



Seasonal Rites for the Three Days

“The Jews” in John’s Passion

On Good Friday, the many churches around the world that are restoring the great Three Days proclaim the Passion from John 18–19, and contemporary Christians are rightly concerned about how the fourth gospel describes “the Jews.” Pastors, church musicians, and parish educators may find these comments and this emendation of the New Revised Standard Version of John’s Passion helpful.¹

About the evangelist: The author of the Gospel according to John was a Jewish Christian. By the year 100, about when the gospel was composed, those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God and those who did not were separating into two distinct religious communities that became Christianity and post-biblical Judaism. In the Johannine community, which was probably located in present-day Turkey, the relationship between these two groups was antagonistic.² So, although honoring the Jewish tradition, the evangelist is critical of those local Jews—mostly Pharisees—who did not in the 90s accept Jesus as the embodiment of the Torah and the replacement of the destroyed temple. The evangelist has backdated these diaspora Jews to those in Jerusalem in the 30s and designates this group with the Greek noun *Ioudaioi*.

About *Ioudaioi*: The word *Ioudaioi* is literally “the Judeans,” that is, people currently or originally residents of Judea who shared a common history and religion. Some biblical scholars urge that “Judeans” is the best English rendering of the Johannine designation.³ During medieval times, Middle English dropped the “d” in “Judean,” producing our word “Jew.”⁴ Thus, the English language suggests two different entities, Judeans and Jews, and this linguistic situation much complicates our reception of John 18–19.

About the historicity of John 18–19: The evangelist engaged in some generalizations and exaggerations. Thus, while blaming the Pharisees for Jesus’ capture, the evangelist describes the Pharisee Nicodemus as a follower of Jesus.

Furthermore, despite a popular misperception that the gospels are historically accurate narratives, John’s gospel includes many details that reflect and describe the year 100 rather than the year 30, and much historical data—for example, the precise political role of the Sanhedrin in the 30s—is unknown to us.⁵ Thus, when the evangelist writes of “the Jews,” a careful reader will ask, Which Jews, when? Biblical scholars agree that only a small number of Judeans in the 30s, probably mostly Sadducees, would have been somehow involved in Jesus’ execution.

About contemporary English Bible translations: In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which attempted a relatively close translation of the Greek into English, chapters 18–19 cite “the Jews” twenty-one times. The word refers variously to an assembled crowd (for example, 19:7), the adherents of a religion (19:31), the temple authorities (18:12), and the residents of the province of Judea (19:20).⁶ Sometimes the referent is unclear (for example, 18:31). Several Bible translations sometimes replace “the Jews” with wording that more explicitly designates which Jews the narrative is referring to. In 19:7, Today’s English Version and the Contemporary English Version write “the crowd.” In 19:31, the TEV writes “the Jewish authorities,” and in 19:38, the CEV writes “the Jewish leaders.”

About contemporary English: To further complicate our translation task, our noun “Jews” has many referents: adherents of the religion of Judaism; members of a historic ethnicity; participants, by birth or choice, in a cultural community; subjects of an ancient religious and ethnic nation-state; even citizens of the State of Israel. An ethnic Jew may be a practicing Christian; an observant participant of Judaism may be of any ethnicity. Some usage replaces the noun “Jew” with the adjective “Jewish.” The word has been used as an anti-Semitic slur.

So: Given the various referents of “the Jews” in the Gospel of John and its many meanings in our speech, the proclamation of John’s Passion on Good Friday may prove a stumbling block. The hope is that, as always, catechesis and preaching will assist believers in receiving the good news of Jesus Christ for their lives in, with, and under the words of the Bible, which always proclaims God’s word in ancient cultural speech. To minimize misunderstandings on Good Friday and to counteract possible anti-Semitism, the following emendation of the NRSV John

¹ For background to the following considerations, see Andrew Chester, “The Jews of Judaea and Galilee,” pp. 9–26, John Barclay, “The Jews in the Diaspora,” pp. 27–40, and D. Moody Smith, “John,” pp. 96–111, in *Early Christian Thought in Its Jewish Context*, ed. John Barclay and John Sweet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

² Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 84–86.

³ Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 14. See, for example, David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 210–14.

⁴ See the entry “Jew” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1970), 787–803, and 814–962, *passim*.

⁶ A somewhat different listing is in “The Jews,” *Worship Guidebook for Lent and the Three Days* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 127.

18–19 attempts to clarify who in each episode of the narrative is meant by “the Jews.” Substitutions are denoted in italics. This proposal comes with awareness that any such rendering of the Greek *Ioudaioi* necessarily involves interpretation of the narrative, yet with no presumption of historical accuracy.

Finally, about liturgical proclamation: It is never pastorally wise to distribute a printed biblical text to the assembly and then to proclaim a different translation; the result can be worshipers speculating about the disparity, rather than receiving the word of God. Thus, please ensure that, if a printed text is provided, it corresponds precisely to the proclaimed text.

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The Passion according to John, emended: John 18:1—19:42

¹[Jesus] went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ²Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” ⁵They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁸Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” ⁹This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” ¹⁰Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. ¹¹Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

¹²So the soldiers, their officer, and the *temple* police arrested Jesus and bound him. ¹³First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

¹⁵Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ¹⁸Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

¹⁹Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the *Jewish people* come together. I have said nothing in secret. ²¹Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” ²²When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” ²³Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” ²⁴Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” ²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ²⁷Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” ³⁰They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” ³¹Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The *Jewish authorities* replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” ³²(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What

have you done?”³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the *Jewish authorities*. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”³⁷ Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

After he had said this, he went out to the *crowd* again and told them, “I find no case against him.”³⁹ But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”⁴⁰ They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a bandit.

^{19:1}Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.² And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe.³ They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and striking him on the face.⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.”⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”⁶ When the chief priests and the *temple* police saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.”⁷ The *crowd* answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.”

⁸Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.⁹ He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer.¹⁰ Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?”¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”¹² From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the *crowd* cried out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.”

¹³When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the *crowd*, “Here is your King!”¹⁵ They cried out, “Away with

him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but the emperor.”¹⁶ Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus;¹⁷ and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.¹⁹ Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”²⁰ Many of the *Judeans* read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.²¹ Then the chief priests of the *temple* said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’”²² Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top.²⁴ So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

“They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

²⁵And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.”²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

²⁸After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.”²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

³¹Since it was the day of Preparation, the *Jewish authorities* did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.³² Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified

with him.³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.³⁵ (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)³⁶ These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, “None of his bones shall be broken.”³⁷ And again another passage of scripture says, “They will look on the one whom they have pierced.”

³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the *temple authorities*, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.