

## On John chapter 18

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### **Preamble : History**

The passion narratives are history. They are intended historically, they are written as history, and Christians read them as history. These things happened. "*If Christ is not raised, then of all men are we the miserablest!*" says Paul (1Cor.15). And Christ cannot be raised if Jesus did not die. Resurrection presupposes death.

All four passion narratives have a strong implicit *point of view*. The Evangelists mean to tell us not only *what* happened, but *why* it happened: what God purposed and how we should understand it. Does this make the accounts biased and unreliable? Should not history be *objective*; should it not be establishing *facts*?

Well, of course we should strive to understand the events without letting our own prejudices and preconceptions colour the picture: we should hear the accounts as dispassionately as we can. But it is a fallacy to think that any historian can be strictly "objective". All historians have an axe to grind: they want to persuade you to see things from their point of view. They *must* do, only an historian *with* a point of view can be interesting. We are all creatures of our time, and we all necessarily have a point of view. The questions are, how well informed are we, and how committed are we to finding out the truth of what we currently believe?

Something happened. But what was it, what does it mean, and what difference does it make to us today? Ultimately, it must be nonsense to insist that we be strictly dispassionate about the "passion narratives"! If the account does not move us – and this one above all others! – then we have simply not appreciated it!

Here is Thucydides, writing his justly famous "*History of the Peloponnesian War*" around 400BC, and it is important to remember that Thucydides was an active participant in this war, which was not even finished completely when he finished writing :-

Thucydides the Athenian wrote the history of the war between Athens and Sparta ... in the belief that it was going to be a great war and more worth writing about than any of those which had taken place in the past. ... This was the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, and affecting ... [almost] the whole of mankind. ... [In contrast: ] all the evidence leads me to conclude that [previous] periods [of the distant past] were not great periods in warfare or in anything else. [Book I §1]

However, I do not think that one will be far wrong in accepting the conclusions I have reached from the evidence which I have put forward. It is better evidence than that of the poets, who exaggerate the importance of their themes, or of the prose chroniclers, who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject-matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology. ... As for this present war, ...if one looks at the facts themselves, one will see that this was the greatest war of all. [Book I §21]

Thucydides, with Herodotus before him and all historians after him, wants to prove something to us, and he lays out his evidence for us so that we can be persuaded that he is telling the truth. Are the Biblical writers any different? Listen to Dr. Luke:

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

Luke claims to have had his story from *eyewitnesses*. Eyewitness testimony was of overriding importance to the ancient historians. Here is Thucydides:

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself, and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.

And with regard to the factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the event I have described or else I have heard of them from eyewitnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy to discover : different eyewitnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other, or else from imperfect memories. ... My work ... was done to last for ever. [Book I §22]

Not *ipsissima verba* then, but *ipsissima vox*. Thucydides' book was even then a recognised classic that Luke had probably read: he (Luke) certainly understood how to write history. Here is Josephus, in his introduction to *The Jewish War* from about AD75, a generation after the events Luke describes, making the same general points:

The war of the Jews against the Romans [culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in AD70] was the greatest of our time ... Yet those with no first hand knowledge, accepting baseless and inconsistent stories on hearsay, have written garbled accounts of it, while those of eyewitnesses have been falsified either to flatter the Romans or vilify the Jews, eulogy or abuse being substituted for factual record. ... I myself ... fought against the Romans [in the early stages], and of the later events I was an unwilling witness. [Book I §1]

All three historians – Thucydides, Luke and Josephus (and the same can be said of Polybius and Livy) – heavily emphasise the role of the eyewitness. Modern historians look for documentary evidence, but ancient historians rarely used such evidence even if they had it (as can be proved in the case of Thucydides). Of course, in the ancient world documents were far rarer than today; also they were either business or government records (considered far too mundane for History!), or real literature which, if it covered the same events, was only another point of view. Where is the *primary source* of the information on past events?

We are now willing to consider mundane documents as "impartial" indicators of what happened, in a way the ancients were not; but they understood that History is a human activity that is validated only by human witness in a way that we have lost as a result of the myth of "objectivity" we have inherited from the Enlightenment. Everyone must have a point of view, and understanding our history depends on us accepting a point of view. Primary historical knowledge must originate in the specific testimony of identified persons. What is the evidence required to convict someone in a court of law? Eyewitness testimony (Deut.17:6; 19:15; Matt.18:16; II Cor.13:1; I Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28; Rev. 11:3)! Prosecutions are very difficult or impossible where no witnesses are prepared to come forward.

But of course, we want to know the truth of what happened, and true understanding depends on being able to accept correction. Things are often not the way we thought. Are we willing to find out, and to let it change us?

## ***Hellenistic and Jewish History***

For my present purposes I want to highlight two questions central to our attitude to the Bible. Do we have the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus (his actual words), or only his *ipsissima vox* (his thought behind the words, his real voice)? And can one's history be understood independently of one's philosophy?

The Hellenistic historians I cited above (and Josephus counts as Hellenistic in this context for all that his books were written first in Aramaic and only subsequently translated into Greek) were clear that they were representing the *ipsissima vox* of the participants they report (and not their *ipsissima verba*). They also all took a decidedly secular view of the history they were reporting: in the passage I cited from Thucydides he was explicit about this, contrasting his approach with those of the "poets".

Luke's prologue to his Gospel might appear at first to fall into this Hellenistic tradition but in fact I will show that the New Testament historians (the evangelists) systematically take a procedurally independent line. I rely here on the interesting work of Richard Bauckham in his "*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*" (2006).

The first thing to note is that the Hellenist propagandists have somehow achieved a monopoly of our historical perspective. In this, the Renaissance casts a long shadow. Everyone "knows" that literature started with Homer, philosophy with Plato and Aristotle, and mathematics with Pythagoras and Archimedes. Seamus Heaney complained of this blinkered attitude in his preface to his new translation of *Beowulf* (1999):

"Achilles rings a bell, but not *Scyld Scēfing*. Ithica leads the mind in a certain direction, but not *Heorot*. The Sibyl of Cumae will stir certain associations, but not bad Queen Modthryth..."

And the recent film-animation of *Beowulf* adds the further insult that it distorts the text to introduce the pagan gods, where the Saxon poet himself was a Christian and doesn't mention Wodin and the others.

Christians should remember that the Trojan War was only just before King David and long after Moses, and the poet of the Trojan War, Homer, was approximately contemporary with Isaiah, who is a fantastic poet in his own right. Moreover, we have a complete text of Isaiah (a very large book) over two millenia old. Jewish history is far better articulated, with a far longer memory than Greek. Schools of Jewish literature were already well established when Homer started composing (I Sam. 10:5ff; 19:20ff; I Kings 19:18; 20:35; 22:6ff; II Kings 2:3ff; 4:1, 38; 6:1; 9:1), and Jewish literacy long predates Greek. Our debt to the Greeks is of course enormous, but we have nevertheless overstated it for centuries.

I am emphasising here that when the Evangelists were writing, they were specifically writing in the Jewish, not Greek, tradition. These two traditions are distinctly different in (at least) two interesting ways. Firstly, the Jewish scribal tradition insists on the integrity in the text of the *ipsissima verba* (where we have seen that the Greeks claim only the *ipsissima vox*). The scribal tradition certainly maintained that the Psalms of David were original to him, whatever modern scholars might choose to

believe (and in fact there is a growing school even in liberal scholarship that has a strong appreciation of the integrity of the text).

On the other hand (secondly) the Jews make explicit their respect for and reliance on their written sources, where the Greeks avoided such reliance, as we have seen. How many times do the Chroniclers say "is it not written in ..."? (I count 32: I Kings 11:41; 14:29, 15:7, 23, 31; 16:5, 14, 20, 27; 22:39, 45; II Kings 1:18; 10:34; 12:9; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 18, 28; 15:6, 21, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5; II Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 25:26; Esther 10:2.) There are further intriguing hints of the same attitude from much earlier. In the report of the sun standing still for Joshua, the Chronicler – for whom such an event is just as incredible as it is for us, since he knows that the sun is God's timekeeper (Gen. 1:14), and "the testimony of the LORD is sure" (Ps. 19:7) – is also careful not only to cite his source ("*Is not this written in the book of Jasher?*", Jos. 10:13) but even to quote from it *verbatim*! I think this quoting from an identified text is unique in the Bible and very rare in the ancient world. I can't think of any other example.

### The Noble Bereans

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17:11

Paul's message was that Christ is raised from the dead: *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.* (Acts 17:31) And you can be saved if you put your trust in him! The "noble" Bereans wanted to "*see if what Paul said was true*". How do you test a story? You cross-question the witnesses (as Daniel did in the case of Susannah). But Luke reports the Bereans not as cross-questioning Paul (doubtless they did that too) but as cross-questioning the Scriptures! How does that work?

You see, it is not the simple fact of being resurrected from the dead that turns the world upside down (Acts 17:6; and see Ps. 146:9; II Kings 21:13; Is. 24:1; 29:16) – Elijah, Peter and Paul each raised a person from the dead; Elisha raised two (one posthumously!); Jesus raised three that we know of; moreover Matthew claims that "many" were resurrected following the Resurrection – it is that Jesus is the Christ of God who is inaugurating the Kingdom of God *now, here!* How do we know this? By seeing what the prophets have said. For first-century Jews (especially Pharisees like Paul), the essential part of turning the world upside down is to turn upside down one's view of the Scriptures. *This* is what they have been saying all along and we never noticed!

The proverb goes, that *seeing is believing*. Of course, we have been emphasising the importance of eyewitnesses, so this is clearly important. But it is not that we only *understand what we see* (that is, to understand something we have to see it), but that we only *see what we understand* (that is, without being committed to an intellectual framework for categorising things, the things themselves are often very difficult or impossible to recognise).

How many times do the Scriptures speak of "opening eyes"? To see God's glory we need to have our eyes open (Gen.21:19; Num.22:31; 24:4; 2Kings 6:17; Is.35:5 etc)! The marvellously combatitive passage in John 9 summarises this perfectly, the physi-

cal senses are a metaphor for the spiritual senses – that is, the understanding – and the perspective is cosmic ("since the world began" ... "for judgement") :-

... one thing I know, that, whereas **I was blind, now I see**. Then said they to him again, What did he to thee? how opened he thine eyes? He answered them, I have told you already, and **ye did not hear**: wherefore would ye hear it again? will ye also be his disciples? ... The man answered and said unto them, Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes. ... **Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind**. ... Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. ... And Jesus said, **For judgment** I am come into this world, **that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind**. ... And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.

What we see – that is, what we are *willing* to see – is subject to God's judgement. Pharaoh *wouldn't* see (Pharaoh hardened Pharaoh's heart), so then Pharaoh *couldn't* see (God hardened Pharaoh's heart). Note that in the conclusion of this story John underlines Jesus turning the world upside down. The story starts with the question, *Who sinned?* Blindness was a curse, therefore the blind must have sinned! But Jesus concludes by asserting that the blind are sinless. Sin comes from the *intent*, not from the *event*. And history is about not so much events as the intent behind the events. You cannot *see* the event without *understanding* the intent: this is why the Bereans were noble.

## Literacy and the Controlled Oral Tradition

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. (I Cor. 15:1-8)

Richard Bauckham calls this passage the "best evidence" of the "kerygmatic summaries of the gospel story and message" (*kerygma* = preaching, as in Matt.3:1) that were passed on *systematically* by the early Church. He says:

We have unequivocal evidence, in Paul's letters, that the early Christian movement did practise the *formal transmission of tradition*. By "formal" here I mean that there were specific practices employed to ensure that tradition was faithfully handed on from one traditioner to others. The evidence is found in Paul's use of the technical terms for handing on ... and receiving a tradition ... These Greek words were used for formal transmission of tradition in the Hellenistic schools and so would have been familiar in this sense to Paul's Gentile readers. They also appear in Jewish Greek usage ... corresponding to what we find in Hebrew in later rabbinic literature.

(Bauckham, *ibid*, Ch.11: the italics are mine, and I have omitted many references.)

The technical terms in the I Cor.15 passage above are: "keep in memory" (v.2, *katecho*: used of Jewish tradition in Mark 7:3, 4, 8 and corresponding to the Hebrew *'ahaz*); and "receiving a tradition" (vv.1, 3, *paralambano*, corresponding to the Hebrew *masar*). Bauckham compiles substantial, and what is to my mind irrefutable,

evidence of this systematic oral transmission of the Gospel, both the events themselves and the very words of Jesus: indeed the *ipsissima verba*.

We forget how different are our own circumstances. Literacy was very widespread in the first century, especially in an Israel which had not only its own written history predating Homer but also an important role for the scribes who provided the texts of Scripture for the synagogues widely distributed throughout the Roman empire. Note that the synagogue in Nazareth, which was little more than a village in Galilee, had its own scroll of Isaiah, *and Jesus could read it* (Luke 4: he was poor and presumably formally untutored). But books were very different things before printing made them cheap. And pre-printing literacy is a quite different thing from post-printing literacy. Prior to printing, the act of reading was generally a *performance* and not usually a quiet individual activity. Remember that Augustine in the *fourth* century was thought to be very weird, almost magical, because he read to himself, *silently*.

Jesus came preaching the *Kingdom of God*. The very idea of the Kingdom of God was one that depended on and presupposed a literate knowledge of the whole sweep of Jewish history. And Jesus *taught* the people. Teaching implies imparting knowledge one way or another. It is a commonplace today that Jesus' mode of teaching was the aphorism and the parable, both forms *designed* for ease of memorisation and repetition, in a culture attuned to the spoken word where oral tradition was systematically maintained and oral traditioners were deliberately trained and had wide recognition. We have the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus precisely because he self-consciously and deliberately cast his teaching in a form suitable for the controlled oral tradition to remember it.

## The Kingdom of God

And understanding the Kingdom is fundamental. A.T.Wright in his magisterial work *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (1992, 1996, 2003) shows that first century Jewish society was in a ferment of eschatological expectation, and that at issue was precisely the reading of their history. Wright characterises this ferment (in Book II, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, ch.10) with five fundamental questions:

- (i) Who are we?
- (ii) Where are we?
- (iii) What's wrong?
- (iv) What's the solution?
- (v) What time is it?

First century Jews would answer these questions:

- (i) We are Israel, the chosen people of the Creator God;
- (ii) We are still effectively in exile, returned to our land but slaves in it (Ezra 9:8f; Neh. 9:36);
- (iii) We are not following Moses' Law;
- (iv) God will return to Zion to bring justice and judgement;
- (v) the Kingdom of God is *at hand* (imminent: and see John Baptist in Matt.3:2).

There were many putative messiahs in the first and second centuries, including Simeon ben Kosiba, whom Aquiba called "bar-Kochba", who led the great and final rebellion against Rome that resulted in the complete destruction of Jerusalem in AD135; the bar-Kochba whose name ("son of the star") comes from Num.24:17-19,

the same bar-Kochba who minted coins depicting the façade of the Temple and numbering the years starting from his declaration of independence in AD132. Rabbi Aquiba is the famous sage of Judaism whose rulings still have tremendous authority even today. Aquiba is recorded as applying the "thrones" of Daniel 7:9 to bar-Kochba: one throne for God and one for David, that is, the son of David, the Messiah, in other words bar-Kochba himself.

When Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) he was at once: answering the same five questions above that all the faithful Jews around him were asking, and foreseeing the fate of bar-Kochba in AD135 and that of the more disparate leaders of the rebellion that ended fatefully in AD70 with the destruction of the Temple. Note that when he said "This Temple will be destroyed" he was of course referring immediately to his body. The Evangelist tells us this since it is the Resurrection that is the astonishing element in this story (John 2:19ff). But Jesus was also referring to the forthcoming destruction of the Temple in AD70. The Temple, the Land and the Law: all were potent political symbols for bar-Kochba and all first century Jews as well, but all were radically re-interpreted by Jesus. Jesus was also interested in the five questions above, and he answered them very similarly:

- (i) We are the people of the Creator God, chosen from before the foundation of the world, and confirmed in the Covenant with Abraham;
- (ii) We are in exile in the world, oppressed by the powers and principalities of the air (Ezra 9:8f; Neh. 9:36);
- (iii) We are not following the Royal Law, unable to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and unable to love our neighbours as ourselves;
- (iv) God's King, David's Son, will return in power bringing justice and judgement to the whole world, and inaugurating the New Creation;
- (v) the Kingdom of God is *at hand* (Matt.4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15; Luke 21:31).

These answers are sufficiently similar to the common answers for everyone to appreciate them, but they are sufficiently different for the discerning to recognise that there was a new and deep analysis going on here. No wonder the people thought that Jesus taught "with authority" (Matt.7:29; Mark 1:22). The authority did not come so much from the miracles as from the teaching, as is clear from Mark who emphasises that the authority of the teaching had precedence over the substance given to this authority by the miracles (Mark 1:27; Luke 4:36). Jesus presented the Scriptures in a new light.

The Jews were expecting a Messiah, but they were not able to agree on what the Scriptures promised, and they did not know how to read the Scriptures. The Ethiopian eunuch's question to Philip is indicative: "of whom speaketh the prophet?" (Acts 8:34). Jesus understood what Isaiah was saying because Jesus had paid attention to the rest of the Scriptures and he knew that God's heart was to bring "light to the Gentiles" – to the whole world, not just to Israel but *to the world through Israel* (Is.46:2; 49:6; 60:3; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23). The Jews worried about the Land, but Jesus was for the whole world. The Jews looked to the Temple, but Jesus looked for the presence of God. The Jews looked to the Law to separate them from the Gentiles; but Jesus looked for the reconciliation of Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, and for the tearing of the veil of the temple from top to bottom to at last reconcile us also to God. No wonder they hated him: he expected them to *rethink everything!*

A.T.Wright documents in detail the Jewish Messianic expectation: and there were many approaches to this expectation; it is because of this lack of agreement that, although it is clearly present, the expectation is quite diffuse. But the Christian church focussed and amplified Messianic expectation into a remarkably uniform and powerful form; actually a Christology, something entirely new even though it was very firmly anchored in the Hebrew Scriptures.

As we look at the Passion Narrative of John we will be bearing Jesus' revolutionary view of the Kingdom of God in mind, and seeing how John's text works as a primary source for our knowledge of this.

## The Text

Our primary source for knowledge of the death of Jesus Christ is the New Testament in general and the Passion Narratives in the Gospels in particular. Obviously, we no longer have access to eyewitness evidence : this is another reason for Jesus' comment to Thomas, "*blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" (John 20:29). Ours is the responsibility of evaluating the primary evidence in our own generation, and testing its reliability for ourselves. This is primarily an exercise of reason, which is why Jesus expanded on Moses when he repeated the First Law: "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind*" (Matt.22:37 and parallels in Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27).

J.A.T.Robinson a generation ago in "*Redating the New Testament*" (1976) argued powerfully, in a close textual analysis that has not to my knowledge been superceded, that the whole of the New Testament was complete by AD70, the date of the destruction of Jerusalem (including the Temple) by the Romans at the climax of the first Jewish War. Josephus in his book "*The Jewish War*" (c.AD75) makes it clear that Titus destroyed the Temple at the conclusion of the siege only reluctantly. In fact, he presents it as partly accidental. Even the Romans acknowledged the importance of the Temple as a cultural icon of great beauty. But for the Jews the destruction of the Temple was a traumatic event of deep ontological significance – the daily sacrifice could no longer be offered!

AD70 is a date whose importance cannot be overemphasised in both Jewish and Christian history, albeit for rather different reasons. The Temple was destroyed, sacrifices ceased, the Jews were deported yet again into an exile from their land – an exile that would prove permanent, Zion was destroyed. We learn from Eusebius (*Church History*, AD324) that the Christians fled Jerusalem before the siege because of the warning of Jesus in Matt.24, and we know from the long argument in the book of *Hebrews* that the early Christians put no value on the sacrificial system. Note that although this is a completely obvious statement to modern Christians: if Robinson is correct and *Hebrews* predates AD70, then the mere presence of this argument is powerful *primary* evidence for this Christian attitude in the *early* church, independent historical sources for which are rather sparse. The consensus of modern scholarship (ignoring Robinson), which consensus has persisted since Harnack's work in 1897, puts *Hebrews* in the reign of Domitian (c.AD90). But Robinson shows how threadbare the evidence for this consensus really is. He dates *Hebrews* c.AD67.

I digress about *Hebrews* because the appreciation of the crucial national symbols that Jesus systematically undermines is important to understanding the Passion Narratives, which bring these things to a climax. And it is of deep importance to us to know why,

contrary to much modern scholarly opinion, this reinterpretation of Judaism originates with Jesus himself.

Remarkably, Robinson considers it entirely possible that John's Gospel may even *predate* the Synoptics, showing that it can be reasonably dated between ~AD40-65. Again, the consensus of scholarly opinion (including conservative Evangelical opinion) places *John* very late, around AD90, roughly contemporary with their dating of *Hebrews*. And again, this consensus has been long-standing, dating, as for *Hebrews*, from Harnack. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century wildly late dates were asserted, including c.AD170 by Baur (Professor at Tübingen, 1826-1860) on the basis that the *terminus ad quem* (the latest possible date for it) is the book's first citation *by name* by Theophilus of Antioch c.AD180.

The other interesting question is, *who wrote John's Gospel?* Well, obviously it was John, unless one follows the more sceptical of modern scholars who believe that anyone could have written these books, merely attributing them to famous leaders to boost circulation, as it were (known technically as *pseudepigraphical*). In fact, the traditional authorship of John is very well attested. The case is compelling, but quite complicated and I will not rehearse it again here.

But if John wrote the *Gospel of John*, which John was that? Eusebius in the fourth century is clear that it was the son of Zebedee, but Papias of Hierapolis at the end of the first century and beginning of the second distinguishes John "the son of Zebedee" from John "the Elder" (II John 1; III John 1). Eusebius overlooks or ignores this distinction, possibly because he was actually not such a good historian, or possibly because he thought Papias was rather heretical and censored the passages he quotes from him. In any case there were *two* memorials in Ephesus, one to John the Apostle and one to John "the Elder".

Bauckham (*ibid*) makes what is to my mind a powerful argument that a) the author of the *Gospel of John* was the "beloved disciple", and b) the "beloved disciple" was John the Elder (distinct from John son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve). Bauckham shows that about 5% of Palestinian males were called "John", so that it is not at all unlikely that several "Johns" were involved in the ministry of Jesus. Indeed the very fact that every "John" has a "surname" (John Baptist, son of Zebedee, "Elder") supports this idea. Everyone knew lots of Johns, and they always needed distinguishing.

Bauckham argues (incontrovertibly, to my mind) that the "beloved disciple" is always anonymous in the *Gospel of John*, and therefore cannot be the son of Zebedee. This is because the "sons of Zebedee" are named in John 21:2 together with two anonymous (unnamed) disciples, one of whom we are certain by implication must be the "beloved disciple". (It is striking that the Twelve are never listed in the *Gospel of John*, and this is the only time John the Apostle is mentioned, and that not by name.) Bauckham's thesis is precisely that the Gospel texts are very careful to indicate the eyewitness testimony on which they are based, and in the case of the *Gospel of John*, the way the Evangelist writes is to show that it is the testimony of the "beloved disciple" on which much of the narrative rests. For example, Peter's testimony is prominent, but the (presumed) "beloved disciple" is mentioned *before* Peter's first mention (John 1:35), and *after* Peter's last mention (John 21:20ff). Of course the "beloved disciple" claims explicitly to be the author of the book (John 21:24).

And then, the "beloved disciple" must have been called "John" since it has been established that the (literal) label on the book identifying the author must have been at-

tached almost immediately. Bauckham cites Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (1983), who establishes that the traditions of the Church were *not* handed down anonymously, but (as we have already insisted) by authorised traditioners, that is, those who had authoritative eyewitness testimony of the events being reported. Since the only other John who had sufficient authority in the early Church was John "the Elder", it seems inescapable that the Evangelist of the *Gospel of John* was the same John "the Elder".

The sub-text in all this is that the early Church itself was very fussy about which documents were acceptable as authentic. The New Testament canon itself was developed essentially by consensus (not by *diktat* despite the propaganda of some modern writers), with the churches demanding certainty that the authors were indeed eyewitnesses of the main events described. So Luke was prominent as a companion of Paul and therefore a participant in the events of *Acts*, and he carefully sought reliable eyewitness evidence in his *Gospel* account (and for the events of *Acts* where he himself was not an eyewitness). Once you realise what is going on it is easy to see for each episode of the *Gospel* whose testimony is the foundation, since the text itself underlines it. This is one important reason that people are named by the Evangelists: they were well known in the churches, presumably recounting their original stories in church meetings throughout the period. Note, by the way, that this scenario simply doesn't work if the Gospels were written late. I think that Robinson must be right, and indeed that Bauckham's argument supports Robinson's.

## The Genre

It is now a commonplace to say that the Evangelists invented a new genre in literature: historical biography. Perhaps the closest is Plutarch's biographies, and I think it is entirely credible to suppose that Plutarch was emulating the Christians!

## The Passion Narrative – Commentary

### Verses 1-5

Having said these things, Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley where there was a garden into which he entered with his disciples. But Judas too, the one who was giving him over, knew this place because many times Jesus had come there together with his disciples. So Judas, having taken the cohort and, from the chief priests and the Pharisees, attendants, comes there with lanterns and torches and weapons. So Jesus, having known all the things to come upon him, came out and says to them, "Whom are you seeking?" They answered him, "Jesus the Nazorean." He says to them, "I am (he)." Now standing there with them was also Judas, the one who was giving him over.

(John 18:1-5; transl. R.E.Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1994)

I use Raymond Brown's translation since it is deliberately literal, which will be useful to us. Brown explores all aspects of the Passion Narratives in exhaustive detail in a massive 2-volume work, and is frequently very interesting and informative. One should hardly say in this context, *the devil is in the detail*, but you get the idea. We need to pay very careful and detailed attention to *what John says*.

*v.1: the Kidron valley, and the garden.* these are (were) real places which can be identified. The historiography of the places has been recently presented in great detail and some plausibility by Gibson (2009). What is interesting is that John does *not* mention "Gethsemane" (probably from the Hebrew/Aramaic word for "oil press") which has no known theological or allegorical meaning (Brown rejects Jerome's at-

tempt to link it with the "valley of fatness" of Is. 28:1, 4). Matthew and Mark name it because it was where Jesus went, and they are recording what happened. Luke does not name it because he avoids exotic Semitic words which his Greek audience will not appreciate. John does not name it because it means nothing. But John *does* name the Kidron valley since it has Biblical resonance with II Sam.15:23; John is drawing a parallel between Jesus leaving Jerusalem beset by treachery and David fleeing the treachery of Absalom his son. The "passion" of David mirrors the passion of Jesus. Curses fell on them both (II Sam.16:7).

**v.3:** *cohort*. Brown insists that taking John's (correct) technical terminology, what is referred to here is a full cohort of 600 soldiers. This seems unlikely to me, but we have to bow to the scholars I suppose. Perhaps this is John's equivalent of the 24-gun salute for heads of state: a *shock-and-awe* approach to apprehending the King of kings?

**v.5:** *Nazorean*. This is a transliteration of the Greek Ναζωραϊον (*Nazoraion*). Note that the Gospels uniformly call the *place* "Nazareth" (ναζαρετ or ναζαρεθ: *nazaret* or *nazareth*), but where the Nazarenes are referred to "Nazorean" is used. "Jesus of Nazareth" can have various spellings. Matthew uses ναζαρετ (or ναζαρεθ) or ναζωραίου (once each); Mark uses ναζαρηνε (three times) or ναζωραϊος (once); and Luke uses ναζαρηνε (once) or ναζωραϊος (two times). John uses ναζωραϊος (three times), but in John 1:45, when Philip speaks of Jesus to Nathaniel, he calls him Jesus of Nazareth (ναζαρετ or ναζαρεθ).

What are we to make of all these? Does it make any difference? Are there not simply variant spellings? Raymond Brown points out that Jesus was "called a Nazorean" (Matt.2:23) of course because he came from Nazareth, but also because the term had "taken on theological value related to" a) the Nazirites (Hebrew: *nazir*, Num.6:1-21, and note well the Aaronic Blessing concluding that chapter in Numbers), see also Samson (Jud.13:3-5) and John (Luke 1:15), and b) the "Branch" (Hebrew: *neser*, Is.11:1). So the distinction between ναζαρεθ and ναζωραϊος is pointing specifically to the holy calling of Jesus. And John makes Nathaniel use ναζαρεθ (and not ναζωραϊος) specifically because he is emphasising that he (Nathaniel) as yet knows very little about Jesus, so at this point in time there is no theological significance to Nazareth. On the other hand, Pilate, when he writes the *titulus* (the inscription on the cross), writes ναζωραϊος. John knows that Pilate will not have appreciated the theological subtlety of this, so he makes him unwittingly acknowledge Jesus' high calling!

**v.5:** *Judas "giving him over"* (παραδιδους, *paradidous*). To "give over" was a Greek legal term, referring to handing criminals over to judgement, judges and executioners (see Acts 8:3, "given over to prison"). But it was also used very frequently in the LXX (Jos.6:2; 11:6; I Sam.23:4; II Sam.2:5 (twice); Job 2:6; Prov.11:8; 27:24 ("is the crown given over from seed to seed?"); Jer.38:3; Ez. 23:28; 25:4; Zech.11:6). The Evangelists use the "giving over" of Jesus to and by sinners, and also the giving over of Jesus by God (Rom.8:32 is very clear). But Mark 10:33 suggests that Jesus gave himself over to death, since he could have avoided going to Jerusalem. The Gospels (and especially John) are very clear that Jesus knew exactly what would happen, the implication of which is that he deliberately *provoked* the events of the Passion. Jesus was not a passive victim in this story: on the contrary, it was like a chess game where the chessmaster is playing novices. They play exactly how he arranges.

## Verses 6-11

So as Jesus said to them, "I am (he)," they went backward and fell to the ground. So again he asked them, "Whom are you seeking?" But they said, "Jesus the Nazorean." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am (he). If therefore you are seeking me, let these go away, in order that the word may be fulfilled which says that 'those whom thou hast given me, I have not lost one of them' [John 17:12]." So Simon Peter, having a sword, pulled it out and hit at the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear. (The name of the servant was Malchus.) So Jesus said to Peter, "Put the sword into the scabbard. The cup the Father has given me – am I not to drink it?"

(John 18:6-11; transl. R.E.Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1994)

**v.6:** *I am* (εγω ειμι, *ego eimi*). See John 8:58 (and cp. John 8:24, 28; 13:19), "Before Abraham was, I am" (πριν αβρααμ γενεσθαι εγω ειμι, *prin abraam genesthai ego eimi*). Although *ego eimi* is good Greek for "I am the one" or "It is I", it is very clear that John has Jesus' claim to the Name in mind. Brown (1970) presents independent evidence that *ego eimi* was used as a type of the divine name in early Judaism in his Commentary on John's Gospel. He also asserts that John 17:11 should be translated as "*keep them through thine own name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.*" The Father has given his Son his own Name!

I think that Brown's commentary on all this is illuminating :-

... There [John 17:11] the Name seems to have the power to keep the disciples safe; here the Name seems to have the power to paralyse his enemies; for as soon as he [Jesus] speaks it the arresting party is forced backwards (εις τα οπισω, *eis ta opiso*) and falls (επεσον, *epeson*) to the ground (χαμαι, *chamai*)! [Compare Ps.56:9, "then shall mine enemies turn back" (*eis ta opiso*); Ps.35:4, "let them be turned back (*eis ta opiso*) ... that devise my hurt"; Ps.27:2, "the wicked ... stumbled and fell" (*epesan*).] Falling down as a reaction to divine revelation is attested in Dan.2:46; 8:17; Rev.1:17; and that is how John would have the reader understand the reaction to Jesus' pronouncement. *Peson chamai* is combined with the verb "to worship" in Job 1:20. No matter what one thinks of the historicity of this scene it should not be explained away or trivialised. To know or use the divine Name, as Jesus does, is an exercise of awesome power. In Acts 3:6 Peter heals the lame man "in the name of Jesus of Nazareth," i.e., by the power of the name that Jesus has been given by God; and "there is no other name under heaven given among mankind by which we must be saved" [Acts 4:12]. Eusebius (AD313) attributes to Artapanus, who lived before the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, the legend that when Moses uttered before Pharaoh the secret Name of God, Pharaoh fell speechless to the ground. That legend ... illustrates an outlook that makes John's account of the arrest intelligible.

(R.E.Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, §13)

**v.9,10:** *the Word fulfilled; sword.* Jesus' own words from an hour or so ago (John 17:12) are quoted as *if they were Scripture*. This translation is stronger than the usual ones, making Jesus himself quote his own words to the arresting party. Of course, there are no quotation marks in the original Greek text, so this must be debatable to some extent; but I think that the picture painted on this reading points to the exercise of awesome charisma. Jesus is being arrested, but at every point he has the initiative. They come with a Roman cohort (600 men) and the Jewish Temple police, all armed to the teeth and looking for trouble, but he, commanding only twelve sleepy and frightened men, dominates the proceedings. Usually, when messiahs were arrested, all their followers were also mopped up – life expectancy for bandits (ληστης, *lestes*) was very short! But Jesus *instructs* them to let the disciples go, and they do!

We have been told all along by the Evangelists that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus had in mind. Of course they didn't – how could they have done? He intended to completely overturn and recast their worldview! It was impossible for them to anticipate the Resurrection – nothing could prepare them for that! It was only

*in the light of the Resurrection* that the Scriptures could be read correctly, as N.T.Wright (2003) establishes forensically. Accordingly, Peter had a sword. It was well-known that followers of messiahs needed swords! This is the sort of inflammatory situation that is almost impossible to control. Jewish hotheads (and Peter was certainly a hothead!) paid scant attention to overwhelming force. If the LORD is with you then "one can chase a thousand" (Jos.23:10, and cp. Deut.32:30)! Had Jesus here been anything less than mightily assertive there would have been a massacre. But John wants us to know that Jesus indeed had the power: power over the Romans (secular rulers), power over the Jews (spiritual rulers), and power over the intentions of his own friends (whom Satan could have so easily ruled, see Matt.16:23; Mark 8:33; Luke 4:8).

**v.11: the cup.** We have said this before, but must emphasise now, that the whole situation was in the hand of the Father. The Son was actively doing his Father's will.

## Verses 12-16

Thereupon the cohort and the tribune and the attendants of the Jews took Jesus and bound him. And they led (him) first to Annas, for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year. (Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that "It is better than one man die for the people." [John 11:50])

But following Jesus was Simon Peter and another disciple. But that disciple was known to the high priest, and he entered together with Jesus into the court of the high priest. But Peter was standing at the gate outside. Accordingly, the other disciple, the one known to the high priest, came out and spoke to the gatekeeper and brought Peter in. And so the servant woman, the gatekeeper, says to Peter, "Are you too one of the disciples of this man?" He says, "I am not". But the servants and the attendants were standing around, having made a charcoal fire because it was cold; and they were warming themselves. But Peter too was with them, standing and warming himself.

Thereupon the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I always taught in a synagogue and in the Temple, where all the Jews come together; and in secret I spoke nothing. Why do you question me? Question those who heard what I spoke to them. Behold, these know what I said." But when he said these things, one of the attendants who was standing by gave Jesus a slap, saying, "In such a way do you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken badly, give testimony about what is bad. If well, why do you beat me?" Thereupon, Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

But Simon Peter was standing there and warming himself. So they said to him, "Are you too one of his disciples?" And he denied and said, "I am not". One of the manservants of the high priest, being a relative of him whose ear Peter had cut off, says, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" And so Peter denied again, and immediately a cock crowed.

(John 18:12-27; transl. R.E.Brown, "*The Death of the Messiah*", 1994)

**v:12: Annas.** Who was high priest, Annas or Caiaphas? John calls both of them "high priest", but all the action is with Annas. Rudolf Bultmann, the great pre-war so-called "form-critical" scholar (who held that *John* came into its final form towards the end of the second century), thought that John mistakenly believed that the high priest was changed every year (v.13: Caiaphas was high priest "that year"). But clearly it is not necessary to read the text that way. "That year" can (and here does) imply, as Brown says :-

... "that fateful year". It is associated with Caiaphas' ability to prophesy about Jesus, and John is emphasising not the length of Caiaphas' term of office but its synchronism with the time of Jesus' death.  
(R.E.Brown, "*The Death of the Messiah*", 1994, §19)

Josephus also speaks ambiguously about the high priest, referring (in *Antiquities*) to Annas as "high priest" long after his term had ended, and referring (in *War*) to Jonathan and Ananias as "high priests" 15 years after Jonathan had been deposed. In fact, ancient sources (Josephus and the rabbinical literature) enable us to reconstruct the high priestly line with some confidence. Annas was high priest from AD6 to AD15, but remained a powerful force right up to the war with Rome which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70: his house had the high priesthood in the entire period. Five of his sons and two other relatives (including Caiaphas) became high priest in turn. Caiaphas seems to have reigned from AD18 to AD37, but we know little more about him (other than what we learn from the Gospels).

**v.15: the other disciple.** It is the Evangelist who gets Peter into the court. John carefully gives us details that allow us to see whose witness he is relying on. Here again he himself is speaking as the eyewitness. Incidentally, this is further evidence that the Evangelist could not have been John son of Zebedee. How could a Galilean fisherman be "known" to the high priest? This whole passage is very mysterious – clearly there is much that John is not telling us, and the events themselves are very far from simple. There are also many other details in this account that have previously been held to be incredible: for example the female gatekeeper. Could a woman have held this post? Raymond Brown points to Acts 12:13 and to Josephus in his *Antiquities* who "saw nothing inconsistent in picturing a woman gatekeeper at the house of King Saul's son Ishbosheth". The position of women seems to have deteriorated after the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but there is not that much 1<sup>st</sup> century evidence now extant. Where we can check him, John appears to be a reliable witness, therefore in the details that seem weird we are entitled to treat him as a primary source.

**v.22: the slap.** This episode where Annas questions Jesus is strange from more than one point of view. Why Annas and not Caiaphas? What is the purpose of the questioning? What is John's narrative purpose? From a narrative point of view, the passage serves only as a platform for Jesus. Annas is not quoted, and the servant is quoted only as a cue for Jesus himself. The whole passage underlines the extrajudicial nature of the proceedings on the one hand, and Jesus' domination of them on the other.

**v.27: the crow.** This entire passage is structured as the interleaving of Jesus' confrontation with Annas and Peter's confrontation with himself. How are we to read this? Peter is overcome, but Jesus is unanswerable. The Evangelist is pointing to the battle with the "powers and principalities" (Col.2:15).

## Verses 28-40

Then they lead Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium. Now it was early. And they did not enter into the praetorium lest they be defiled and in order that they might eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and says, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered and said to him, "If this fellow were not doing what was bad, we would not have given him over to you." So Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves, and according to your law judge him." The Jews said to him, "It is not permitted us to put anyone to death," in order that there might be fulfilled the word of Jesus that he spoke, signifying what kind of death he was going to die.

So Pilate went again into the praetorium, and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Of yourself do you say this, or have others told you this about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your nation and the chief priests have given you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my attendants would have struggled lest I be given over to the Jews.

But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." So Pilate said to him, "So then you are a king." Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. The reason for which I have been born and for which I have come into the world is that I may bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate says to him, "What is truth?"

And having said this, again he went out to the Jews and says to them, "I find no cause at all against him. You have a custom that I release to you one person at Passover. So do you desire that I release to you 'the King of the Jews'?" So they yelled back, "Not this fellow but Barabbas". But Barabbas was a bandit.

... the chief priests answered, "We have no King but Ceasar" ...

(John 18: 28-40; 19:15; transl. R.E.Brown, "*The Death of the Messiah*", 1994)

A.T.Wright thinks that Pilate's main desires were a) to look after Pilate, and b) to thwart the Jews. He wanted to do the opposite of what they wanted him to do. This is not an account of a *trial* at all. The account of the meeting of the Sanhedrin in John 11 is the only judicial account John gives (in contrast to the Synoptic Evangelists). And this passage makes it clear that the Jews have *already* come to an understanding with Pilate, an understanding that he now wants to wriggle out of. How else to read their reply, *if he were not doing bad things ...?* They do not accuse him, they allude to a previous accusation which Pilate pretends to have forgotten.

The events surrounding the "trial" of Jesus are the more puzzling the more they are considered. Why actually was he condemned? Note that the question I am asking here is *historical*, not theological. A.T.Wright (1996) considers it in great detail, adducing massive evidence for his account, which we follow here. The Jewish leaders want Pilate to crucify Jesus. This is because the people think he is a messiah, and this is what the Romans do to messiahs. But the situation is very complicated, since the Jewish leaders do not want the people to condemn them for handing Jesus over – that would make them traitors! They want to nip the Jesus movement in the bud by claiming that he was *leading the people astray* :-

The general populus were wanting Jesus to be the sort of messiah whom Pilate, if he caught him, would have to execute – the sort who, like Barabbas, would lead a violent revolution in the city (cf. Luke 23:19, which reads like a passage from Josephus: Barabbas has committed *phonos* [murder] during a *stasis* [uprising] in the *polis* [city]). If the Jewish leaders had found Jesus guilty of being a revolutionary messiah, and had handed him over to Pilate on that charge, they might well have precipitated the riot they were anxious to avoid (... riots, and Roman repression, at times of festival were nothing new ...). But if they were able to claim that he was guilty of a well-known capital crime in Jewish law [*leading the people astray*], they might win the people over. Further demonstration that this was their aim can be found in the mocking by the Jewish court. Whereas Herod and the Romans taunt Jesus as a would-be messiah, the Jewish leaders mock him as a would-be *prophet*.

A.T.Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (ch. 12 §3)

***Leading the people astray:*** This is what false prophets do whose prophecies "come to pass" but who urge the people to "follow other gods" (Deut.13: note that here the false prophet is a 'deceiver' – he is false even though his predictions come true – in contrast to the false prophet whose predictions do *not* come true, as in Deut.18 and Jer.28). This is how the later Jewish tradition (the rabbinical literature) remembers it:

Jesus was hanged in the eve of Passover. The herald went before him for forty days saying, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he practised sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Let everyone knowing anything in his defence come and plead for him.' But nothing was found in his defence, so he was hanged on the eve of Passover.

Babylonian Talmud: *bSanh.* 43a

The Babylonian Talmud was written down well after the final destruction of Jerusalem in AD135 and must be read with considerable caution for information from (at least) a century previously, since its (mostly) Hillelite authors did not always represent the Shammaite party entirely fairly :-

The Shammaite party, who formed the majority of Pharisees until at least AD70, were strongly inclined towards revolution. The 'live and let live' party were the 'lenient' Hillelites, so aptly exemplified by Gamaliel's attitude in Acts 5:33-40; but they were in the minority until at least AD70 (and we must recall that our evidence for the period AD70-135 is mostly from later, and thoroughly Hillelite, sources). The 'zeal' we observe in Saul of Tarsus represents the 'severe' Shammaite line, which dominated the Pharisaic agenda in the time of Jesus. Purity (in its very different manifestations such as food laws, handwashing and so on) was not, in this period, an end in itself, if indeed it was ever really that. It was the symbol, all the more important for a people who perceived themselves under threat, of national identity and national liberation.

A.T.Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (ch. 9 §1(ii))

But there is a much earlier text in Josephus, which can also be read as Jesus "leading the people astray". Wright points out (1996, ch. 9 §5) that "when what are usually seen as Christian interpolations are removed ... the text can ... be read in a positive light :-

[Jesus] was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many of the Jews and many of the Greeks.

Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:63f: Feldman's translation in the Loeb edition

"But a good case can be made for taking the crucial words in a far more negative sense :-

[Jesus] was a doer of strange deeds [*paradoxes*], and a deluder of the simple-minded. He led astray many Jews and Greeks.

Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:63f: Wright's translation

"The same charge [*leading astray*] is clearly present in John (7:47, in the context of vv.12, 25-7, 40; 10:19-21), Luke (23:2, 5, 14) and Matthew (9:34; 10:25; 12:24-7; 27:63f)." And Wright summarises much recent scholarly work which underlines this reading. He concludes :-

... we have seen that Jesus spoke and acted subversively in relation to Israel's symbols [*ie.*: *Temple, Land, Law*], and that this activity aroused a controversy quite unlike the debates between the different Pharisaical schools. He was not upholding what had come to be regarded as the inalienable symbols of Israel's nationhood and national aspirations. Instead, he was putting the symbols of his own work into the forefront, claiming in act, even more than in word, that Israel's god was in this way reconstituting his people. The charge that he was a deceiver, leading the people astray, perhaps through magic and false prophecy, fits the bill closely: his onlookers would have had to conclude something like this or would have had to have become his followers (and compare John 7:45-52 where exactly this choice is posed). We can be fairly sure that nobody in the early church invented the idea that Jesus' family said he was mad (Mark 3:21). It is highly unlikely that anyone would have invented the charge that Jesus did what he did through being in league with the prince of demons (Mt.12:24; Mk.3:22; Lk.11:15 and cf. Jn.7:20). We are here on firm historical ground.

A.T.Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (ch. 9 §5)

Wright is an historian writing for secular and sceptical audiences. When he says "fairly sure" and "highly unlikely", he is using scholarly understatement. When he does not capitalise "God" it is because he is explicitly avoiding religious presuppositions. He wants to show that *the history itself*, viewed dispassionately, shows how to read the surprising story of Jesus in the Gospels, allows us to coherently reconstruct the events surrounding the trial and execution of Jesus in a way that does not arbitrar-

ily exclude any of the evidence, and shows us that the Resurrection must have been a real historical event. Of course, Wright's reading will not *compel* non-believers to believe, but it does mean that non-believers must acknowledge the possibility and plausibility of the Christian story. For two centuries scholars have perpetuated the myth that the Gospel is not history – it is invented. This is an old assertion that Peter himself denied (II Pet.1:16), but more recently it has had new rationalist clothes that have led many astray. But we are on firm historical ground. It is we, not they, who are being rational.

**What is truth?** Pilate's question has been debated endlessly, as has the question, "Who killed Jesus?" *Could* Pilate have let Jesus go? He wanted to, not because of representations from his wife or because of his conscience pricking him, but because (as A.T.Wright insists) he simply wanted to upset the Jewish leaders. But they were willing to press the case to Caesar (John 19:15) and this made the conclusion inevitable.

Should the Jewish leaders take the blame for killing Jesus? The Gospels show Jesus in conflict with the authorities from the beginning. But again it seems to me that they had no choice. Children cannot lead the country, but only the children inherit the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:14f; Luke 18:16f). Nicodemus was a leader sympathetic to Jesus, and advised by him to be born again; even he could only manage to bury Jesus' body (John 3:2; 7:59; 19:39). The leaders *had* to oppose Jesus! How else was Jesus to be victorious over Satan and all the principalities of darkness? Jesus wept over Jerusalem, "*Thou that killest the prophets*" (Matt.23:37; Luke 13:34)!

Should the Jewish people take the blame? They said, "*His blood be upon us and our children!*" (Matt.27:25) Indeed it was, indeed it was! In only a generation Jerusalem would lie in ruins, the whole of Judah would be sacked and there would be crosses all the way to Ceasarea. Nevertheless, their response was manipulated by their leaders.

Of course, they all had their own responsibility. But Peter put his finger on it when he told the people at Pentecost, "**You** put him to death ..." (Acts 2:23), where of course most of them had no direct hand in it. But all of us are responsible, since all of us accommodate evil: "*We all like sheep have gone astray ... there is none that doeth good, no, not one*" (Is.53:6; Rom.3:10ff; cp. Ps.119:176; Jer.50:5; I Pet.2:25; Pss.14:3; 53:3; Eccl.7:20).

In John's Passion account Jesus is King: everything that happens to him (Jesus) is with his consent and within God's purposes. Jesus "*set his face*" to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51); he prophesied his own death: the Synoptic witness to this is clear and extensive (Mt.16:21 / Mk.8:31 / Lk.9:22; Mt.17:22f; Mk.9:31; Mt.20:18f / Mk.10:33f / Lk.18:31ff), and John shows Jesus perfectly aware of what was going to happen, predicting his death (12:23-33), his betrayal (13:18-30) and Peter's denial (13:38). Where then is free-will, if all the political leaders were *constrained* to act the way they did? As I emphasised above with Pharaoh; sowing the wind, you risk reaping the whirlwind – beware, sin crouches at the door: you can harden your heart against God one too many times, and then next time it may be God who hardens your heart!

So Pilate concludes his conversation with Jesus by the question, *what is truth?* Pilate is a stranger to truth. But if he has any sense of duty at all it will certainly be Machiavellian. Similarly with the Jewish leaders: Caiaphas' prophecy, "It is better for one man to die for the people" (John 11:50; 18:14) was honestly made from a sense of duty, and in his case the Machiavellian intention was explicit. Machiavelli famously

asserted that *the ends justify the means*. But he was surely right to insist that the first duty of a Prince is to maintain the peace, since war brings untold bloodshed, pain, terror, plague and famine to all. And if the Prince is too nice about procedure then he will be overcome by events. Machiavelli's thesis has been debated ever since, but it is telling that his book is still in print! The political machinations that all the Evangelists describe are uncomfortably familiar to us!

## **Summary and Conclusion**

John wants to tell us *what* happened, *why* it happened, and what it *means*. Note that things don't "happen" in a vacuum: the story of *what happened* cannot be confined to bare "facts". A man was crucified. So? These things were routine. And bloody – they were not spoken of in polite society! So much so that even the methods the Romans used were debatable until quite recently. The point of the story lies in all the details: twice (at least) Jesus speaks of "glory" (*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*, John 12:23; *Now is the Son of Man glorified*, John 13:31). Where is the glory in crucifixion? This is a deep paradox that has never since ceased to puzzle the world.

*What happened* cannot be properly known without a knowledge of *why* it happened and what it all *means*. History must be a *story*, with plot and purpose. History is *never* bare facts. Bare facts *cannot* be interesting – what we are *compelled* to believe gives us nothing, and changes us not at all. This is a general statement, true for all sorts of history. History tells us who we are, and who we could be.

Nevertheless, John is determined to show us the glory of Jesus Christ, even in the Passion, his darkest hour. Especially in his Passion: "*the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not*" (John 1:5). Of course, we read the Passion story understanding that this wasn't all the story – it continued to the Resurrection, which is manifestly glorious. But the Evangelists emphasise to us that were the glory not there in the Passion then the Resurrection would mean nothing either. Note in Matthew "many" rising from their graves and walking around Jerusalem, a throw-away remark. They were not inaugurating the Kingdom of God like Jesus was, substituting the Church for the Temple, the whole World for the land of Israel, and a Spirit-filled heart for ritual purity. They, unlike Jesus, did not provoke the wrath of the temporal rulers, the enmity of the spiritual leaders, the treachery of his closest friends, and the hatred of the powers of the air. Neither their deaths nor their resurrections mean anything to us.

There has been endless debate about the inconsistency of the Gospels with each other, as though reality is tidy and easy to communicate – or even know! Who can explain the current political situation (the imminent collapse of the Euro in response to the Greek crisis) in a way that will be acknowledged by historians a thousand years hence to adequately describe all the relevant intricacies? But the Evangelists managed to do exactly this in a very small book. The whole New Testament I have in my hand is less than 300 pages of which the Gospels and Acts are just over half. It is a brilliant triumph of genre, style, concision and purpose. The Gospels have been shown many times to be consistent with each other, and their differences have only underlined their mutual independence as witnesses, thereby emphasising their reliability. They appear inconsistent only to those who insist on flattening out and simplifying the reality of Jesus' times; to those who approach the texts irrationally and anachronistically. To those, that is, who are not willing to accept the discipline of *history*.

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