

The Trial of Jesus

Luke 22:66-23:25

The prosecution of Jesus breaks into four phases, each distinguished by the identity of those sitting in judgment on him: the Jewish court or ‘Sanhedrin’ (22:66-71), the Roman court over Judea (23:1-5), the Roman court over Galilee (23:6-12), the Roman court over Judea (23:13-25). The emphasis throughout is two-fold: persecution by Jewish leaders, and vindication by Roman officials. Regarding application, even this early in the process, it is evident that the entire section is much more about Jesus than it is about us ... but if he can die for us, then it should be no burden to read a story that is predominately about him!

Day 1: Deuteronomy 13 Why the Jewish leadership wants Jesus dead

In Deuteronomy, Moses lays down guidelines so that the Jewish people worship God as the Ten Commandments require. In chapter 12, this entails worshipping only in the place – both the location and the venue – which God authorizes, and requires that they remove the pagan altars and shrines on the various hills and under large trees. In chapter 13, this entails worshipping only God. They are to kill anyone who advocates the worship of other gods, whether prophet or miracle-worker (13:1-5), an immediate family member (13:6-11), or the residents (both human and animal) or an entire town (13:12-18).

Jesus’ teaching diverges significantly from the mainstream orthodoxy of his day. Consider, for example, his welcome of repentant sinners and his rejection of some contemporary temple practices. Either Jesus is a heretic, or the religious leaders must repent. Unsurprising, they opt for the former, and the directives of Deuteronomy 13 kick into place: Jesus must die for leading people away from proper worship of the true God.

Day 2: Luke 22: 66-71 The Jewish religious trial

The paragraph is highly compressed: a great deal occurs in small space through the use of coded language and Old Testament allusions (which again underscores our disadvantage, given our relative ignorance of the OT).

The Jewish leadership twice inquires of Jesus: “Are you the Messiah?” “Are you the Son of God?” From Luke 1:32-35, we know that these two titles are equivalent: the angel announces to Mary that her child will reign forever on the throne of David (i.e., Messiah), and will be called ‘the son of God.’ The language derives from the Psalm 2:6-7: “I have installed my king on Zion ... ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’” The idea in ancient Israel, as in imperial China, is that the king holds divine authority, and serves as the representative of God, much as a human son to a Father; thus, ‘son of God’.

Jesus offers two answers. First, he alludes to Jeremiah 38:15: when King Zedekiah seeks military advice about the approaching Babylonian army, the prophet replies: "If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me." With this allusion, Jesus characterizes his inquisitors in terms of the vindictive King Zedekiah, and himself as the righteous but threatened Jeremiah. Second, he invokes his favored, less political self-designation 'Son of Man' (from Daniel 7:13-14), and links it with Psalm 110:1, "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" When they press him a second time, he caustically turns it back on them, transforming their question into an ironic confession of (dis-)belief: "You say that I am." In response, as he had just predicted through the words of Jeremiah, they seek to kill him.

Given Jesus' previous hostility toward them and their interpretation of proper Jewish faith, the Jewish leadership has two choices. Either they can face the possibility that Jesus stands in the long tradition of prophets – including Jeremiah – in which case they need to repent. Or they can dismiss him as a heretic. Once he claims to be God's representative, they opt for the latter. In dishonoring Jesus, they think themselves to be honoring God. Ironically, in plotting his death, they accomplish God's purposes and fulfill Jesus' calling.

Day 3: Luke 23:1-5 The first Roman (Judean) political trial

Lacking the authority to perform executions, the Jewish leadership necessarily brings Jesus to Pilate, the Roman-appointed governor of Judea. Three times they make the same charge against him: "This man perverts our nation!" "This man forbids us to pay taxes to the emperor, and says that he himself is the Messiah, a king." "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judas [and] Galilee."

These charges are capital offenses. For the most part, Roman emperors left local populaces to their own governance, provided they were peaceable and supportive. The first and third charges – 'perverting the nation' and 'stirring up people' entail creating civil disturbance, violating the Roman insistence that subjected peoples remain peaceable. The second charge – refusing to pay taxes and claiming to be king – instigate rebellion, violating the Roman insistence that subjected peoples be supportive. While their actual concerns about Jesus are religious, Jewish leadership entice Pilate to act by putting the charges in political language designed to alarm him.

Pilate will have none of it. "'Are you the king of the Jews?'" he asks (likely incredulous). This provincial peasant and itinerant rabbi cuts no impressive figure, and obviously poses little threat to the might and army of the Roman empire. "There is no substance in these charges," is his verdict.

Day 4: Luke 23:6-12 The second Roman (Galilean) political trial

Pilate is the Roman official over Judea and Samaria; Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great, ruler at Jesus' birth), over Galilee. So when Pilate hears of Jesus' Galilean roots, he passes the buck, and the prisoner. This turn-of-events poses great risk to Jesus. Herod has already killed John Baptist (Luke 9:9). Moreover, Jesus previously went public with his sentiments toward this corrupt malevolent: when Pharisees try to scare him off with the report that Herod aims to kill him, Jesus replies: "Go tell that fox, "I will drive out demons and heal people... surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:31-33). In so saying, he alerts the attentive reader to what is coming: the real crisis arrives only when Jesus and Herod are both in Jerusalem. That is, now.

Luke draws attention to two features of the examination before Herod. First, Jesus' fame has already preceded him. Herod has heard of Jesus' extraordinary abilities, and has been looking forward to seeing him play his parlor tricks. Secondly, Jesus remains silent in the face of both interrogation and ridicule.

If Luke is going to mention only two items from this trial, why the latter? This is part of his strategy for reinterpreting the death of Jesus. Does Jesus' capture, mocking, and crucifixion belie his claim to be Messiah? No, says Luke, instead, his silence in the face of accusation confirms his identity as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah:

⁵ He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:3-7).

Vehement protestation of innocence was what Herod and his accusers expect; silence is what God prescribe for his Servant and Son, Messiah (cf. Acts 8:32-33).

Day 5: Luke 23:13-17 The verdict

This second time that he presides, Pilate reviews the entire legal process: the accusation of sedition brought by Jewish leadership, the two examinations, and a three-fold statement of verdict: 'Innocent.' To satisfy the accusers, and to motivate Jesus in future to fly beneath the radar, he prescribes a sound beating. But as far as he is concerned, that is the end of it.

Luke has a couple of objectives in underscoring this point, and both relate to the second half of this work, the book of Acts. As the message of Jesus spreads, it stirs near constant opposition from Jewish religious authorities, often leading

to riots. This poses two problems. First, how can Jesus be the Messiah, given that Jewish leadership in Jerusalem called for his execution, and Jewish leadership in the provinces continues to oppose the preaching of the gospel? Secondly, given that it was the Roman civil – not the Jewish religious – leadership which executed Jesus, does this not establish that wherever conflict continues to exist over the preaching of the gospel, the Christians are the ones at fault? So Luke takes pains to point out that the Roman government actually vindicated Jesus; it was political expediency in the face of a Jewish mob which led to his crucifixion. Neither Jesus nor his followers are the trouble-makers.

Day 6: Luke 23:18-25 The sentence

The verdict is 'innocent'; the sentence is 'death'. Say what?!

The verdict is 'innocent'; the prisoner is released. Or, the verdict is 'guilty'; the prisoner is sentenced to death. Either of these options makes sense. But not: the verdict is 'innocent'; the sentence is 'death'.

Further underscoring this travesty of a trial, Barabbas is released in place of Jesus! This drips with bitter irony: Jesus is tried on the charge of insurrection, and found innocent, but sentenced to death. At the same time, Barabbas, a convicted insurrectionist, awaiting execution for killing Roman officials, is set free. Luke twice draws the readers' attention to the irony and injustice, once at the beginning, and again at the end of the paragraph (23:18-19,25).

With the 20/20 vision of hindsight, we have come to understand that Jesus' death was substitutionary, for our sin, and, therefore, his crucifixion is a virtue to celebrate, not a problem to explain. But it was a pressing question for seekers in Luke's day, and is a legitimate question for seekers today. Even if it does not matter to us, it very much matters that Jesus was neither heretic nor guerilla, and was unjustly convicted of the former in Jewish court, but vindicated of the latter in Roman court. Otherwise, he would be a heretic or a criminal (depending on which government you asked), not a savior or lord. Luke's point is that the conviction of Jesus is a travesty of justice, and a callous political expedient: it was not proof of his guilt in his own day, let alone in ours.

As I noted at the beginning of the week, this entire section is much more about Jesus, than it is about us. But there is at least one take-away from the story that applies to us in any opposition we face. Luke brings out this lesson in Acts 4: "Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." Even in this brutal miscarriage of justice, God was still in control, and his will was accomplished. His will for our salvation.