

John 2: 11

Saw the glory → editorial
comment

Courting Betrayal

**Jesus as Victim
in the Gospel of John**

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Journal for the Study of the New Testament
Supplement Series 161

Gender, Culture, Theory 5



commandment and to do so *in extremis*—his subjects do not die for him, he dies for them. Rather than obsequiousness, he asks for a genuinely servile approach to be practised among his people and again, he is the first to show them what this means. He does not demand mere loyalty, but the practice of a love that is prepared to lay down its life and not solely for the king, but also for fellow subjects. Signs of status, dignity and honour as we know them are absent; the dignity of this king is displayed in his debasement before his friends and enemies as he washes their feet. His kingship is not about exerting authority but bearing witness to the truth. His 'sovereignty' must also be understood in this context as he is a king who eschews the exercise of power as we know it. Pilate's power may be derivative, but Jesus' power is also limited. He is a king with power to do one thing alone: to lay down his life (10.18). He does not speak on his own authority (12.49) and he does what another commands (14.31). Even stranger, that 'other' is his father. If there is one thing an earthly king does not have, it is a father—'The King is dead. Long live the King'. These points will be further explored during the following discussion on the arrest, trials and crucifixion, but suffice to say here that Jesus' identity as a victim cannot preclude his identity as a king. The former must be used to reinterpret the latter.

The Arrest of Jesus (18.1-12)

From the point of Jesus' arrest his oppression and subjection to physical threat evidently intensify as he becomes a political prisoner. Although his ability to move about the country has been restricted for some time (7.1; 11.8), he now loses his liberty entirely. The 'elusive Christ'¹⁰ has finally been ensnared and is at the mercy of hostile Jewish and Roman authorities. The occasion of his arrest has the potential to be far more violent than it actually turns out to be. Jesus is 'seized and bound' (v. 12), but the only real casualty is Malchus, the high priest's slave, who has his ear amputated in a burst of enthusiasm by Peter.

An examination of the contents of the text reveals an operation of such scale and drama that the scene is almost farcical. Jesus has gone with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a familiar meeting place in a garden. We can assume that the sum total of his party consists of twelve men—Jesus and the remaining eleven disciples. In the garden they are confronted by the betrayer's party, consisting of a Roman

10. As Stibbe sees him ('Elusive Christ', pp. 19-38).

cohort (τὴν σπεῖραν), numbering six hundred armed soldiers¹¹ carrying torches,¹² a number of officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, and Judas himself. The Synoptics do not paint such an official and imposing picture of Jesus' apprehenders.¹³ They talk of a crowd¹⁴ which has among it a contingent of religious authorities, but does not yet involve the Romans. It could be argued that the reason for mobilizing a sizeable army to arrest one man was to counteract any trouble there may have been from supporters of Jesus, although it can hardly be said that the support of the people is something that Jesus can rely on in John. Despite their cries of 'Hosanna' as he enters Jerusalem (12.12-13) and the worries of the Pharisees that the world has gone after him (12.19), we know that they are fickle in nature, as is evidenced by 7.30 and 8.59. The Johannine Jesus in no way commands the popular support of his Synoptic counterpart, whose arrest is delayed for fear of the people rioting (Mt. 26.5 and parallels).

The effect that the inclusion of the Roman cohort in the narrative has is to emphasize the immense force ranged against Jesus in the Johannine account. On a practical level, it could be that, due to the failure of the authorities to capture Jesus in the past, notably at the Feast of Tabernacles (7.25-52), they are not prepared to risk his escaping their clutches again and so they take the precautionary measure of marshalling all available men. Symbolically, what Jesus is faced with here is the hatred

11. So claims Lindars, (*Gospel of John*, p. 539). BAGD concurs: 'the tenth part of a legion, normally 600 men' (p. 761). Sloyan disagrees, however, exclaiming 'surely not the literal six hundred men ... but a small fraction' (*John*, p. 201); and Fuller sees the size of the cohort as being 'grossly exaggerated' ('Passion, Death and Resurrection', p. 55). The text allows us to assume that it is the full cohort and it becomes less incredible if the authorities had in mind the possibility of civil unrest following the arrest. Ernst Haenchen goes further, suggesting the whole Roman-Jewish company would have amounted to around 800, armed and with lanterns to prevent any of Jesus' party escaping in the darkness (*John*, II, p. 164).

12. A note unique to John and possibly a reference to τις περιπατῇ ἐν τῇ νυκτί, προσκόπτει, ὅτι τὸ φῶς οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν αὐτῷ (Jn 11.10).

13. For a thorough study of the differences between the Johannine and Synoptic accounts see M. Sabbe, 'The Arrest of Jesus in Jn 18.1-11 and its Relation to the Synoptic Gospels', in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'Evangile de Jean: Sources, Rédaction, Théologie* (BETL, 44; Leuven: Leuven University Press/Uitgeverij Peeters, 1977), pp. 203-34. Sabbe's article is a refutation of the claim by Anton Dauer that Jn 18.1-19, 30 is a combination of the redactional work of the evangelist with a written pre-Johannine source.

14. Mk 14.43 and Lk. 22.47 use ὄχλος; Mt. 26.47 uses ὄχλος πολὺς.

and opposition of the entire world.¹⁵ He is confronted with the might of the Roman army (representing the Gentile world), and the power of the chief priests and Pharisees (representing his community), all of whom have overtly hostile intentions. Bearing this in mind, the evangelist's comment in 18.4 that Jesus 'knew all that was to befall him' seems hardly surprising. There is no need for supernatural knowledge here—it would have been patently obvious to all present what was about to befall Jesus.¹⁶ The time for escape is now ended, as practical preparations for the hour of death are set in motion with the arrest. Faced with this absurdly one-sided situation, it is Jesus who takes the initiative, as the leader of his own party, by approaching and addressing the masses with the question 'whom do you seek?' (v. 4). They too have a leader; a representative of the world that rejects Jesus, but it is obviously not Judas whom Jesus addresses, or who makes the reply 'Jesus of Nazareth' (v. 5). Nor is it Judas who identifies Jesus to the rest of his entourage; but rather, Jesus identifies himself. The role of the betrayer is minimized to gathering a sufficiently impressive band and leading it to the garden. There is no need for words or a kiss between the two men.

The reason for the dramatic response of the assemblage to Jesus' admission ἐγώ εἰμι ('I am he') has been the source of much speculation. Some hold that falling to the ground is the typical response to a theophany, which is what has occurred here,¹⁷ whether or not the use of the divine name is implied.¹⁸ An alternative suggestion if use of the divine name is accepted is that the crowd are not so much floored by the theophany as horrified at the blasphemy.¹⁹ Others believe that it is

15. Barrett claims that the inclusion of the Romans was due to John's intention to show that 'the whole κόσμος was ranged against Jesus' (*Gospel According to St John*, p. 516).

16. Some scholars hold that there is supernatural knowledge on Jesus' part (Barrett, *Gospel According to St John*, p. 519; Haenchen, *John*, II, p. 165; and Sabbe, 'The Arrest of Jesus', p. 217). The reader already knows that Jesus has a strong awareness of his impending death.

17. Brown, *Gospel According to John*, II, p. 818; Lindars, *Gospel of John*, p. 541, Barrett, *Gospel According to St John*, p. 520. All refer to other examples of biblical theophanies, for example, Dan. 10.9; Acts 9.4, 22.7, 26.14.

18. So Haenchen, 'the revelatory formula of the divine man' (*John*, II, p. 165).

19. Compare the ritualistic melodrama with which the high priest responds to Jesus' blasphemy in the Synoptics: 'by tearing his garments' (Mk 14.63 and parallels).

simply the 'intimidating effect'²⁰ of the 'divine majesty'²¹ of the person of Jesus. An interesting, if implausible, suggestion is that of Stibbe, who muses that the captors respond in this way primarily because they are astounded that they have finally succeeded in ensnaring their victim: 'They fall back in amazement not so much because Jesus is divine as because they have at last apprehended the elusive Christ'.²² The irony of the scene is rich. Six hundred professional soldiers are sent to arrest one man, who fells them all with two words. Also ironic is the fact that this is the one point when Jesus exhibits any kind of power over his adversaries, and it is the very moment at which he loses his liberty. A tremendous sense of anticipation is created by the writer at the end of v. 6: Jesus is surrounded by a hostile multitude, but suddenly they are all incapacitated. *What will happen next?* If we did not already know the ending we might wonder if he was going to seize his chance and flee, just as he did in 7.30, 8.59 and 10.39. This time, however, he simply stands there and impatiently repeats his question and its answer. His second statement is cleverly phrased in a way that will enable his disciples to escape detention, even if he cannot: 'I told you that I am he; so, if you seek me, let these men go' (v. 8). Thus the desertion of his followers is legitimized in John on theological grounds.

Missing from the Johannine account of Jesus' arrest is his accusation that the authorities had no need to apprehend him under the cover of darkness as they could have approached him in the temple at any time (Mt. 26.55 and parallels). This would have been patently inappropriate in John, since they frequently *had* attempted to arrest him at other times, but without success. Nor does he lament the fact that they have come after him with swords and clubs, like a robber (Mk 14.48 and parallels). The Johannine Jesus already knows that the authorities afford him no respect and in all likelihood expects this sort of rough treatment. Matthew's pious platitude, 'for all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (26.52) is also missing. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is no pacifist and scorns Peter's impetuous bravery not for the reason stated above, or even because he could, if he wanted, marshal his own angelic army, but because it is *another sabotage attempt on the fulfilment of his work*. Just as Jesus rebuked Peter during the footwashing scene for attempting to pressure him into behaving in a manner Peter found more comfortable

20. Sloyan, *John*, p. 201.

21. Sanders, *Gospel According to St John*, p. 385.

22. Stibbe, *John*, p. 184.

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(13.6-10), so he does not trust Peter's motives here either. Once again Peter finds an ignominious master unpalatable. He cannot seriously have intended to take on the Roman forces single-handedly. The implication is that he would rather have Jesus a hero, dying in a blaze of glory, than surrendering in a cowardly fashion, shamefully shackled and destined for the most dishonourable death. Jesus' attitude is clear from the reason that he gives for rejecting Peter's actions: 'Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?' (v. 11). There is no response from Peter, who presumably now flees with the other disciples. For them, Jesus' fate has been sealed and all is lost. However, for Jesus there was never an alternative to the Father's cup. He behaves with dignity and resignation during this scene, rather than with potency,²³ as finally the κόσμος closes in and he is seized and bound.

The Jewish 'Trial' and Peter's Denial (18.13-27)²⁴

The Jewish trial and the denial of Jesus by Peter are interwoven, with the contrasting behaviour of the two individuals being used by the evangelist to illuminate the themes of bearing witness and concealment. In comparison to the Synoptic account of the Jewish trial, John's portrayal appears purely perfunctory in nature. This is even more evident when this scene is compared to the subsequent interrogation before Pilate in the Fourth Gospel, which is highly elaborate. The events of 18.13-27 do not advance the plot in any significant manner, serving merely to re-emphasize Jesus' innocence in the face of the accusations of the Jews. The reason for this cursory treatment of the Jewish trial in John is simply that, by this time, there is little more to be added about the reason why Jesus is rejected by the Jews and the fate that awaits him at their hands.²⁵ The reader has known why they wish to kill him since

23. Stibbe sees the scene ending with Jesus exhibiting 'Socratic composure...in control of events' (John, p. 181). There is, however, a difference between being in control of *oneself* and being in control of one's *environment*. It is the former, rather than the latter that is the case here.

24. The word trial appears in inverted commas because, unlike the Synoptic accounts, it would appear that John's account does not relate a proper trial before the Sanhedrin, but an informal interrogation (Brown, *Gospel According to John*, II, p. 826; Rensberger, *Overcoming the World*, p. 91).

25. Andrew Lincoln notes that there is no account of a Jewish trial before the Sanhedrin because 'throughout his public ministry Jesus can be viewed as on trial before Israel and its leaders' ('Trials, Plots and the Narrative of the Fourth Gospel',