

“What is Truth?”

Pilate’s Question in its Johannine and Larger Biblical Context

By Andreas Kostenberger

6 Observations on Jesus’ Trial in the Gospel of John

- 1) While Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” and the fact that the personal embodiment of Truth was standing directly in front of him is definitely ironic, in light of the trial narrative as a whole, it seems that John is trying to show the irony in Pilate’s rhetorical question with regard to the utter indifference towards the truth acted out by both the Jewish leaders and Pilate.
- 2) The parallelism between Caiaphas and Pilate and their respective roles and actions in John’s Gospel.
 - a. Speaking a prophetic word
 - b. Handing Jesus over
 - c. Representative of the whole world as responsible for crucifying Jesus
- 3) The relationship between truth and the cross works to communicate a resounding message. The truth was crucified.
- 4) Although Pilate enters the narrative in John 18 and 19, he is relatively a minor character in John’s Gospel. Still, as it has been from the very beginning, the Jews and Jesus are the major characters of this gospel story which continues to reinforce the message that John has communicated all along, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him (Jn 1:11).” In one fell swoop, the Jews both reject Jesus as the Messiah and the Truth.
- 5) Pilate’s interjection in Jn 18:38 should be heard as an attempt to cut off Jesus’ testimony. He had heard enough of Jesus’ sermonizing; there were more “important” matters at hand.
- 6) The results of Jesus’ Jewish and Roman trials demonstrate the relationship between power and truth. The truth cannot be conquered by brute force and political suppression.