What is truth?” is Pilate’s question, displaying his lack of understanding of the true truth that can be comprehended only by those who first embrace the Truth sent from God and are guided by the Spirit of truth.<sup>74</sup>

In the end, therefore, Pilate is a tragic figure who fails to realize the momentous significance of the present encounter. His curt dismissal of the larger question of truth will have eternal personal consequences, and he can ill afford to brush aside the issue as glibly as he does. In fact, through Pilate, the evangelist teaches us something quite profound about the connection between Jesus and truth, namely, that the more one knows who Jesus is (who is the truth), the more one must become apathetic about the issue of truth itself if one is to continue rejecting Jesus.<sup>75</sup> In contrast to Jesus’ great humility (evidenced, among other things, by his mere self-reference as a “witness to the truth”), Pilate displays considerable arrogance

<sup>72</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* 143; cf. R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John’s Gospel: A Commentary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956) 311, who states that “the position now reached . . . is that he will take the side neither of accusers [18<sup>35</sup>] nor of Accused [18<sup>38</sup>], and that he seeks, as before, to avoid the responsibility of a decision.” The parallel to Nicodemus is also adduced by Barrett, *Gospel according to St. John* 538, who writes (citing Haenchen) that, “like Nicodemus (7.50f.), Pilate for all his fair play and open-mindedness is not of the truth; he is of this world.” For an assessment of Nicodemus as a character in John’s Gospel see also Köstenberger, *John* 117–20.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. e.g. Bond, *Pontius Pilate* 178, who notes that Pilate understands neither the nature of Jesus’ kingship nor his reference to truth. Bond also notes that, in a sense, Pilate shows that he is “a Jew” (cf. 18:35) in that he joins the unbelieving world—epitomized by the Jewish leaders—in their rejection of Jesus (ibid. 179).

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Thiselton, “Truth” 893, who points out that “Pilate remains baffled because there are certain questions about truth which can be answered only when a man is fully open to hear the witness of Jesus. This brings us back to the claim of Jn. 14:6, that Jesus Christ not only states the truth; he *is* the truth.”

<sup>75</sup> I am grateful to Scott Swain for helping me draw out this implication.

in the way he deals with the one charged with wrongdoing who stands before him. In this, Pilate serves as a representative character of all those who fail to recognize that they are called to render a verdict regarding Jesus and who deem *themselves* to be in the judgment seat regarding Jesus while in fact it is *they* who will be judged on the basis of their decision concerning Jesus.

In an act that has profound supernatural consequences, Pilate, in Bultmann's words, "shuts the door on the claim of the revelation, and in so doing he shows that he is not of the truth—he is of the lie."<sup>76</sup> But, as Bultmann points out, Pilate is different from the Jewish leaders who are bent on killing Jesus and on perpetrating a lie in keeping with the intentions of their true spiritual father, the devil (8:44). Pilate is not a Jew, so that for him it is not envy (Matt 27:18; Mark 15:10) or religious prejudice that might cause him to condemn a fellow countryman. Rather, he is called upon to judge Jesus as one on the outside, both ethnically and religiously. Can Pilate retain his neutrality?

Because Jesus' kingdom is not merely "an isolated sphere of pure inwardness" nor "a private area for the cultivation of religious needs, which could not come into conflict with the world," but rather a word of judgment challenging the world's sin, he cannot. A *neutral* stance toward Jesus is a decision *against* Jesus, and in the end Pilate "does not have the strength to maintain the standpoint which he had taken," but casts his lot with the Jewish leaders and the world because he cannot take his stand on the side of Jesus.<sup>77</sup>

3. *Jesus.* John's primary goal in his characterization of Jesus throughout the passion narrative, including his Roman trial, is the demonstration of his innocence of all the charges brought against him by the Jewish leaders, including the central charge of blasphemy (19:7). If Jesus is innocent, that is, negatively, he is "not guilty" as charged, it logically follows that, positively, he is who he claimed to be, and who the fourth evangelist believes him to be, namely the Christ, the Son of God (20:30–31). This is how, on a larger scale, Jesus' trial before Pilate fits in with the purpose statement of John's Gospel. While Pilate in the present instance yields to the Jewish leaders, he, as the representative of Roman law, considers Jesus innocent (18:38; 19:4, 6), a fact that retains its significance despite the fact that Jesus ends up at the cross.

Since the passion narrative began in 18:1, Jesus has been betrayed by Judas (18:1–11), denied three times by Peter (18:15–18, 25–27), and interrogated by Annas the high priest (18:12–14, 19–24) and by Caiaphas (18:24, 28). Throughout the proceedings against him, Jesus is shown to maintain a calm demeanor. When those who would arrest him enter the garden, he steps forward and identifies himself as the one they have come to take into

<sup>76</sup> Bultmann, *Gospel of John* 656.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 657. For a critique of Bultmann's interpretation of Pilate as a representative of the state, see Giblin, "John's Narration of the Hearing Before Pilate" 226–27, with further bibliographic references on p. 226, n. 16. Giblin notes that, unlike Matthew and Luke, John never refers to Pilate as governor.

custody (18:4–5). When they hesitate, he identifies himself a second time in order to shield his followers from arrest (18:8–9). When Peter draws his sword and cuts off Malchus’s ear, Jesus rebukes Peter and expresses his resolve to “drink the cup” the “Father has given” him (18:11).

When interrogated by Annas about his disciples and his teaching, Jesus responds that he always taught openly in synagogues and in the temple; his teaching was no secret (18:20–21). At this, one of the officers standing by strikes Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is this how you answer the high priest?” (18:22). Again, Jesus retains his calm demeanor, responding only, “If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?” Jesus has testified to the truth, and the truth is its own best defense. Neither hearing before Annas or Caiaphas leads to any charges being proven against Jesus, and with this Jesus is transferred to Pilate.

Now inside the governor’s palace alone with Pilate, Jesus is asked by the governor whether or not he is “the king of the Jews.”<sup>78</sup> Jesus is fully aware that the epithet “king of the Jews” is capable of more than one definition, especially given the different cultural, political, and religious backgrounds of Jews and Romans. As Darrell Bock points out, “If Pilate is asking from his own Roman interests, ‘Do you have zealot-like designs against Caesar in an alternative political kingship?’ then Jesus’ reply would be negative. If he is asking from a Jewish perspective, ‘Are you the promised Messiah?’ then Jesus would respond positively.”<sup>79</sup>

Hence, Jesus cannot simply answer Pilate’s question; he must first define the sense in which he is and is not a king. Thus, with full composure, Jesus replies with a counter-question: “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” (18:34).<sup>80</sup> Jesus, of course, knows the answer (it was the latter), but he poses the question nonetheless in order to elicit Pilate’s response to the Jewish leaders’ charge before answering the governor’s question himself. Pilate brusquely retorts, “Am *I* a Jew?” making it clear that it was the Jewish leaders who had presented Jesus to Pilate as a messianic pretender and political threat to Rome.

Then Jesus answers Pilate’s question, yet he does so not in terms of his *kingship*, but his *kingdom*.<sup>81</sup> Jesus’ use of the term “kingdom” harks back

<sup>78</sup> This is the first reference to Jesus as “the king of the Jews” in this Gospel (cf. 18:39; 19:3; 19:19, 21 [*bis*]; see also 18:37 [*bis*]; 19:12, 14, 15 [*bis*]). Earlier, Jesus had eluded efforts by the people to make him their king (6:15). Jesus is acknowledged as the “king of Israel” by Nathanael in 1:49 and hailed as such at the triumphal entry (12:13, 15, with reference to the messianic passages Ps 118:25–26 [though “king of Israel” is the evangelist’s exegetical addition] and Zech 9:9).

<sup>79</sup> Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture* 531.

<sup>80</sup> The intense personal nature of the interchange and Jesus’ standing his ground before Pilate is revealed in that both in 18:33, 34 and in 18:37, Jesus reciprocates to an emphatic “you” (*sy*) by Pilate with an emphatic “you” of his own: Pilate: “Are *you* the king of the Jews?” Jesus: “Do *you* say this of your own accord . . . ?” (18:33, 34); Pilate: “So *you* are a king?” Jesus: “*You* say that I am a king” (18:37; note also the personal pronoun in Pilate’s question in 18:35: *egō . . . eimi*).

<sup>81</sup> Bultmann, *Gospel of John* 654; Brown, *Gospel according to John XIII–XXI* 868; cited in Beasley-Murray, *John* 330; Bieringer, “My Kingship is not of this World” 170.

both to Israel's monarchy under David and his successors and to the OT prophetic tradition, most notably Daniel (e.g. chs. 2 and 7).<sup>82</sup> On a literary level in John's Gospel, Jesus' reference to his kingdom marks a critical shift from 3:3, 5: the kingdom of God has now become the kingdom of *Jesus!*<sup>83</sup> Jesus' kingdom is not of this world: that is, it does not have its origin or derive its authorization from the world, but rather transcends the political and material sphere of this world.<sup>84</sup>

When Pilate probes further, "So you are a king?" (18:37; cf. 18:33), Jesus again does not provide a direct answer,<sup>85</sup> responding, "You say that I am a king" (18:37).<sup>86</sup> While not denying that he is a king, Jesus again does not focus on his own kingship but on the larger purpose for which he has come into the world: to bear witness to the truth (18:37).<sup>87</sup> The reader knows that Jesus is much more than a mere *witness* to the truth; he *is* the truth in his very own person. Yet, before Pilate, Jesus is humbly content to speak of his coming as a *witness* to the truth; to establish the reign of the truth and to witness to it, this is the purpose for which Jesus was born and has come into the world (18:37).

<sup>82</sup> See also Amos 9:11–12 (cited by James in Acts 15:16–18). Acts 1:3 records that Jesus spoke to his followers about the kingdom of God at some length prior to his ascension. Yet they still do not understand the time frame and progression involved in the establishment of Jesus' kingdom and hence ask him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). In Acts 3:20–21, Peter speaks about a future time of "refreshing" and restoration.

<sup>83</sup> In the book of Revelation, the loud voices raised in heaven anticipate the consummation of this development: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:15). Bieringer, "My Kingship is not of this World" 171, sees a parallel between the reference to God's kingdom presupposing a birth "from above" in 3:3, 5 and Jesus' kingdom being "not of this world" in 18:36.

<sup>84</sup> As Beasley-Murray, *John* 331, rightly notes, the fact that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world does not imply that it is "not active in this world," nor that it "*has nothing to do with this world*" (italics his). Jesus' kingdom *affects* this world, but it does not *belong* to it (emphasis added; Brown, *Gospel according to John XIII–XXI* 869; Bultmann, *Gospel of John* 657, both cited in Beasley-Murray, *John* 331). Maggay, "Jesus and Pilate" 31, makes the important point that "while, on the one hand, it is wrong to politicize Jesus' Kingship . . . it is also just as inappropriate to spiritualize Jesus' Kingship and see it as entirely future." He refers to Mary's *Magnificat*, which makes clear that "the coming of the King and of his kingdom will mean a concrete historical reversal: the mighty will be overthrown and the humble and lowly lifted up." Hence the power of God becomes visible in the political struggles of our time.

<sup>85</sup> This is in keeping with the Johannine motif of the "elusive Christ" (the term is Stibbe's: see Mark W. G. Stibbe, "The Elusive Christ: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel," *JSNT* 44 [1991] 20–39, alluded to also in Stibbe, *John* 187) and is an instance of what A. D. Nuttall calls "discontinuous dialogue," which is caused by Jesus' "technique of deliberate transcendence," creates suspense, and ironically contributes to his own condemnation (see A. D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St John* [London: Methuen, 1980] 129, cited in Stibbe, *John* 188).

<sup>86</sup> Commentators (e.g. Bernard, *Gospel according to St. John* 611; Meyer, *Gospel of John* 494) regularly note the incredulous if not contemptuous nature of Pilate's question, "So you are a king?" in 18:37, which is underscored by the fact that the personal pronoun "you" (*sy*) is put last in the sentence.

<sup>87</sup> Note the three references to "my kingdom" in 18:36, which forms an inclusion and contrasts with the two references to "God's kingdom" in 3:3, 5.

This truth, in turn, calls for a personal response: “Everyone who is of the truth listens to me” (18:37).<sup>88</sup> Within the framework of the Gospel, this statement echoes Jesus’ words in his “Good Shepherd discourse” in chapter 10 (see vv. 3, 16, and esp. 27; see also 3:3, 21). In the context of the Johannine narrative, this echo may invoke the notion of Jesus as messianic shepherd who describes the nature of his kingship to the Roman governor.<sup>89</sup> While it is *Jesus* who is ostensibly the one being tried here, Jesus’ words put the spotlight, at least momentarily, on Pilate: will he respond to the truth and listen to Jesus? Or will he listen to his accusers?<sup>90</sup> In principle, it would be possible for him to listen to Jesus. But responding to Jesus now would mean a radical break with his past, so radical that it is virtually unthinkable. Pilate’s past enslaves him, and his present is too cluttered with political expediency and compromise to allow the truth to break through.<sup>91</sup> Like the Jewish leaders (10:26), Pilate is not among Jesus’ “sheep.” So, disappointingly but not surprisingly, after no more than perhaps a moment’s hesitation, Pilate dismissively retorts, “What is truth?” and brusquely breaks off the interrogation, returning outside to render his verdict regarding Jesus to the Jewish leaders.<sup>92</sup>

After Jesus has endured a severe flogging and humiliation (19:1–6), and after the Jewish leaders have told Pilate that the *real* reason why they wanted Jesus crucified was that he had “made himself the Son of God” (19:7), Pilate, now afraid (cf. Matt 27:19), summons Jesus one more time, asking him, “Where are you from?” (19:9). But Jesus gives him no answer.<sup>93</sup> The reader of the Gospel, of course, knows the answer—Jesus is the eternal, pre-existent Word of God (1:1)—but this truth would be lost on Pilate.<sup>94</sup> Pilate, incredulous

<sup>88</sup> Though not quite in the way in which Bultmann, “ἀλήθεια, κτλ.” 246, conceives of it. Bultmann is at his existential best when he writes that 18:37 “shows again that ἀλήθεια is the self-revealing divine reality, and that its comprehension is not a free act of existence, but is grounded in the determination of existence by divine reality.” More apropos is the remark by Westcott, *Gospel according to St. John* 261: “Truth, absolute reality, is the realm of Christ. He marks out its boundaries; and every one who has a vital connexion with the Truth recognises His sway.”

<sup>89</sup> See esp. the echoes of Ezekiel 34 and other OT messianic passages in John 10, on which see Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Jesus the Good Shepherd Who Will Also Bring Other Sheep (John 10:16): The Old Testament Background of a Familiar Metaphor,” *BBR* 12 (2002) 67–96. See also the discussion of the nature of Jesus’ kingship in the context of his appearance before Pilate in Bond, *Pontius Pilate* 169–71.

<sup>90</sup> Kruse, *John* 360.

<sup>91</sup> As Ulrich Wilckens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (NTD 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 282, writes, Pilate “wants to remain judge rather than becoming a disciple” (Er will Richter bleiben, nicht Jünger werden).

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Barclay, *John* 2.243, who notes that Pilate had “not the courage to defy the world in spite of his past, and to take his stand with Christ and a future which was glorious.” See also Beasley-Murray, *John* 332, who notes that Jesus’ statement “implicitly conveys an invitation,” placing “Pilate in a situation of decision”: “Jesus the prisoner sets his judge in the dock!”

<sup>93</sup> As Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture* 533, notes, Jesus had already said that he kingdom was not of this world and that he had “come into this world” (18:36–37).

<sup>94</sup> In 16:28, Jesus had told the Eleven, “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” In 12:46, Jesus had said, “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”

that the prisoner would not take the opportunity to lobby the one who had authority to free him for his release, asks Jesus, “You will not speak to me? Don’t you know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” (19:10). But Jesus calmly points out that Pilate’s authority came “from above”—from God—so that the one who delivered Jesus over to Pilate (presumably Caiaphas) was guilty of a greater sin.<sup>95</sup>

Hence throughout the entire proceedings against Jesus, while Judas and Peter are hard-pressed and face inner turmoil, while the Jewish leaders change their story and seek to cajole and intimidate Pilate to render a “guilty” verdict concerning Jesus, and while Pilate is quite literally torn between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, Jesus stays calm, “knowing all that would happen to him” (18:4), resolved to “drink the cup that the Father has given” him (18:11). In fact, the Jewish leaders’ seeking his death by crucifixion is shown “to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (18:32). In all of his suffering and humiliation, Jesus respects the authority of Pilate and the Jewish leaders and entrusts himself to God the Father.

As we assess the outcome and implications of Jesus’ trial before Pilate for Jesus, it is important to realize at the very outset that, in many ways, the present encounter is merely a culmination of preceding developments and dynamics. When Pilate interrogated Jesus, he had behind him a life replete with political ruthlessness and compromise. His is a hardened conscience and a willful rejection of truth. The Jewish leaders, too, have shown in their response to Jesus’ signs and teaching that they will not listen to God’s Messiah. The road that Jesus walked prior to his appearance before Pilate, by contrast, was one of love, ministry to others, and uncompromising obedience to the One who sent him. In many ways, these three characters merely act out their part in a way that is consistent with their character and conduct up to that point.

How does Jesus fare in comparison to the Jewish leaders and Pilate? As mentioned above, both the Jewish leaders and Pilate temporarily emerge from the proceedings against Jesus in some sense victorious and yet fatally wounded. While the Jews’ victory over Pilate and Jesus comes at the high cost of betraying their religious hope, and while Pilate agrees to condemn a man to die who he senses is innocent, Jesus, by contrast, the one who appears to be the major loser and victim of the Jewish leaders’ and Pilate’s “unprincipled alliance,”<sup>96</sup> has in fact not yielded anything, has ultimately lost nothing, and gained everything.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. the Jewish leaders’ self-reference as having “handed over” (*paredökamen*) Jesus to Pilate in 18:30 and Pilate’s reference to Jesus’ “own nation and the chief priests” having “handed” him over (*paredökan*) to him in 18:35. See also Jesus’ comment that if his kingdom were of this world, his servant would fight to prevent his arrest by the Jewish leaders (18:36; so rightly the NIV; TNIV; and the NLT, though almost all other translations incorrectly render the phrase *paradothō tois Ioudaiois* “handed over to the Jews”; e.g. KJV; NKJV; NASB; NRSV; ESV; HCSB).

<sup>96</sup> The term is Ridderbos’s: Ridderbos, *Gospel of John* 587.



First of all, Jesus *stayed true to his mission of testifying to the truth*. He respected those whom God had put in authority over him and entrusted himself in faith to God the Father.

Second, Jesus *fulfilled both the revelatory and the redemptive mission* he had set out to accomplish (1:18; 4:34; 17:4; 19:31). On the cross, Jesus revealed the love of God for humankind (3:16) and as God’s “lamb” made atonement for sin (1:29, 36). Hence, according to Johannine theology, the cross, far from being a place of shame, became for Jesus a place of glory, the place where his perfect submission and obedience to the will of the Father were manifested, which included the provision of redemption for humankind.

Third, as John 20 and 21 make clear, Jesus *rose from the dead* on the third day, which marks the overruling of the Jewish plot to kill Jesus and Pilate’s decision to condemn Jesus to die. Hence, in typical Johannine fashion, Jesus in the farewell discourse does not dwell on the imminent crucifixion but euphemistically subsumes it under his “return to the Father.” The way the fourth evangelist tells it, “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (13:1). The cross merely marks Jesus’ departure out of this world to the Father. Or as Jesus says in 14:12, believers will perform even greater works than he did subsequent to his departure, “because I am going to the Father.” Listening to Jesus, it is as simple as that: “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father” (16:28)—barely a mention of the cross as a station on the way back to Jesus’ place of glory with the Father (cf. 17:5, 24).

Though apparently the loser in the Jewish and Roman trials against him, Jesus thus emerges as the ultimate victor in the Gospel, eliciting from Pilate the acknowledgment that he was either indifferent to the truth or incapable of determining what it was (18:37–38a), plotting his strategy to spread his message of salvation (13–17), commissioning his followers as the Father had sent him (20:21), and calling Peter and the other disciples to follow him until he returns (21:19, 22). Pilate, on the other hand, as is known from subsequent history, continues to clash with his Jewish subjects and is recalled to Rome three short years after pronouncing the death sentence on Jesus.<sup>97</sup>

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Which results did our study of Jesus’ trial before Pilate yield? First, we have seen that a strong case can be made for the historicity of John’s account, both on the basis of the known history of Pilate’s tenure in Palestine and of the pattern of Jesus’ dealing with questions and representing his messianic calling to others. Second, we have seen that Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” engages several major Johannine themes, including the

<sup>97</sup> See the historical survey above.

trial motif, the theme of Jesus' kingship, and the notion of truth. With regard to truth, we have noted the strong Christological orientation of truth in John's Gospel in line with the evangelist's purpose of proving that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God. Third, the Jewish leaders, together with Jesus, were found to be the major characters in the present narrative, while Pilate turned out to be a comparatively minor figure.

I close with six observations from Jesus' trial before Pilate and a brief conclusion.

First, commentators regularly note the irony of Pilate's question, "What is truth?" in light of the fact that Truth incarnate, "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6), is standing right in front of him.<sup>98</sup> While not wanting to deny this, I believe there is an even *more striking irony* at work here. As Miroslav Volf aptly notes,

Trials are supposed to be about finding out what happened and meting out justice. In Jesus' trial, neither the accusers nor the judge cared for the truth. . . . The judge scorns the very notion of truth: "What is truth?" he asks, and uninterested in any answer, he leaves the scene of dialogue . . . For both the accusers and the judge, the truth is irrelevant because it works at cross-purposes to their hold on power. The only truth they will recognize is "the truth of power." It was the accused who raised the issue of truth by subtly reminding the judge of his highest obligation—find out the truth.<sup>99</sup>

In the context of the trial narrative, Pilate, as the one called to judge concerning the truth regarding Jesus, here dismisses the entire question of truth. If the judge cares nothing about the truth, what does that say about the value of Jesus' trial and the verdict reached regarding Jesus? The message is obvious: the question of truth was dismissed as glibly as Pilate's question dismissed Jesus' claim that he came to witness to the truth.

The second observation pertains to the *parallelism* maintained by the fourth evangelist regarding *Caiaphas and Pilate*, the Jewish high priest and the Roman governor. Both speak better than they know, Caiaphas without realizing it arguing for the necessity of Jesus' provision of substitutionary atonement (11:49–50; 18:14), Pilate unwittingly acknowledging Jesus as the truth (18:37). Both also share in their complicity in Jesus' death, Caiaphas as the one who handed Jesus over to Pilate (19:11), and Pilate in handing Jesus over to the Jews to have him crucified (19:16). In this momentous hour of salvation history, the evangelist therefore shows how these two characters are unequally yoked in the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and "king of the Jews." Caiaphas's action on behalf of the Jewish nation and Pilate's action, representing the non-Jewish world, include Jew as well as non-Jew in the sin of crucifying the Truth. Whether by actively pursuing Jesus' death

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Keener, *John* 2.1114, citing Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 130; Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 292.

<sup>99</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* 266. Volf's entire discussion of Jesus' trial before Pilate (entitled "Jesus Before Pilate: Truth Against Power") on pp. 264–71 repays careful reading.

(the Jewish leaders) or by passively acquiescing to pressure (Pilate), the religious and political authorities in charge at the time of Jesus’ trial conspired together against the Lord’s anointed, as Psalm 2 envisages (Ps 2:1–2; cf. Acts 4:25–26), as evidence of the pervasive sinfulness engulfing a world that lies in darkness apart from the Light that has come in Jesus.

Third, Christologically and salvation-historically, truth is inextricably linked to the *cross*. In Jesus, the truth is crucified.<sup>100</sup> This does not mean the death of truth, for truth cannot be permanently kept down. Yet truth is intensely personal. It is *Jesus* who represents the truth in his very own person, and it is *he* who calls people to respond to him in faith. People’s rejection of the truth, likewise, manifests itself in their rejection, not of a set of abstract propositions, but of *Jesus*. To employ the kind of reasoning John repeatedly uses in his first epistle, if anyone claims to love the truth and yet rejects Jesus, who *is* the Truth, how can that person legitimately claim to love the truth? In a world that often refers to God but rarely mentions Jesus, the fact that it is specifically in *Jesus*, rather than generically in *God*, that Truth is found is profoundly significant and intensely relevant. Not only this, but in this world, the truth, like Jesus, will always be called to suffer. The cross therefore ought to serve as a perennial reminder that, in this world, the only truth is a crucified truth. In this world, Jesus could not *be* the truth without ending up being called to die *for* the truth and *as* the truth. It will be the same for his followers.

Fourth, if the above analysis is on target, the two *major characters* or groups in the Johannine trial narrative are the *Jewish leaders and Jesus*, while *Pilate* turns out to be a *comparatively minor character*. As a character, Pilate only surfaces in John 18 and 19, and even there, he is continually shown to be torn in the clashing claims between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. By contrast, in the context of the Johannine narrative, both Jesus and the Jewish leaders pervade the story from beginning to end. The first clash between Jesus and the Jewish authorities occurs at the temple clearing in chapter 2 (2:14–22). It reaches its first major climax in chapter 5 (esp. 5:18) and continues to escalate especially in chapters 8 and 10. Hence, even in chapters 18 and 19, while Pilate is temporarily in the foreground of the narrative, it is the Jewish leaders who have handed Jesus over to Pilate (18:30, 35, 36) and who receive him back from Pilate to have him crucified (19:16).

The implication is that the Jews cannot blame Pilate for putting Jesus on the cross. The truth, certainly according to John’s Gospel, is that they not only asked Pilate to render a “guilty” verdict regarding Jesus, but they exerted extensive pressure on Pilate to coerce him into compliance. This is not the place to defend John and his Gospel against the charge of anti-Semitism, nor does John *need* to be defended in this regard, since such charges are quite evidently anachronistic impositions of modern concerns

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Lincoln, “Reading John: The Fourth Gospel under Modern and Postmodern Interrogation” 145, who speaks of “crucifying the truth.”

onto the Gospel.<sup>101</sup> In the end, Jew and non-Jew alike stand guilty before God in their complicity of rejecting the Messiah and the Truth, and every person stands in need of responding to Jesus' vicarious death for humankind in personal faith.<sup>102</sup>

Fifth, what exactly was the tenor of Pilate's question, "What is truth?" and why did he ask it? It seems that the major function of the question was that of *cutting off Jesus' testimony*, similar to the crowd's reaction to Paul's reference to Jesus' resurrection in Acts 17:31. "No more—that's enough!" would be a free, but, I believe, accurate reading of Pilate's intent. If Pilate had meant his question, it would inquire, in good Roman legal fashion, as to the actual facts of the case, in keeping with his role as a judge in the matter. But Pilate did not intend to prolong the interrogation nor did he display any real desire to get to the bottom of the issue (contrast 7:17). No more talk of "truth" and other philosophical gibberish. It was time to get on to more important business.

Sixth and finally, Jesus' Roman trial speaks to the *relationship between power and truth*. If I may be allowed this anachronism, the view of a lone, helpless prisoner before the representative of imperial Roman power is not unlike the much more recent image, broadcast all around the world, of the Chinese student defying a tank at the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Truth is pitted against power, and "the truth of power" is pitted against "the power of truth."<sup>103</sup> Jesus' example shows that the power of truth does not depend on worldly power—though ultimately, in Jesus truth and power converge, Rev 11:15—and in his willingness to die for the truth and for others and in his refusal to resort to violence, he models "the power of self-giving love."<sup>104</sup> Contrary to the claims of postmodernism, it is not true that the only truth there is is power.<sup>105</sup> In this Jesus gives hope to all those who stand for truth and because of this are oppressed by those in power.

<sup>101</sup> I am aware that calling Pilate a "comparatively minor" character in the Johannine trial narrative is potentially explosive and open to misrepresentation, but in the spirit of Luther, as an interpreter of the Johannine narrative, "Here I stand, I can do no other." On the alleged anti-Semitism of John's Gospel, see Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, eds., *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) and the fuller volume with the same title published by Royal Van Gorcum in 2001. But see my review of this work in *Themelios* 28/2 (2003) 71–73.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Rodney A. Whitacre, *John* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999) 443: "So now both Jew and Gentile have been given a chance to respond to the one come from God."

<sup>103</sup> The phrase is Volff's (*Exclusion and Embrace* 266), to whose suggestive treatment on pp. 264–71 this paragraph is partially indebted. See the previous references to Volff's work above.

<sup>104</sup> The phrase is Lincoln's ("Reading John: The Fourth Gospel under Modern and Postmodern Interrogation" 145), to whose treatment on pp. 143–46 this paragraph is partially indebted.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Lincoln, "Reading John: The Fourth Gospel under Modern and Postmodern Interrogation" 143, who sums up postmodernism's own "grand narrative" as holding that "power produces what passes for truth and this truth then becomes the means by which the powerful wield more power." As Lincoln rightly points out, there is "a cost to leaving open the question of truth," because "[t]he person who treats the question about truth with contempt has no compelling reason not to treat human life with contempt." Lincoln aptly notes that "[w]e need to be alert not only to the dangers but also to the potential for human wellbeing bound up with claims to truth, including that of the Fourth Gospel, which sees truth embodied in Jesus" (*ibid.* 144).

VI. CONCLUSION

In the late 1970s, Václav Havel, writer, dissident, and more recently president of the Czech Republic, wrote an essay entitled, “An Attempt to Live in Truth: Of the Power of the Powerless.”<sup>106</sup> This essay, which earned Havel an extended period in prison, is devoted to a critique of the totalitarianism that sent Soviet troops marching and tanks rolling down Wenceslas Square in Czechoslovakia’s capital to crush the reform movement known as “Prague Spring.” Havel recounts the story of a greengrocer who displays, together with his onions and carrots, a sign in his window, saying, “Workers of the world, unite!” Why, Havel asks, does the greengrocer display this sign? His answer: any political system that compels such an act of inauthenticity marks the rule of a lie. In fact, people’s every action is a lie: voting in elections that are meaningless; listening to speeches that are inconsequential; saying the opposite of what they really think; posting an ideological slogan because they feel obliged to do so and because they do not want to get into trouble. This is what living a lie is all about.

But what would happen, Havel goes on to ask, if this greengrocer were to try and start living in the truth? If he were no longer to go to elections whose result was already predetermined? If he were no longer to participate in events which did nothing other than perpetrate stale ideologies? If he were to speak his mind rather than timidly parrot the beliefs of those in power? If he were no longer to cave in to the pressure to conform to the expectations of others? What would happen if he were to remove the slogan from his store window?

Havel knows first-hand what would happen. The recriminations Havel and his fellow dissidents experienced are a certainty for everyone who speaks up for the truth in the midst of a system of lies. But hear what Havel says about suffering for what a person knows to be true. There is no greater power than standing up for the truth, than simply speaking the truth, describing what one has seen, doing only what one believes he should do, living in keeping with one’s faith, hope, and love. Living in the truth has tremendous personal and political consequences, which, once unleashed, have the potential of causing the collapse of an entire system of lies. In Havel’s case, his words proved prophetic. The iron curtain fell, and the man who served repeatedly in prison for speaking up for the truth was appointed president of his country.

The same power of truth is evident in the lives of Jesus and his followers. Pilate’s house of cards collapsed only three short years subsequent to Jesus’

<sup>106</sup> I am indebted for the following story to Söding, “Die Macht der Wahrheit und das Reich der Freiheit” 57–58. See Václav Havel, “The power of the powerless” (trans. P. Wilson), in *Living in Truth: Twenty-two essays published on the occasion of the award of the Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel* (ed. Jan Vladislav; London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989 [1986]) 36–122 [dated October 1978]. The original title of Havel’s essay is *Versuch, in der Wahrheit zu leben: Von der Macht der Ohnmächtigen* (trans. Gabriel Laub; Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1980). See also Václav Havel, “Ein Wort über das Wort. Rede aus Anlass der Verleihung des Friedenspreises des deutschen Buchhandels am 15. 10. 1989,” in *Am Anfang war das Wort* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1989) 207–24.

crucifixion, and, despite the Jewish leaders' efforts to keep the peace with Rome, their "place" was nonetheless destroyed in AD 70 and their "nation" laid waste (cf. 11:48). The rule of truth established by Jesus, on the other hand, took root, and, as the Book of Acts attests, the message of the resurrection spread like wildfire. The story of the early church gives powerful testimony to the fact that the truth cannot be permanently kept down.

Truth has a power of its own, a power that in the long run proves stronger than the usurped authority of institutional power. Jesus *embodies* this hope, the hope of the ultimate triumph of truth in the reign of his kingdom. It is *this* hope to which he bore witness in his "good confession" before Pontius Pilate. May you and I bear witness to this truth, the gospel, which is found *only* in Jesus, and may *we*, by our words and our lives, give a clear, distinct, and irrefutable answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?"