

# THE TRIAL OF JESUS

## CHAPTER IV

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WE shall now consider the report given by the fourth Evangelist of the Trial of Jesus. According to the Synoptists Jesus was tried before Caiaphas, the high priest, and afterwards before Pilate, and St. Luke mentions a quasi-trial before Herod. The fourth Evangelist tells also of a previous examination of the Prisoner before Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas. It is difficult to see what motive could be suggested for the insertion of this notice of an examination before Annas unless it really took place. There is certainly nothing antecedently improbable in it, for it is well

known that Annas wielded enormous influence, though he had long ago been deposed from the high-priesthood, now held by his son-in-law.

Exception has been taken to the statement of our Evangelist that Caiaphas was high priest *that year*. It has been said that this proves the writer to have been under the erroneous impression that the high-priesthood was a yearly office. This point is mentioned here by the way, and it must be left to the reader to judge whether such a mistake is at all probable in a writer who, it must be allowed, shows himself throughout well informed about, and thoroughly conversant with, Jewish matters and customs.

Returning to the examination of Jesus before Annas, we notice that it fits in remarkably well with the account given by St. Luke of the arrest and trial. For he tells how Jesus was taken from the place of His arrest to the high priest's house (*oikíav*), and then a considerable interval

elapsed, during which the threefold denial of Peter occurred, before the meeting of the Sanhedrin, which is said to have taken place before it was day. There is then nothing at all impossible in the course of events in the Fourth Gospel. The Evangelist, like St. Luke, puts the denial of Peter before the trial before Caiaphas; and the filling up of the interval of time between the arrest and the formal arraignment before the Sanhedrin by an informal examination by, or at any rate in the presence of, the influential Annas certainly seems highly probable. Whether this examination took place in the house of Annas or in the palace of the high priest Caiaphas is a question which cannot be positively determined. For my own part I take it that it was held in the palace of Caiaphas, but the uncertainty arises from our inability to decide whether our Evangelist intends Annas or Caiaphas when he speaks of the high priest in xviii. 15 and 19. The

title ἀρχιερέυς could be and certainly was applied to Annas after his deposition from the high-priesthood, and indeed the term is used with some elasticity, and we read of ἀρχιερεῖς, rendered by "chief priests" in our English translation. But as in verse 13 the Evangelist says expressly that Caiaphas was high priest and he does not there apply any title to Annas, merely describing him as the father-in-law of Caiaphas, it seems most natural that when he immediately afterwards speaks of ὁ ἀρχιερέυς he should mean him who has been so designated, namely Caiaphas. On the other hand, if ὁ ἀρχιερέυς in verse 19 refers to Caiaphas, then the Evangelist records no examination made by Annas, and the questions put to Jesus respecting His doctrine came from Caiaphas. In this case the statement of verse 24, that Annas sent Jesus bound to Caiaphas, may seem wanting in point. But of course the examination, whether made by Annas himself or by

Caiaphas in the presence of his father-in-law, was quite informal, and when Jesus is sent bound to Caiaphas the high priest (v. 24) it is that He may be formally arraigned before the Sanhedrin.

The matter is, however, not one of great importance. The statement made by our Evangelist that there was an informal examination made before the meeting of the Sanhedrin is extremely probable, and we have seen that St. Luke's narrative leaves room for it, though he does not actually mention it. Moreover the statement of our Evangelist that this examination took place before Annas, if not by him, is also probable, considering the influence which he is known to have had. Indeed it seems to me that we have here one of those touches which show the Evangelist to have been accurately informed. This of course he would be if he is to be identified with the other disciple (v. 15) who was known to the high priest.

The story of the denial of Peter, who accompanied this other disciple to the palace of the high priest, is told in our Gospel in such a circumstantial way that it is difficult to believe that it is other than historically correct. Like St. Luke, differing here from the other Synoptists, our Evangelist makes the denial take place before the meeting of the Sanhedrin. He tells us that the first of the three denials occurred as Peter entered into the palace of the high priest. 'The other disciple,' whom we take to be the fourth Evangelist, and who was known to the high priest, gained admission to the palace, and in view of the fact that he was no stranger he was able to persuade the portress to admit Peter. Nor was the question put by the portress to Peter, "Art thou also one of this man's disciples?" an unnatural one. Probably she knew John to be a disciple; hence the point of the word 'also.' But Peter, afraid, said, "I am not." Our

Evangelist then tells us that Peter passed to the fire and stood and warmed himself with the servants and the officers, who had made a fire of coals, for it was cold. One who had himself experienced the cold of that night would naturally remember the fact.

The other two denials are placed by our Evangelist after the examination of Jesus respecting His disciples and His teaching, and the record of them follows immediately on the words: "Annas therefore sent him bound unto Caiaphas the high priest." Then, as Simon Peter stood and warmed himself, those who were with him questioned him: "Art thou also one of his disciples?" He denied, and said, "I am not." Then one of the servants of the high priest being, the Evangelist tells us, a kinsman of him whose ear Peter cut off, said, "Did I not see thee in the garden with him?" Peter denied again: and straightway the cock crew.

It has been pointed out\* that the statement made by St. Luke that on the third denial the Lord turned and looked upon Peter would find a simple explanation if the narrative of the Fourth Gospel be accurate, for, according to it, the last two of the three denials occurred as Jesus was being taken before Caiaphas. If then Peter denied Jesus just as He was being led past the place where Peter was, what more natural than that Jesus should have turned to look at him, and that that look should have brought tears of bitter sorrow into Peter's eyes?

It may be noted, too, that St. Luke places an interval of about an hour between the first and second denials of Peter, and with this the narrative of the Fourth Gospel agrees, in that it implies that the examination took place in the meanwhile. Of course it is open to

\* Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* in the article on "Annas."

objectors to say that our Evangelist had St. Luke's Gospel to help him in the construction of his own, and therefore points of agreement prove nothing. But it is difficult to see how the Evangelist could have constructed his narrative about these matters with all its circumstantial detail if he had not been possessed of information more accurate and detailed than he could possibly glean from the other Gospels.

Our Evangelist tells us nothing of the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, though we see that he knew of it from his statement that Jesus was sent bound to Caiaphas. It may seem idle to speculate why he is silent on this point, but it is probable that he had nothing to add to what the Synoptists had written about it, and moreover it contributed little to the ultimate condemnation of Jesus, which had to come from Pilate. The Evangelist has already described in brief and striking terms the attitude of the high priest by

saying: "Caiaphas was he which gave counsel to the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people." The trial before the Sanhedrin was no true trial at all. It was merely an attempt so to implicate Jesus that the counsel of Caiaphas might appear justified.

But when our Evangelist comes to tell the story of the arraignment before Pilate he gives very full information, and only the most obstinate prejudice will fail to see in this account a very accurate knowledge of what took place. We gain from St. John a far more exact idea of the stages by which Pilate was led on to consent to the death of Jesus than could ever be derived from the pages of the Synoptists; Pilate is so set before us in this Gospel that we are constrained to acknowledge that here, even if nowhere else in the book, we have the picture of a historical reality. The only reasonable exception, as it seems to me, that can be

taken to this part of the story of our Evangelist is that it says nothing of Pilate sending Jesus to Herod. But it is easily possible to combine the narratives of St. Luke and St. John so as to have a consistent whole.

Our Evangelist begins by stating that Jesus was led from Caiaphas into the Prætorium while it was early, and he explains the peculiar way in which the trial had to be conducted because the Jewish accusers refused to enter into the Prætorium, lest they should be defiled, and so might not eat the passover. Exception may be taken to this statement on the ground that the passover had already taken place. This is a point, however, the consideration of which we must defer until a later chapter. I may say here in anticipation that I take the view that our Evangelist is right, and that the passover was to take place the next evening.

The prisoner then was within, and the accusers without, and Pilate has to conduct the case by passing from the one to the others. He goes out therefore to ask the accusers what their accusation was. Instead of bringing a direct charge they reply evasively: "If this man were not an evil-doer, we should not have delivered him up unto thee." Now we know from the Synoptists that the Sanhedrin, after seeking to find some cause of death in Jesus, had at last found it in His confession of Messiahship, which they interpreted as blasphemy. Satisfied that for this He deserved to die, but unable to carry out the sentence themselves, they had come to Pilate, evidently hoping that he would consent. If, as we suppose, he had already allowed them the necessary band of soldiers to arrest Jesus, they may have interpreted this to mean his readiness to acquiesce in their verdict. But instead they find that Pilate requires a definite accusation,

which they were not prepared for. In their opinion Jesus was an evil-doer; should not this suffice? Pilate then replies with some sarcasm that if he is not to decide the case but they, then judgment must proceed from them and not from him: "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." To which the Jews replied: "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." By their answer they showed to Pilate that it was a death sentence that they required and not an equitable judgment of the case according to Roman law. The Evangelist finds this incident worthy of record because, as he significantly adds, the inability of the Jews to put any man to death brought about the fulfilment of the word of Jesus which he had spoken, signifying what manner of death He should die. That Jesus had so spoken and foretold His crucifixion, the Synoptists plainly declare; so that our Evangelist cannot be accused of ascribing here undue foreknowledge to Jesus.

The Evangelist does not state that the accusers then preferred a case against the Prisoner, but it seems to be implied in the subsequent conduct of Pilate, who entered again into the Prætorium and, calling Jesus, asked Him: "Art thou the king of the Jews?" Jesus proceeds to inquire whether this is a charge brought against Him as to which He must defend Himself or whether it is an inquiry made by Pilate. He asks: "Sayest thou this of thyself, or did others tell it thee concerning me?" Then comes Pilate's answer full of contempt and scorn for the Jew: "Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me: what hast thou done?"

When then Jesus is informed that there is a charge laid against Him, He is ready to defend Himself, because this is obviously a matter as to which the Roman Governor has a right to an answer. He defends Himself, then, not by denying the charge,

but by showing that it was misleading. "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence."

Is He then guilty of the charge they have brought against Him? Pilate asks Him: "Art thou a king then?" Jesus answered: "Thou sayest that I am king. To this end have I been born, and to this end am I come into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." And Pilate asks: "What is truth?"

But he sees clearly, whatever his attitude of mind towards Jesus and His claims to be a king, that this is no political case and that no criminal offence has been committed; so he goes out again to the accusers and says: "I find no fault in him."

At this point the account given by St. Luke helps us. The accusers became more

urgent, he says, and accused Jesus of stirring up the people, teaching throughout all Judæa and beginning from Galilee even to Jerusalem. Pilate, learning that the prisoner was a Galilean, sends him to Herod, who was at that time in Jerusalem. But Herod could get no answer to the questions he put to the prisoner, and sent Him back to Pilate arrayed in a splendid robe. Neither did he find any fault in Him touching the things whereof He was accused.

Of all this our Evangelist says nothing. Nor from his point of view was there any need to mention it, for matters stood after the visit to Herod exactly as they did before. Pilate is in the same position now as then. He can find no fault or crime in the Prisoner. But at this point he shows signs of weakness. He wishes to please the Jews, and so he offers to release Jesus as a political prisoner. It may seem strange that when the accusers had so plainly shown that it was the death of Jesus which they desired, Pilate should

have sought to satisfy them by setting Him free. This is a trait in the story which increases our confidence in the truth of it. Pilate does not propose simply to release Jesus, but to release Him as a political offender in honour of the feast and according to custom. But the accusers would have none of it. That would have been to frustrate their whole design. They demanded instead the release of the robber Barabbas.

Then Pilate, still exhibiting cowardly weakness, has Jesus scourged, hoping apparently that by thus disgracing Him in the eyes of the accusers he will satisfy their malice, and be able to spare his own conscience the guilt of the death of an innocent man. The soldiers plaited a crown of thorns and put it on Jesus' head and arrayed Him in a purple garment—possibly the same as that in which Herod had clothed Him\*—

\* There is an interesting article in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, April, 1909, by Dr. A. W. Verrall on "Christ before Herod." I do not find myself in

and after they had mocked Him, Pilate went out once more, still protesting that he could find no crime in the man, and exhibiting Jesus wearing the crown of thorns and the purple garment. To their pity he appeals, and possibly also to their sense of humour, which he hopes may enable them to see the absurdity of the charge they have brought against Jesus. But to Pilate's words, "Behold the man," they reply with shouts: "Crucify him, crucify him." If this is what they want, Pilate says, let them do it themselves. "Take ye him and crucify him, for I find no crime in him."

Then, and not till then, did the accusers bring forward the charge on which they

agreement with the writer when he argues that Herod's conduct, described in the original as *ἐμπαίξας περιβαλὼν ἰσθῆγα λαμπρὰν αὐτὸν*, was not intended as a piece of mockery. It seems to me that *ἐμπαίξας* cannot be separated from *περιβαλὼν* as Dr. Verrall's interpretation of the passage requires. Herod mockingly threw round Jesus a splendid robe and sent Him to Pilate. This seems the natural meaning of the passage.

had already in the Sanhedrin declared Jesus to be worthy of death: "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God." And when Pilate heard this he was the more afraid, and he entered into the Prætorium again and asked Jesus, "Whence art thou?" But Jesus gave him no answer. He refused to be questioned by Pilate, except so far as the questions arose out of definite charges of which Roman law required Pilate to take account. And Pilate said unto Him: "Speakest thou not unto me? Knowest thou not that I have authority to release thee, and have authority to crucify thee?" To which Jesus replied: "Thou wouldest have no authority against me except it were given thee from above; therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath greater sin." Hereupon Pilate sought to release Jesus, but the Jews, detecting the weakness Pilate had already shown, proceed to work upon his fears: "If thou release this man,

thou art not Cæsar's friend: every one that maketh himself a king speaketh against Cæsar." And they were successful. Pilate brought Jesus forth, and took his place on the judgment seat at a place which the Evangelist, with his usual particularity of statement, says was called the Pavement, and in Hebrew Gabbatha. His final appeal, "Behold your king!" and "Shall I crucify your king?" met only with the response from the chief priests: "We have no king but Cæsar." And he delivered Jesus to be crucified.

We cannot say what is the point intended by the Evangelist in mentioning that, when Pilate took his place on the judgment seat, it was the preparation of the passover, and it was the sixth hour. Did he intend to indicate that time was pressing and that this business must be got over before the feast? It may be so, but the sixth hour, supposing this to mean six o'clock according to our reckoning, that is six hours from

midnight, could not be considered late. Or could it be that, regarding Jesus as the true paschal lamb, as his words in xix. 36 show him to have done, he saw the fitness of this day and hour for the sentence of death now passed upon Him? Or was there something in the outward appearance of the city at this moment which directed attention to the character of the day, and was the hour impressed on the mind of the Evangelist by his experience of the event? Or did he feel that the day and hour of this decision, so momentous in the history of the world, deserved to be chronicled? These are questions that we cannot answer.