

The Gospel of John
Session Eleven – The Passion Narrative – Part 2
(John 18:13 – 19:42)



The Denial of Saint Peter by Rembrandt, 1660 – Wikimedia

Peter and the Other Disciple
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Spotlight on the Crucifixion

Peter and the Other Disciple

The scene now shifts to outside the hearing room, where Peter and unnamed “other disciple” are following Jesus (v. 15). The other disciple is not named, just as the Beloved disciple remains anonymous. This disciple now accompanies Peter, even as the Beloved Disciple usually appears in the company of Peter (except at the foot of the cross, for by then Peter, along with the rest of the disciples, has fled). No other Gospel mentions this figure, just as no other Gospel mentions the Beloved Disciple. Since he is someone in whom the evangelist has a theological interest, it is surprising, if this episode is his composition, that John does not simply call him the Beloved Disciple. His further anonymity suggests that he belongs to tradition, if not to history. The question of his identity with the Beloved Disciple is related to the problem of the historicity of the latter, who is said to be responsible for the Gospel itself. If the disciple whom Jesus loved was a historical figure, as many exegetes now conclude, and was designated as such only by the evangelist, it would not be surprising that he should appear without the evangelist’s sobriquet in a narrative received from tradition.

The possibility that this disciple was known to the high priest seems to mitigate against his identification with John the son of Zebedee, the Galilean fisherman. Yet fishermen were entrepreneurs, not common laborers at the bottom of the social spectrum. Thus the conjecture that John knew the high priest because he sold him fish is not as preposterous as it has appeared to many modern exegetes. On the other hand, the natural inference from the bare statement that the disciple was known to the high priest is that he was a Jerusalemite. So also the Beloved Disciple appears only in Jerusalem during Jesus' ministry. This coincidence encourages their identification, although it does not support the identification with John the son of Zebedee. The latter is not impossible, although less likely.

Obviously, this disciple has connections that Peter lacks, and thus is able to help him. In John it is the door maid who grants Peter entrance at the behest of the other disciple who asks him about his relation to Jesus. In the Synoptics it is also a maid who accuses Peter of being with Jesus. In John, Peter brusquely denies the maid's question. This denial scene concludes with Peter standing by the fire, warming himself, with members of the arresting party.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

Trial without the Sanhedrin

John's placement of a hearing before Jewish authorities in the midst of the account of Peter's denial of Jesus (found also in Mark, and Matthew) is either given him by tradition or by the Synoptics, probably Mark. As we have seen, there are problems to be explained if John is regarded as dependent on Mark (or Matthew). Rather, John seems to have relied on, or have been heavily influenced by, an alternative account. It seems to have left a deep impression on the Gospel tradition that Peter actually denied Jesus, particularly if John is here independent of Mark. Like Judas's betrayal, Peter's denial creates a potential embarrassment for the early church. Is it more readily explained as a literary invention for the sake of theology or as an unfortunate even that the tradition has not suppressed? The latter is more likely.

As we have noted, John's account lacks at this point a strong, formal, condemnation of Jesus in a trial before the Sanhedrin. Officially, condemnation of Jesus by "the Jews" has already occurred more than once and will continue into the trial before Pilate. Indeed, it is a major theme of the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, at this point John's account is remarkably spare, as the Gospel omits the kind of trial and condemnation one might have anticipated.

Therefore, distinctly Johannine theological themes do not come to strong expression in this pericope. This state of affairs stands in some contrast to the Gospel of Mark, where the trial before the Sanhedrin serves as a climax of the narrative. Jesus, under questioning, admits that he believes himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God,

and therefore condemned to death by the authorities. In John, of course, the reader has known Jesus was the Messiah from the beginning, in Mark, since Peter's confession. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mark's narratives of the confession of Peter and the Sanhedrin trial both have counterparts of diminished significance in John (6:66 – 69; 18:19 – 24), which do not have the same pivotal function in the narrative. At the same time the Johannine version of these episodes cannot easily be explained as derivative from Mark.

Although such episodes as the denial and trial may be given by tradition and history, the typical Johannine irony shines through them. While Jesus is being arraigned before the representative of Jewish authority, his chief disciple is outside busily denying him. Jesus was handed over by one of his disciples, denied by another, and abandoned by all. Yet precisely through these events and their dismal culmination in a horrific death Jesus saves his disciples; indeed, he protects them from such a fate.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

Pilate: The Conflict Between Survival and Truth

"Where are you from?" Pilate asks. Jesus is silent, giving no answer.

"You do not speak to me?" Pilate prods. You do not recognize my power, my authority? "Do you not know," he challenges, "that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?" It is a typical claim of the world. The power to decide who lives and who dies is the ultimate power of the state. It is, however, not in touch with the meaning that Jesus has come to reveal. So Jesus responds: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin."

This is an interesting shift. In the mind of the author of the Fourth Gospel, the ultimate blame for the death of Jesus is to be placed on the religious authorities of his nation. Pilate is simply their tool. The world has been enlisted on the side of religion. The state is now the instrument of divine punishment.

To put this placing of blame in context, we need to know that it was widely believed among the followers of Jesus at this time that the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE was direct punishment for the Jewish refusal to receive Jesus. At the actual moment of the writing of this gospel, the Jewish nation was itself broken, destroyed and powerless, but the Christians were also oppressed by the world. There was hope for the world, but no hope remained in John's mind for the religious authorities of Judaism. The message of the Christ must transcend both religion and

the power of the state, so those two entities are now aligned in degrees of guilt as the drama rolls on.

Pilate once more seeks to release Jesus. This time, however, the religious authorities play on Pilate's own survival fears. "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; everyone who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar." It is the ultimate power play. The religious authorities claim the Roman government as their ally in the struggle against Jesus, and Pilate now has to decide on which of these two sides he stands. The stakes are now rooted in the instinctual human drive to survive.

John writes, "When Pilate heard these words he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgement seat at a place called the pavement." It was, says the Fourth Gospel, "the day of the preparation for the Passover" – that is, the day on which the paschal lamb is slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts of Jewish homes to break or to hurl back the power of death. Jesus is to be the new paschal lamb who will hurl away death, the ultimate limit on our humanity, thus breaking the boundary that separates us from the eternity of God.

Pilate then says to Jesus' accusers: "Here is your king." They respond: "Away with him; crucify him!"

Pilate, tightening the noose, answers with a question: "Shall I crucify your king?" Then John places the ultimate words of religious idolatry on the lips of the chief priests: "We have no king but Caesar." The final denial has been spoken. "He came to his own and his own received him not" (John 1:11). The role that the Jewish nation was to play in bringing to earth the kingdom of God has been denied. The right of God to rule the world has been dismissed. The messianic claim has been renounced. God could never again be seen in the power symbols of either religion or politics, in church or state. Something quite different was to be revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate was the final foil through whom the revelation of Jesus would be received. Jesus' revelation would carry him and his disciples beyond the scope of religion and beyond the realm of the world's most powerful symbol of authority. They would be born to a new dimension of human life. The doorway into that new dimension would be opened in the death of Jesus, accused by entrenched religion, executed at the hands of the state.

Pilate has played his role on this central stage, and now he disappears.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

Spotlight on the Crucifixion

Watching the crucifixion scene in John is quite different from watching it in the Synoptics. I want to zoom in on a few details to draw your attention to them. First, while in the Synoptics Jesus dies alone, with the disciples having entirely fled and the women looking on from a distance, in John there are numerous loved ones at the foot of the cross. Do we have an abundance of Marys there or not? Are there three women or four? Jesus' mother is there, but she is never named in John. Jesus' aunt is there. Is she the same as Mary the wife of Clopas? That would make both sisters named Mary, it seems. And for the very first time in the story we see Mary Magdalene. Jesus establishes the church as a household of fictive kin. What do I mean by this? Notice that from the cross Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, behold your son." And to the Beloved Disciple he says, "Behold your mother." The Beloved Disciple and Jesus's mother are not biologically related; they are *Jesus* related. No longer is biology a primary category. Rather, those who seek to follow Jesus become our primary family members, our "real" (rather than merely biological) kin. Biology is incidental; Christian community is intentional.

Second, Jesus remains in control of the unfolding drama, even on the cross. After establishing the church, he next says, "I thirst." He says it for symbolic reasons, specifically to fulfill Psalms 69:21, Psalm 22:15, or both. He then announces, "it has been completed" (19:30, my translation). It is important to note that in Greek, the verb tense called the perfect indicates action completed in the past with continuing effect into the present. That is the tense used here. What Jesus has been saying throughout the Gospel has now come true: he was sent to do the work God gave him to do, and he has completed it. We are all, to this day, the beneficiaries.

Third, verse 30 declares the keeping of another promise, namely, the giving of the Spirit. English translations get this wrong, probably because they have the Synoptics in mind when translating this passage. It gets translated as a way of saying "Jesus died." But the Greek says Jesus "bestowed the Spirit." Greek words are not capitalized; that's a decision of your translator (in this case, me). Throughout the Gospel, Jesus has promised the Spirit once he departs. Here, on the cross, he establishes the church and bestows the Spirit. The scene will be repeated in a different iteration in the next chapter, when he makes the same move with the disciples who are hiding out in a locked room in fear. The way time works in John is more poetic than literal. Remember the constant references to "the hour"? It's best to think of the activity from the cross to the end as all one moment for John. After all, isn't that how eternity works?

Fourth, only in John does a soldier pierce Jesus' side with a spear. Blood and water come out. People have found a number of different meanings in this detail. It may be a way to highlight Jesus' true physical humanity (some would argue the same for the "I thirst" statement). Others take a sacramental view, connecting the blood with the Eucharist/Lord's Supper and the water with baptism. Recall 7:38: "Let anyone who believes in me come and drink! As Scripture says, 'From his

belly/womb/stomach [*koilia*] shall flow streams of living water” (my translation). Perhaps it is all of the above. What meaning do you find in this detail?

Fifth, while Joseph of Arimathea appears in all of the burial accounts, only in John does Nicodemus accompany him. Interpreters weigh in differently on Nicodemus’s weighty load. Does he bring so much myrrh and aloes because he “gets it,” like Mary in chapter 12, who is effusive with the nard? Or does the hyperbolic hundred pounds signify that he doesn’t expect Jesus to arise? Does the author mention Nicodemus’s night moves in order to highlight that Nicodemus will always be a shady figure, or does it indicate his former self? Here he is acting before sunset, taking a risk to be associated with Jesus when his disciples are nowhere in sight. What is your own take on Nicodemus, given all that you now know at this point in the story?

Fade to black.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

Primary Sources:

John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, by D. Moody Smith, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999

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