

# Luke's record of the trials and crucifixion

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*Much of Luke's account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus is unique to him. Careful consideration of this material yields many insights into Jesus' last hours before his death.*

**T**HE GOSPELS differ far more from one another than would be noticed by a casual reading of them. In each of the four records the Spirit presents us with a large amount of unique information about our Lord Jesus Christ during the days of his flesh. This article will focus mainly on Luke 23. A careful comparison of this chapter and the corresponding records in Matthew, Mark and John shows that just over seventy per cent of the factual information presented in this chapter is unique to Luke. This article will highlight just some of that unique information and seek to explore the significance of it.

## **Peter at the trial of Jesus**

All the four Gospel writers record that Peter was present during the early stages of Jesus' trials. However, it is only Luke who tells us that Peter's denials of his Lord were addressed each time to a specific individual: "Woman, I know him not" (22:57); "Man, I am not" (v. 58); "Man, I know not what thou sayest" (v. 60). It is Luke alone who records that "the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter" (v. 61). Here we have a much more personal glimpse of those traumatic events in Annas' house than in any other Gospel.

## **The first accusation**

Piecing together the Gospel accounts of the trial of Jesus before Pilate is a fascinating exercise. Luke is the only Gospel from which it can be clearly seen that, after the (illegal) night-time interrogations before Annas and Caiaphas, there was an attempt at legality in a trial at first light before the whole of the Sanhedrin (vv. 66-71). Following this, Luke alone records that "the whole multitude of them [the Sanhedrin] arose, and led him unto Pilate" (23:1). It is clear from the Gospel records that they

expected a formality of a trial and an immediate death sentence.

It is very probable that a deputation of Jewish leaders had been to Pilate the night before to advise him that they would be bringing a notable prisoner first thing the next morning and that they wanted him executed before the Passover Feast. It would seem that Pilate had agreed to this request, but changed his mind overnight, or perhaps when he saw the prisoner in the morning. John records that, when the Jews brought Jesus to him, he took them completely off guard by asking, "What accusation bring ye against this man?". The record continues, "They answered and said unto him, If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee. Then said Pilate unto them, Take ye him, and judge him according to your law. The Jews therefore said unto him, It is not lawful for us to put any man to death" (18:29-31). The Jews clearly had no prepared charge to lay before Roman justice, so they had to think on their feet; what would cause Pilate to convict him?

At this point Luke picks up the account, and tells us, "And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King" (23:2). After a short interrogation of Jesus, Pilate decided that there was no case to answer: "I find no fault in this man" (v. 4). Again we are dependent on Luke for the next stage of the proceedings: "And they were the more fierce, saying, He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place" (v. 5). Luke then narrates that Pilate saw an opportunity to get rid of the case, and, uniquely, relates Jesus' trial before Herod (23:6-12).

## **"I find no fault in this man"**

Luke reveals more to us about the attempts of Pilate to find Jesus not guilty and release him than any other Gospel. Seven times in total Pilate



**The Citadel in Jerusalem. Most of the buildings here date to the Muslim period, but were built on the site of Herod the Great's palace, of which the tower in the background is the chief surviving remnant. This palace was taken over by the Roman procurators of Judea, and is therefore the likely site of the trial of Jesus before Pilate. © Ritmeyer Archaeological Design. Used by permission.**

declared Jesus to be innocent; four of them are recorded by Luke:

- 1 "I find no fault in this man" (Lk. 23:4; Jno. 18:38)
- 2 "I . . . have found no fault in this man" (Lk. 23:14)
- 3 "Lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him" (v. 15)
- 4 "I have found no cause of death in him" (v. 22)
- 5 "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (Mt. 27:24)
- 6 "Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him" (Jno. 19:4)
- 7 "Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him" (v. 6).

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## The journey to Golgotha

Each of the four Gospel writers records the journey from Pilate's judgement hall to the place of crucifixion. Each has at least one unique detail, but Luke has more than all the others. Luke appears to have a different name for the place of crucifixion, but in fact the Greek word translated "Calvary" in 23:33 is the same as that translated "skull" in Matthew 27:33, Mark 15:22 and John 19:17, these being the only places where the word occurs.

It is only by putting together the four records that we can see the full pathos of that journey. John records that "he bearing his cross went forth . . ." (19:17). Luke tells us that the Romans laid the cross on Simon the Cyrenian "that he might bear it after Jesus" (23:26), the sense being that Simon was carrying the back end and walking directly behind Jesus, who was still carrying the front of the cross. As the journey progressed, Jesus became too exhausted even to do this, and Matthew tells us that Simon was now "compelled to bear his cross" (27:32). When they got to the place of crucifixion, Jesus had become too weak even to walk up the hill, and it is Mark who reveals that "they bring him unto the place Golgotha" (15:22), the word translated "bring" being the same word as used in Mark 2:3, "bringing one sick of the palsy", indicating that Jesus had to be carried up to the place of execution: "his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men" (Isa. 52:14).

Clearly, Jesus was in the last stages of exhaustion on that journey, but Luke (again only Luke) tells us that he turned and spoke to the crowd who followed him, and particularly to the women in that crowd (23:27-31). When he spoke, he addressed them with a very rare title, "Daughters of Jerusalem". In the plural form it occurs only in the Song of Solomon, speaking of those who attend upon the bride and desire to behold the bridegroom. The singular form "daughter of Jerusalem" occurs in several more places, particularly Lamentations 2:13,15, where the prophet Jeremiah (himself a wonderful type of Jesus in his sufferings) cries, "what thing shall I liken to thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? what shall I equal to thee, that I may comfort thee . . . ? . . . All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that men call The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth?".

Jesus himself has no comfort for them, recalling his own words in the Olivet Prophecy (Mt.

24:19; Mk. 13:17; Lk. 21:23), and quoting Hosea 10:8—the context of which is the destruction of Samaria for its wickedness!—and finally Ezekiel 17:24: “I the LORD have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish”. Space forbids a lengthy exposition of this verse, but the fundamentals are:

- **The high tree:** the kingdom under David and his sons, brought down by Nebuchadnezzar
- **The low tree:** Judah in captivity, exalted by the decree of Cyrus
- **The green tree:** Israel in the time of Jesus, dried up by the Romans
- **The dry tree:** Israel scattered among the nations, to be revived at the second coming.

### “Father, forgive them”

Luke is supremely the Gospel of Jesus at prayer (see [“Jesus: man of prayer”](#), p. 271). As a priest he is continually making intercession with the Father throughout the Gospel, so it is Luke alone who records that, as “they [that is, the Romans] crucified him”, he prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”. This prayer is immediately followed by the statement, “And they [that is, the Romans] parted his raiment, and cast lots” (23:33,34). It is clear, therefore, that he was praying for the Roman soldiers, whose duty it was to put him to death by crucifixion. Doubtless they had never had a prisoner do that for them before!

And equally doubtless, they would never have seen a prisoner behave on the cross as Jesus did. At first they were unmoved; Luke alone records that the soldiers mocked him and offered him vinegar, saying, “If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself” (vv. 36,37). The continuing example of Jesus bearing his afflictions unto death eventually had its effect upon them, as will be seen.

### The thief on the cross

Another individual who is only introduced to us in Luke’s Gospel is the repentant thief. Matthew and Mark state that both of the malefactors crucified with him “reviled him” (Mk. 15:32; cf. Mt. 27:44). Luke 23:39-43 has more detail, and reveals to us the remarkable mind and amazing understanding of one of the men who was “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20):

- “Dost not thou fear God . . . ?”; with the clear implication that, although his fellow did not, he did!

- “thou art in the same condemnation”, or, you are subject to the “judgment” (Young’s Literal Translation) of God
- “we indeed justly”; God’s judgement in our case is right
- “we receive the due reward of our deeds”; we are condemned to death because of “wicked works” (Col. 1:21)
- “this man hath done nothing amiss”; Jesus was sinless, a conclusion that the Jewish rulers refused to accept
- “Lord”; he recognised that the one dying beside him was the Messiah
- “remember me”; he believed that Jesus would rise from the dead
- “when thou comest”; he understood that Jesus would ascend to heaven and then return to the earth to do a further work, which would involve raising those dead ones who were in ‘remembered places’, the meaning of the word “graves” in John 5:28
- “into thy kingdom”; that further work would also include the establishment of the long-promised Kingdom, of which Jesus would be the King.

What an amazing confession of faith this was! And what a response it drew from the Lord: ‘Remember you then? You have my word today; you will be with me in the garden’ (see Song of Solomon 5:1)!

### “Into Thy hands I commend my spirit”

It is perhaps not appreciated how diverse the four Gospel writers are in their recording of the sayings from the cross. Luke’s record is vital to help us to understand the sequence of the seven ‘words’ that Jesus spoke during his crucifixion, for three of the seven are found only in Luke’s Gospel:

- 1 “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34)
- 2 “Woman, behold thy son! . . . Behold thy mother!” (Jno. 19:26,27)
- 3 “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43)
- 4 “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34)
- 5 “I thirst” (Jno. 19:28)
- 6 “It is finished” (Jno. 19:30)
- 7 “Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46).

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that, almost at the end of his life, Jesus “cried with a loud voice” (Lk. 23:46; Mt. 27:50; Mk. 15:37), but

none of these three record what he said. It is John who records, "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst . . . When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the [spirit]" (19:28,30).

This gives the impression that "It is finished" (the last words of Psalm 22?) were the last words of Jesus. Luke, however, says: "when Jesus had cried [It is finished] with a loud voice, he said, Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the [spirit]" (23:46). So Jesus' last words were not the last

words of Psalm 22 but the opening words of Psalm 31:5.

### **A righteous man**

Matthew, Mark and Luke all mention the reaction of the centurion who was in charge of the crucifixion of the three. Matthew and Mark record him acknowledging that Jesus was truly the Son of God. Luke goes further and tells us that watching the crucifixion of Jesus causes the centurion to glorify God and acknowledge, "Certainly this was a righteous man" (23:47). May our consideration of his last hours cause us to do the same, not only with our lips but in our lives.