

What Is Truth?

All four of the Gospels tell the story of Jesus's Passion. John's telling, like much of the rest of his Gospel, is especially rich in symbolism and unique details. To give just a few examples, all of the Gospels tell us that Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's slave when trying to protect Jesus; John alone tells us that the slave's name was Malchus. All of the Gospels describe Roman soldiers casting lots for his clothing while Jesus suffered on the cross; John alone tells us that Jesus's tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. All the Gospels say Jesus was offered sour wine on the cross; John alone says there was hyssop in it.

Many of the seemingly minor details in John's Passion narrative are loaded with symbolic meaning. The name of the wounded slave, "Malchus," is derived from the Hebrew word מֶלֶךְ (*melek*), which means "king." Jesus's seamless tunic likely represents the garments worn by the Levitical priesthood, the religious authorities originally appointed by Adonai to mediate between heaven and humanity. Hyssop is different from the gall that Matthew describes in the wine Jesus was offered when he first came to Golgotha. Gall is a painkiller made from wormwood or myrrh; Jesus's refusal to take it emphasizes his determination to experience the full agony of his Passion. Hyssop, on the other hand, is the herb the Hebrews used to spread the blood of the sacrificial lambs on the doorposts at Passover in the Book of Exodus. With just those three symbols, the injured "king," the priestly tunic and the hyssop, John emphasizes that Jesus is our heavenly king and great high priest, the Lamb of God sacrificed for humanity's sake.

Other details unique to John deepen our understanding of Jesus's relationships. The Gospels all describe a group of women watching the Passion from a distance. Mark and Matthew report that Jesus's mother was among them; only John describes Jesus placing his mother's care in the hands of the beloved disciple as he hangs at the brink of death. His loving act may

designate Mary as the mother of all Christians. Perhaps it signifies the Christian church embracing its Jewish heritage as embodied in her. Or perhaps it serves to make the beloved disciple, traditionally thought to be John himself, Jesus's adopted brother and that much more credible a witness to Jesus's Passion and the wonders that followed.

Similarly, all of the Gospels say that Jesus was taken before Pilate, but only John recounts much of their conversation, and only John gives us Pilate's infamous question, "what is truth?" John Calvin thought Pilate's "what is truth?" was an expression of worldly disdain, but he also observed that Pilate's indignation "shows that wicked men never reject the doctrine of the Gospel so spitefully as not to be somewhat moved by its efficacy." John tells us that the Roman governor was so touched by our Lord that he wanted to save Jesus if possible. Is John setting up a contrast between Pilate and the Temple authorities? Maybe; hold that thought.

All the Gospels point out that Jesus did various things throughout his ministry in fulfillment of Scripture. But John seems the most determined to connect the specifics of Jesus's Passion with ancient Hebrew prophecies. In this passage alone, John tells us half a dozen times that various things happened to fulfill predictions that Scripture or Jesus himself had made. Honestly, what does it matter?

To John's readers, it mattered a lot. John's Gospel is the last of the four, written decades after the others. Many of John's intended readers were Jewish Christians. Under pressure from synagogue leaders who thought Christianity had gone too far, John's Jewish readers wanted assurance that Jesus was, in fact, their long-awaited Messiah. By showing how Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies, John gave his Jewish readers the confirmation they needed to resist pressure from their synagogue leaders to renounce their Christian faith.

But John was also writing for a Gentile audience. He wanted them to understand that Jesus wasn't solely the Jewish Messiah, important as that title was. John went beyond Matthew, Mark and Luke to affirm Jesus not only as the Messiah and Son of Man but also as the Χριστός (*Christos*), the Greek name for the divine Son of God. That may be why John portrays Pilate wanting to release Jesus. John may have hoped to strengthen his Gentile readers' faith by showing how our Lord moved even the ruthless Pilate to mercy.

Unfortunately, the contrast that John establishes between Pilate and the Temple authorities has been misused for centuries to justify antisemitism and violence against the Jewish people. It's an abuse of the Gospels that can't go unchallenged. John wrote for certain audiences in a particular historic period when specific theological disputes were running especially hot. He wanted to give his fellow Christians ideas and arguments that would support their faith. John doesn't pretend to be an historian in the sense that we understand history. He tells a story, and he portrays his characters in a way that supports his larger message. I'm not suggesting that the Temple authorities were entirely innocent in Jesus's execution. But I am saying that the individual Temple leaders at that time were responsible for their own actions, just as Pilate was responsible for his. We can't blame the Jewish people or Judaism as a whole for Jesus's death.

Bible commentators sometimes act as though there's little or no factual truth in the Gospels. Their commentary implies that the words and actions John attributes to Jesus are essentially fiction, concocted by the evangelist to convey a larger truth about Jesus and his ministry. I don't think we can make that assumption. John claims to have witnessed the Crucifixion, and some of the earliest church fathers were adamant that the author of John's Gospel was the son of Zebedee himself. Personally, I think it's better just to admit that we don't really know exactly who wrote this Gospel or how factually accurate it is by modern standards.

We also don't need to dwell too long on the question of whether and how Jesus's life, ministry and death satisfied the predictions of the ancient Hebrew prophets. That may have mattered a lot when Christianity was coming into being, but it doesn't necessarily matter so much anymore.

It matters that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, "god from god, light from light," as we acknowledge every week in the Nicene Creed. It matters that he loves humankind enough to join us in our humanity, becoming fully human as well as fully divine so he can understand what we go through every day of our limited lives. It matters that he teaches us how to pray, how to live, and how to love one another. It doesn't really matter whether there were seams in his tunic or hyssop in his wine. It matters very much that he lived, died and came back to show us that death is not the end, that all can be forgiven, and that anything truly is possible with God.

Any of the symbols and stories that are unique to John's Gospel can be terrific sermon fodder. They can also be great starting points for individual study and contemplation. As Holy Week draws to a close, you may want to focus on one or more of the specific details that John thought were important enough to include in his description of Jesus's Passion. Maybe they're factually accurate or maybe they're not, but they can help you answer Pilate's question, "what is truth?" If those details point you toward the Jesus who forgives us when we make mistakes, seeks us out when we're lost, comforts us when we're sorrowful, and loves us enough to lead us to his Father's arms, they're true, alright. They're true. *Amen.*