

Pilate's Extended Dialogues in the Gospel of John: Did the Evangelist alter a written source?

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In the Gospel of John (hereinafter, GJohn) the dialogues between Pilate and Jesus and between Pilate and the Jews are significantly longer than those found in the Gospel of Mark (hereinafter, GMark), the latter being almost universally accepted among NT historians as the earliest of the four canonical Gospels.

GJohn divides the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus into two segments and divides the dialogue between Pilate and the Jews into four segments, weaving these several segments together and interspersing other material, such as the mocking of Jesus by the Roman guards. As an experiment, I took the two segments with Jesus and linked them together as a single conversation and took the four Jewish segments and linked them together as a single conversation. I then separately examined the two conversations for logical narrative flow.

A critical reading of these two separate conversations suggested, at least to this analyst, that there was something odd about both conversations. There appear to be three major problems. First, in terms of narrative flow some of the questions and answers within each of the two separate conversations seem to be out of logical chronological order. Second, some of the answers in each conversation seem as if they belonged to different questions within the same conversation, as if someone shuffled the original answers and reassigned them to different questions. Third, the questions that Pilate asks Jesus in GMark also appear in approximately the same form in GJohn but in the latter they get different response from Jesus in GJohn and similarly, Jesus' responses to Pilate in GMark also appear in GJohn but as responses to different questions than those asked in GMark.

In this essay I will argue that 1) the author of GJohn had a written source for these two extended conversations; 2) this earlier written source originated as an attempt to address perceived shortcomings in an earlier version of the Passion Narrative that was similar to what appears in GMark; and 3) the author of GJohn, in order to address additional concerns, further reworked this written revision by rearranging the order of the questions and answers.

Tables 1-4

[Table 1](#) presents GJohn's complete dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, following the same sequential order as it appears in that Gospel. [Table 2](#) sets forth my proposed reconstruction of Pilate's dialogue with Jesus as it would have appeared in the written source before it was altered by the author of GJohn. I have placed two portions of that dialogue in brackets. The bracketed portions each contain an attack on the Jews. I suspect that the author of GJohn added these two elements to his written source but I will not address that issue in this paper.

[Table 3](#) contains GJohn's complete dialogue between Pilate and the Jews, following the same sequential order as it appears in that Gospel. [Table 4](#) sets forth my proposed reconstruction of the dialogue between Pilate and the Jews as it would have appeared in the written source before the author of GJohn altered it.

It is my argument that both proposed reconstructions present smoother-flowing more coherent conversations in a more logical chronological order than do the dialogues as presently preserved in GJohn. To the extent that this conclusion is correct, it serves as a major argument in favor of a pre-existing written source.

Pilate and Jesus: GMark vs. GJohn

In GMark Pilate asks Jesus only two questions. First, Pilate asks Jesus if he is King of the Jews and Jesus responds, “You say so (15:2).” Second, Pilate says, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you (15:4).” Jesus responds with silence (15:5). GMark’s account seems to have several shortcomings from a logical narrative point of view and GJohn appears to address some of those concerns.

For example, nothing about Pilate's interrogation of Jesus in GMark would reasonably lead Pilate to think Jesus is innocent. In fact, in GMark Pilate never makes any claim that Jesus is innocent whereas GJohn has three specific declarations by Pilate that he finds no case against Jesus. Also, when GMark’s Jesus’ says, “you say so,” the response seems slightly off kilter. Pilate didn’t say so; he only asked a question. Either Pilate’s question had a more accusatory tone than Mark let’s on, or Jesus’ answer was inappropriate. GJohn, on the other hand, has a longer conversation between Pilate and Jesus that gives the reader some reason to think that Pilate could find Jesus innocent, and GJohn has Jesus give GMark’s "you say so" answer to Pilate’s question about being a king only after Pilate makes a more forceful accusation.

Let’s look at how GJohn handles GMark's dialogue between Jesus and Pilate. [Table 1](#) sets forth the complete dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, following the same chronological order as it appears in GJohn. (The numbering sequence in column 1 will make it easier to follow the reconstruction of the source dialogue later on.)

GMark and GJohn both begin Pilate's interrogation of Jesus with the same question: “Are you the King of the Jews?” But in GJohn Jesus responds with a question of his own. “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me (18:34)?” This answer avoids the dismissive air of GMark’s Jesus. GJohn’s Jesus simply attempts to find out if the accusation of being a king is based on Pilate’s personal knowledge or based on what the Jews have told him.

This leads Pilate to put forth a variation of GMark’s second question. “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done (18:35)?” This second question by Pilate in GJohn is the functional equivalent of Mark’s second and final question to Jesus. Both GMark and GJohn point out that the Jewish authorities have placed charges against Jesus and each has Pilate ask Jesus to respond to the charges. In GMark the request to respond to the charges is met with silence. In GJohn, however, Jesus again responds in a different manner. “My kingdom is not from this world (18:36).” GJohn’s Jesus then adds an attack on the Jews for handing him over (18:36). It is this answer in GJohn that provides a basis for Pilate finding no case against Jesus. Instead of dismissing the accusation, as Jesus does in GMark, GJohn’s Jesus explains that he is not in competition with the Roman Empire because his kingdom is not over any earthly territory. (GJohn doesn't address the question of how the Roman God Jupiter might respond to this claim about a heavenly kingdom.)

So, GJohn’s dialogue between Pilate and Jesus begins with the same two basic questions that Pilate asks in GMark, but GJohn’s Jesus gives two very different responses. GJohn’s Jesus is more responsive and less dismissive than GMark’s and provides a reason for finding him not guilty of the charges that he claims to be King of the Jews.

Where in GJohn, then, are the two answers that Jesus gave in GMark? The first of the two GMark answers comes in response to Pilate’s third question in GJohn. After Jesus explains the nature of his kingdom, Pilate makes a direct accusation against Jesus. “So you are a king (18:37)?”

It is at this point that GJohn’s Jesus gives the GMark response, “You say that I am a king (18:37).” To which, he adds, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice (18:37).”

In GJohn, Jesus’ response is far more appropriate than in Mark’s. First, Jesus has already explained that he is not a king in the sense that Pilate means. Second, Pilate has made a direct and allegedly erroneous accusation against Jesus. The response by GJohn’s Jesus suggests more an air of frustration at what he perceives as Pilate’s dim-wittedness rather than Mark’s more dismissive attitude.

The second part of Jesus' answer, about being born to the truth, however, presents a problem. It doesn't seem to address Pilate's lack of comprehension. The issue immediately before Pilate is not credibility but clarity of expression. Pilate has essentially said, "So what is it? Are you or aren't you a king." Jesus' answer doesn't clarify matters.

That Jesus' explanation seems somewhat muddled in this context is apparent from Pilate's response. "What is truth (18:38)?" Although this statement is often treated as a deep philosophical reflection on Jesus' prior answer, the context suggests otherwise. The question is rhetorical and Pilate doesn't wait for an answer. His reply suggests more a frustrated lack of comprehension than deep thought.

Pilate immediately steps outside and announces to the crowd that he finds no case against Jesus. However, that is not what he said just a few moments earlier, when he accused Jesus of being a king. Basically, GJohn's Pilate seems to display no understanding of what Jesus is talking about and as his later actions demonstrate he treats Jesus' claim to kingship as more a matter for ridicule than as a serious threat. It is this understanding that later leads Pilate and the Roman guards to mock and abuse Jesus as King of the Jews and to argue that the Jews should let him go.

A more difficult problem emerges with GJohn's treatment of GMark's second response by Jesus, silence. After some interaction with the Jewish crowd Pilate returns to ask Jesus another question. "Where are you from (19.9)?" It is this question in GJohn that Jesus refuses to answer.

Jesus' silence in this regard is most bizarre. In the first place, a fundamental theme in GJohn is that Jesus comes from Heaven, and he preaches that doctrine frequently in the Gospel. Pilate's question about where Jesus comes from seems to be the natural lead-in for some remark by Jesus about his being sent from heaven. What makes this silence even more strange is that Jesus has already told Pilate that Jesus' kingdom is not from this world. Having said that, why would Jesus suddenly clam up when it comes to addressing a fundamental doctrine of his ministry? This sequence of Jesus' silence about where he comes from after talking about his kingdom not being from this world suggests a chronological problem with the order of GJohn's narrative.

In response to Jesus' silence, Pilate challenges him further to respond. "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you (19:10)?" Pilate's follow-up suggests a further chronological problem. At this point in time Pilate has made three public declarations that he found no case against Jesus. Why would Jesus' silence as to the question of where he came from provoke a threat of crucifixion? In terms of narrative flow, one suspects that this question must have originally come earlier in the sequence of events.

Reconstructing the Source Dialogue Between Pilate and Jesus

In the preceding discussion, I noted that GJohn's Jesus gives different responses to GMark's questions from Pilate, and gives GMark's responses by Jesus to a different set of questions from Pilate. I have also suggested that there seem to be elements of chronological disorder in the Johannine narrative. Let me turn now to my proposed reconstruction of a prior written source and see how my suggestions address these problems. Look at [Table 2](#) to see how I have rearranged the questions and answers.

In this reconstruction I start with the original GMark question and answer. As noted above, Jesus' reply in GMark seemed inappropriate to Pilate's question, as Pilate had not said that Jesus was the king of the Jews but only asked if that was so. Here, this proposed pre-Johannine source picks up on that concern. When Jesus says "you say so" Pilate's replies, "I am not a Jew, am I." Pilate is essentially rebuking Jesus, pointing out that he "didn't say that, rather the Jews said it." The author of GJohn may have found this particular scenario troubling as it depicts Pilate as possibly getting the better of Jesus in the inquiry and felt a need to rearrange the material so that it showed Jesus always in command, a Johannine theme throughout GJohn. In the earlier source, however, Jesus responds to Pilate's rebuke with his first line of defense. He talks about his role as a prophet rather than as a king, someone who has come to speak the truth, and implies that the Jews don't like the message he is bringing and therefore they have brought false charges against him.

Pilate, however, presses further. He is still not quite sure what it is that Jesus claims to be and asks what truth Jesus is teaching vis-à-vis his role as a king. Jesus, perceiving the nature of the question, again avoids a direct answer. He wants to know why Pilate asks the question. Is it based on things that Pilate knows or only on what the Jewish authorities have told him?

Pilate responds by saying the Jewish authorities have handed Jesus over and Pilate wants to know why they did so. As in GMark, Jesus remains silent when asked about the charges brought against him. Pilate becomes angry at the silence and reminds Jesus of the power to condemn him to death. Jesus responds that Pilate has no such power unless it comes from heaven.

The reference to power coming from heaven leads Pilate to ask Jesus where he comes from. Jesus responds with the statement that his kingdom is not from this world. Pilate concludes from that answer that Jesus does claim to be some sort of king and says, "So you are a king." The dialogue ends at this point and in the original source this probably led to the mockery of Jesus by Pilate and the Roman soldiers who ridicule his claim to being a king.

The final conclusion in the proposed written source is that while Jesus claimed to be some sort of ethereal king, he did not claim to be an earthly king and Pilate determined that Jesus' claim to being a king was somewhat nonsensical and not deserving of death as he doesn't appear to be challenging Roman authority. Traces of this conclusion are obvious in GJohn, but the re-arrangement of the theological/philosophical discussions seem designed to show Pilate with a more respectful attitude towards Jesus, a Pilate that might be more offended by the Jewish opposition than appears in the written source. The author of GJohn also probably found the concluding accusation in the written source, "So you are a king," to be offensive and decided to rearrange the dialogue in order to change the import of the accusation.

Pilate and the Jews

Let me turn now to some anomalies in the dialogue between Pilate and the Jews. [Table 3](#) shows the original chronological sequence of the dialogue between Pilate and the Jews

In the beginning of GJohn's dialogue with the Jews, Pilate asks what accusations the Jews bring against Jesus (18:29). As in GMark the accusations are not specified. The Jewish authorities respond, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you (18:30)." This is sort of like saying, "Beats me. You figure out what he did wrong." Pilate responds by telling the Jews to take Jesus and try him themselves according to their own law (18:31). Pilate seems to be saying, "if you won't tell me what he did, don't bother me with your problems." We should recall here that in GJohn there was no Jewish trial of Jesus prior to going to Pilate and no charges had been voted against him.

At this point, the Jews respond, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death (18:31)." In GMark, there is no explanation for why Pilate is asked to conduct proceedings against Jesus when the dispute seems to be an internal Jewish affair of no import to the Roman government. In GJohn, the Jewish reply attempts to explain why Pilate winds up hearing the charges against Jesus. As a result, Pilate, apparently with great reluctance, agrees to hear the case and goes off to question Jesus outside the presence of the Jewish authorities (18:39).

Contrast this portion of the dialogue with a later exchange between Pilate and the Jews. It takes place after Pilate has partially examined Jesus, after the Barabbas incident, and after the mockery and abuse of Jesus. Pilate exhibits Jesus in mock royal garb and the Jews cry out, "Crucify him! Crucify him! (19:6)" In response, Pilate says, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him (19:6)."

Pilate's response is troubling and presents a chronological problem. GJohn has already told us earlier that Pilate told the Jews to take Jesus themselves and try him, and the Jews said they weren't allowed to put anyone to death. If the Jews said they couldn't put anyone to death, why would Pilate then tell the Jews to crucify Jesus themselves? The sequence seems to be out of chronological order. So is the next Jewish response. "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God (19:7)."] Shouldn't

this accusation come up when Pilate asked what the charges were? And why didn't the Jews remind Pilate that they couldn't put anyone to death?

The narrative flow seems to suggest that some questions and answers were inverted. When Pilate says that the Jews should try Jesus themselves, it would seem that this would be the place where the Jews would respond that they have a law and according to that law Jesus should die. Then we would expect Pilate to say that if Jesus violated Jewish law then the Jews themselves should crucify Jesus, at which point the Jews would respond that they are not permitted to put anyone to death. But that is not the sequence in GJohn.

Let's look at another example. After Pilate's initial examination of Jesus, he comes out and announces that "I find no case against him (18:38)." Pilate then immediately raises the alleged custom of having the Governor release a prisoner over the Passover holidays and asks if he should release "the King of the Jews (18:39)." The Jews reject the offer and ask for the release of Barabbas (18:40). Pilate takes Jesus and has him whipped, and the Roman soldiers mock and abuse him.

Later, after further questioning of Jesus, GJohn tells us "From then on Pilate tried to release him (19:12)" but the Jews opposed his action. This allegation about Pilate, from then on, trying to release Jesus also seems out of chronological order. He had already been trying to release Jesus earlier, right after the first interview with Jesus when he declared that he found no case against him. Let's review that scene again for further difficulties.

When Pilate came out after the first interview with Jesus and said he found no case against him, he immediately raised the question of releasing a prisoner over the holidays. Let's put aside here the problem that in GMark it is Jews in the crowd who raise the issue of a prisoner release and not Pilate. In terms of GJohn's narrative flow, this sequence doesn't make sense. Pilate had just declared that he found Jesus innocent. It was his initial duty therefore to release him. He should not have to raise the holiday release issue unless some opposition had been voiced to the release. But no opposition had yet been raised. Why didn't he simply announce, "Therefore I am releasing him"? If opposition arose, then he might consider the holiday appeal.

This suggests that the later reference to Pilate, from then on wanting to release Jesus, actually belongs earlier in the story, after the first declaration that Pilate found no case against Jesus, and that the holiday offer followed at some point after that reference.

Let's now look at [Table 4](#) where I propose a reconstructed earlier written source for GJohn's dialogues between Pilate and the Jews and where I address the concerns previously noted.

The dialogue starts as it presently does in GJohn, with the launching of unspecified accusations. GJohn's additional pre-inquiry dialogue with the Jews is moved to a later point in the proceedings. Pilate goes into his headquarters to conduct the interview with Jesus and emerges to tell the Jews that he finds no case against Jesus.

At this point I moved the later statement in GJohn that Pilate from then on tried to release Jesus to immediately after this initial declaration that he found no case against Jesus. This, I suggest, then provoked a Jewish reaction against the release. The Jews remind Pilate that anyone claiming to be a king sets himself against the emperor.

It is at this point that Pilate recalls the custom of releasing a Jew for the holidays and figures that such custom would justify releasing even a man who claimed to be a king, especially one whom Pilate doesn't take very seriously. The Jews, however, reject the offer and demand the release of Barabbas.

Pilate then asks if he should crucify "your king." Why "your king" if he has found no case against Jesus? The implication appears to be that Pilate considers Jesus' claim to kingship to be ridiculous and not threatening, and he wants to convey that understanding to the Jews in the hope that they would agree to release Jesus. But the Jews remain adamant and say, that Pilate should indeed crucify Jesus.

At this point, Pilate, having found Jesus not deserving of a death sentence under Roman law and annoyed at the Jewish resistance to Jesus' release, tells the Jews to take Jesus and judge him by their own law. The Jews respond that under Jewish law he deserves a death penalty for claiming to be the Son of God.

Pilate then replies that if he deserves to die under your law, take him yourselves and crucify him. It is here that the Jews tell Pilate that they are not permitted to put anyone to death.

I suspect that at this point in the dialogue, Pilate resigned to the idea that he must deal in some manner with Jesus has him flogged and mocked in the hope that this will satisfy the crowds. After the abuse, Pilate again tries to release the man, again sarcastically calling him “your king.” Presumably, the purpose is to make clear that Pilate’s mockery of Jesus’ claim to being a king shows that there is no perceived threat from him and that the Jews should cease their opposition.

Nevertheless, the Jews stick to their theme, that anyone claiming to be a king is an enemy of the emperor and they reject Pilate’s offer to release “your king” by saying that they have no king but the emperor.

Pilate makes one last-ditch effort to change their minds. He brings out the beaten Jesus, bloodied and in mock royal garb, a pathetic looking creature that couldn’t possibly be any threat to the Romans. Implicitly, by displaying Jesus in this manner, he is trying to shame the Jews into releasing him. As if to emphasize the point, Pilate no longer sarcastically refers to Jesus as a king, points to Jesus’ appearance, and says, “Here is the man.” The statement shows that Pilate considers Jesus innocent of the charge that he claims to be a king. Nevertheless, the Jews don’t accept Pilate’s verdict and again demand that Jesus be crucified. Pilate finally yields.

Conclusions

In the above analysis I have attempted to show that several questions and answers in Pilate’s Johannine dialogues between Pilate and Jesus and Pilate and the Jews appear to be out of chronological order and that some answers seem to belong to different questions. Such an understanding would only make sense if there had been an earlier written source to re-arrange. By attempting to create a logical chronological sequence for the questions and answers, restoring some of the original dialogue as reflected in GMark, and creating a smoother narrative flow, I have attempted to reconstruct what would appear to be the earlier written source that the author of GJohn relied on. I have also attempted to show that both the author of the source material and the author of GJohn attempted to address perceived problems with earlier versions of the Passion Narratives.

Finally, I want to emphasize that this is an attempt at narrative reconstruction and not historical reconstruction. Whether or not, this earlier source or GJohn contains historically accurate accounts of what happened between Pilate, Jesus and the Jews is a separate question from whether or not the author of GJohn relied upon an earlier written source and made changes to that source for his own narrative purposes.