

# SSECarticles

## The Flogging of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel

by Norm Young



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**Abstract:** The Fourth Gospel's (FG) account of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate has some affinities with Mark and—to a lesser degree—with Luke's narrative; but overall, John marches according to his own drum-beat. The most obvious difference between the FG's account of the Roman Trial and the Synoptics is their length. The FG devotes 593 words to its account (18.28-19.16) of the trial compared with 338 words for Matthew (27.11-31), 265 for Mark (15.1-20), and 252 for Luke (23.1-5, 13-25). However, a more startling difference is the FG's positioning of the scourging and the Roman soldiers' mocking of Jesus in the midst of Pilate's investigation of the charges against Jesus. Matthew and Mark place these events at the end of Pilate's interrogation of Jesus, just prior to his being handed over to be crucified. In contrast the FG situates them in the midst of Pilate's inquiry, that is, as scene four (John 19.1-3) of the seven scenes that form the FG's trial narrative. Thus John distances the scourging and the troops' mockery from Pilate's handing Jesus over to be crucified. Why does he do this? He does it for dramatic effect: so as to forcefully portray the abused, pitiable, and mocked Jesus, as indeed being the true King (Messiah) of Israel. Hence the FG's remarkably frequent use of βασιλεύς and βασιλεία in its trial narrative.

### I Introduction: The Problem

According to reviews, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* devotes ten minutes of the film's 126 minutes to the scene where Jesus is flogged prior to his being crucified. The Gospels, on the other hand, do not focus on the brutal details of the flogging and employ only

the one verb (*phragellōsas*, Mark 15.15; Matt 27.26; *emastigōsen*, John 19.1) in describing the incident. Their concern is to portray the dignity of Jesus, and hence they refer to the shame and humiliation of their Lord's tragic end rather than its violence.

Most readers would understand Mark and Matthew's sequence of events—the release of Barabbas, the flogging of Jesus, the soldiers' mocking, and Pilate's handing him over to be crucified—as associated events that followed each other in relatively quick succession:

*So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort [and began to mock him] (Mark 15.15–16 NRSV, cf. Matt 27.26–27).*

However, if the flogging is an immediate preliminary to the crucifixion, then there is a disparity between Mark (and Matthew) and the Fourth Gospel (FG) regarding the timing of its occurrence.

Mark and Matthew place the flogging of Jesus at the end of Pilate's interrogation of Jesus, whereas the FG situates it in the midst of the trial. The following table (p8) clarifies this contrast.

There is no parallel in Mark and Matthew of the trial continuing before Pilate for *twelve more verses* after the flogging and the soldiers' mocking. The FG's location of the flogging and the mocking in the midst of the trial rather than at its end also obliges him to position the handing over of Jesus to be crucified after and not before the mocking (see the above table). The listing of the generally-accepted seven scenes of the FG's trial narrative emphasises the uniqueness of the FG's account.

1. Scene one (outside, 18.28–32) "We are not permitted to put anyone to death" (v. 31).
2. Scene two (inside, 18.33–38a) "Are you the King of the Jews?" (v. 33).
3. Scene three (outside, 18.38b–40) "Not this man, but Barabbas!" (v. 40).
- 4. Scene four (inside, 19.1–3) "Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged" (v. 1).**
5. Scene five (outside, 19.4–8) "Behold the man!" (v. 5 NKJV).
6. Scene six (inside, 19.9–11) "Where are you from?" (v. 9).
7. Scene seven (outside, 19.12–16) "Behold your king!" (v. 14 NKJV).

How then are we to understand the disparate sequence of events between Mark and Matthew and the FG

| Mark 15                       | Matthew 27                     | John 18–19                        |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Before Pilate vv. 1–5         | Before Pilate vv. 11–14        | Before Pilate I, 18.28–38         |
| Release of Barabbas vv. 6–15a | Release of Barabbas vv. 15–26a | Release of Barabbas vv. 39–40     |
| Flogging v. 15b               | Flogging v. 26b                | Flogging 19.1                     |
| <i>Handed over v. 15c</i>     | <i>Handed over v. 26c</i>      |                                   |
| <i>To be crucified v. 15d</i> | <i>To be crucified v. 26d</i>  |                                   |
| Mocking vv. 16–20a            | Mocking vv. 27–31a             | Mocking vv. 2–3                   |
|                               |                                | <i>Before Pilate II, vv. 4–15</i> |
|                               |                                | <i>Handed over v. 16a</i>         |
|                               |                                | <i>To be crucified v. 16b</i>     |
| Led out v. 20b                | Led away v. 31b                | Took Jesus v. 17a                 |
| Simon carries cross v. 21     | Simon carries cross v. 32      | Jesus carries cross v. 17b        |
| Golgotha vv. 22–25            | Golgotha vv. 33–36             | Golgotha v. 18                    |

regarding the flogging of Jesus? There are five main solutions known to me; three of which assume Jesus was flogged twice during the trial, while two limit it to once. Let us examine these in turn.

## II Solutions that Require Two Floggings

### 1. A Lesser Punishment

Several scholars (A. N. Sherwin-White; F. F. Bruce; J. H. Neyrey; D. A. Carson) believe that the FG refers to the same lighter whipping depicted in Luke 23.16, 22. Pilate's intention was to discipline (*paideuō*) Jesus as a caution and then release him (I. H. Marshall; J. Nolland; F. Bovon). As this proposed flogging occurred in Luke earlier in the procedures and prior to the release of Barabbas some feel it parallels the FG's order. On this view it is a whipping prior to and distinct from the scourging associated with the crucifixion.

There are a number of problems with this view. First, the whipping in Luke was proposed but there is no evidence that it was carried out. If there was a whipping, and Luke does not say there was, then Barabbas was the recipient, as he and not Jesus was released (Luke 23.25). Second, unlike Luke, the flogging in the FG was administered, and yet Jesus was not released. According to this opinion Jesus was whipped in an effort to get him released, and when this failed he was scourged prior to the crucifixion (following Mark and Matthew). Two floggings in rather quick succession seems unlikely to me. Third, the FG

places the flogging after the release of Barabbas just prior to the soldiers' mocking. This parallels Mark and Matthew but not Luke. Fourth, the verb used in the FG (*mastigoō*) is used in the Gospels for the scourging related to the crucifixion (Mark 10.34; Matt 20.19; Luke 18.33) and is not a synonym for the disciplinary whipping (*paideuō*) that Pilate proposed according to Luke 23.16, 22.

### 2. A Judicial Torture

Another suggestion (J. A. Glancy, M. L. Skinner) that also draws on a parallel with Luke is the view that Pilate is driven to use torture (a lashing) against an uncooperative prisoner in an attempt to establish the truth and thus provide cause to have Jesus released. All the objections to the previous solution apply equally to this proposal. Further, despite John 19.4, 6, 12, there is no suggestion in verses 1–3 that Pilate had Jesus tortured (lashed) in an effort to release him.

### 3. To Arouse Pity

Some notable scholars (R. Bultmann; E. Haenchen, M. W. G. Stibbe; M. C. de Boer; C. M. Tuckett) propose that in the FG Pilate hoped that by whipping Jesus he would arouse the Jewish authorities' pity and thus agree to his releasing him as a harmless pretender. The severe scourging that preceded the crucifixion was hardly designed to evoke sympathy: "in the culture of the time such a scene would surely provoke laughter and derision. Crowds regularly gathered at public executions to

participate in the mockery” (Neyrey). Hence, this solution too assumes, whether stated or not, that the whipping was some milder punishment and not the terrible ordeal associated with the scourging that preceded the crucifixion. Notwithstanding the narrator’s comment in John 19.12 regarding Pilate’s desire to release Jesus, the Prefect’s calling him their king (vv. 14) was extremely provocative and more likely to arouse their ire than their pity—and indeed it did (v. 15a).

### III Solutions that Require only One Flogging

#### 4. The Gap Theory

Several commentators (J. Blinzler, G. R. Beazley-Murray, C. L. Blomberg) interpret the Aorist participle in Mark 15.15 and Matthew 26.27 (*phragellōsas*) as allowing an indeterminate time between the flogging and the actual handing of Jesus over (*paredōken*) to be crucified. That is, to translate the passage thus: “And sometime after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.” The aorist is more likely simultaneous action within a series of aorist and imperfect verbs that follow one another in uninterrupted succession (Mark 15.15–20): released, delivered, having flogged, to be crucified, led ... began, struck, mocked, stripped, clothed, led, and crucified. The suggestion that Mark and Matthew’s language allows room between these events for the FG’s twelve verses of continuing interrogation is less than convincing. This view tries to align Mark and Matthew with the FG by arguing that the former permits what the latter demands, namely, that the flogging of Jesus occurred in the midst of the trial and not at its end.

This could mean either that all four Gospels have only a lighter disciplinary whipping or that Mark, Matthew and John have placed the severe flogging (*verberatio*, Sherwin-White) much earlier in the trial and consequently detached it somewhat from the crucifixion, which is not the usual Roman custom (Luke has no flogging prior to the crucifixion).

#### 5. A Dramatist’s Licence

On this view, the FG, as well as Mark and Matthew, refers to the brutal scourging that preceded the crucifixion, but it positions it out of align with the other two Gospels. However, “it is quite clear that John has done this [dislocation] deliberately, regardless of the correct procedure (perhaps not knowing it)” (B. Lindars, cf. R. E. Brown). So if John has given a dramatist’s interpretation of the historical event; what is his purpose? It is this: he wished to place the mocked king centre stage to make it known that this brutalised and humiliated figure was indeed the true Davidic King. Notice the FG’s concentration of the terms king/kingdom in its trial narrative: 15 of the 21 (**71 per cent**) occurrences of these two terms occur in the scenes before Pilate (including the three in the inscription on the cross, John 19.19–21).

This compares with Mark’s 12½% of its usage of these two terms and Matthew’s 2½% in their trial narratives.

Unlike Mark and Matthew, the FG retains the burlesque regal attire that the soldiers placed on him in mock adoration: “Hail, King of the Jews!” (John 19.3). So when Jesus came outside to the Jewish leaders, they were confronted with the ludicrous spectacle of a severely beaten individual wearing a crudely plaited crown and a makeshift royal robe, and to add insult to injury, Pilate gestures and says, “Behold the Man!” (v. 5 NKJV). This is the very language that God used when identifying Saul as Israel’s first king (The Lord said to [Samuel], “**Behold, the man** of whom I spoke to you! This one shall rule over My people.” 1 Sam 9.17 NASB). Little wonder then that “when the chief priests and the police **saw him**” (v. 6) they shouted “Crucify him!”

Pilate probably had no inkling how insulting to the Jews was his first declaration (“Behold the man”), but he certainly intended the taunt with his second, “Behold your King!” (v. 14 NKJV) and equally when he asked, “Shall I crucify your King?” (v. 15). This final insult is met with the extraordinary declaration; “We have no king but Caesar” (v. 16a NIV). This is despite the contrary and frequent biblical claim that God alone is Israel’s King (Judg 8.23; Isa 26.13; 44.6; Jer 10.10; Ps 47. 6, 7, 8; 95.3; 145.1). For Pilate their exclusive allegiance to Caesar signalled the end of the tussle, and so he immediately handed Jesus over to be crucified (v. 16b). His taunts had succeeded; but then the Jewish leaders had achieved their goal too, since Pilate handed Jesus over **to them** to be crucified.

The inscription Pilate wrote on the cross in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,” was calculated to wound the national pride of the chief priests; and it succeeded. He may have thought he had the last word, but did he? Pilate considered such a powerless king (however, see 18.36; 19) a joke; a king fit for the Jews. The chief priests thought such a humiliated king an insult; a king not fit for Israel. John, with typical irony, presents Jesus, the lacerated and helpless king as the true Majesty: “the Man Born to Be King” (D. L. Sayers).

Editors’ Note The views expressed are those of the authors/speakers and the Society takes no position on the intellectual content of papers and articles.