

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 23:1-49

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The story of Jesus' trial before Pilate and his crucifixion and death was heard in its original context in the framework of the experiences of Luke's audience. Luke's audience was predominately Hellenistic Jews who were citizens of the various cities of the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean. As they listened to Luke, they would have been aware of stories from their cultural background.

They knew, for example, the story of the martyrdom of Eleazar (2 Maccabees 6) and of a Jewish mother and her seven sons (2 Maccabees 7). It was a story that was told with horror at the unjust treatment that was received by Jews at the hands of the Gentiles. It is part of the background of Luke 23. I suggest that you read it as preparation for telling the story of Jesus' passion.

Another part of the background that is absolutely essential to realize is that Luke's story was told and heard in the context of the aftermath of the Jewish war. Luke describes that horrendous event explicitly in Jesus' last discourse with the disciples in Luke 21 (see especially verses 20-24). The section of signs and persecutions and the destruction of Jerusalem are a description of what happened some 15-20 years before the composition and distribution of Luke's story. That is, Jesus' prophecy had been fulfilled in the recent experience of Luke's audiences.

The war was an enormous tragedy. All of Luke's listeners remembered the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the murder by the Roman armies of ten's of thousands of innocent Jews, and the enslavement of a whole generation. These young Jews were taken to Rome, marched in the triumph of Vespasian and Titus, and then sold as slaves in the mines, as rowers on the ships, or as sex slaves throughout the Roman empire.

A third element of the background that I suggest you read is Suetonius' "Life of Domitian" ([click here to be linked](#)). You will get a sense of the character of the Roman emperor at the time that Luke was telling his story. Domitian was a maniac, probably the worst emperor in the entire history of Rome in terms of the impact that he had on the overall moral fabric of Rome. After he was assassinated the Roman Senate issued a decree called the *damnatio memoriae*, the damnation of memory. It meant that the memory of Domitian was to be eliminated. All of his statues, all his inscriptions, everything that was a sign of Domitian's presence, was eliminated, torn down and destroyed in order to try to eliminate his memory. One reason for this extraordinary action was that he had murdered many members of the Roman Senate. But that was only the tip of the iceberg of Domitian corruption and cruelty.

Another thing that Domitian did, beginning about halfway through his reign in the 80's, was to require everyone who came before him to call him "my master and my God."

Domitian was installed as emperor in 80, ruling through 96 AD. So when Luke affirms that **Jesus** was the Son of God, he is also affirming that **Domitian** is **not**. This story of Jesus' trial before the Roman procurator Pilate is told **against** Domitian, even as it is told **about** Jesus.

A traditional understanding of the Pilate trial is that Luke's purpose in telling it was to portray Pilate as a good guy in order to ingratiate Christians with the Romans and to disassociate them from the Jews. That is, the story was a combination of pro-Roman apologetic and anti-Jewish polemic. I think this is a flawed understanding. I conclude that the purpose of this story is an appeal to the audience (and insofar as we hear the story, we are part of the audience) to recognize **our** involvement in Jesus' crucifixion, **our** engagement in the death of the Messiah.

This story is told in a spirit of grief and of horror at what we have done. Pilate is, on the one hand, different than Antiochus IV Epiphanies (II Maccabees 6-7) in that he recognizes that Jesus is innocent and tries to release him. But then in utter cynicism he violates his own standards of justice and hands Jesus over because of the demands of the crowd. And who is the crowd? The crowd is us! It is **our** people. We, then, demanded the death of the one God sent to be our king and Messiah—the King of the Jews.

This dynamic is heightened by the people's choice of Barabbas rather than Jesus. Barabbas is characterized by Luke as being guilty of murder and insurrection. We do not have historical evidence for the specifics about what happened in Jesus' day in regards to an insurrection, or a person named Barabbas, or even of the custom of Pilate releasing a prisoner at Passover. We can be certain, however, that the description of Barabbas evoked for Luke's audience the memories of the war that resulted in such disaster, as well as the zealot armies that perpetrated it.

The choice of Barabbas in this story was heard by Luke's listeners as the choice of war, insurrection, and murder. The crowd—we—demanded this way over the way of Jesus. When you tell this story, have in mind that the audience you are addressing is invited to identify with the people of Israel and to recognize in the telling of the story the horror of what it is that we have done in choosing Barabbas over Jesus. What we have chosen is fully appropriate for American Christians because of the degree to which we have been involved in the choice of war as a way to deal with global conflicts. We have in our background the means to understand and identify with the people of Jerusalem who chose Barabbas. Who would we choose: a military leader, or an advocate of non-violence and peace?

The next part of the story is distinctive to Luke. After Jesus' condemnation, "the daughters of Jerusalem" wept for Jesus and he says to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.'" Luke's listeners heard Jesus' words in relation to what happened to women who were pregnant and little children during the siege and

destruction of Jerusalem. By adding this episode, Luke alludes to the experience of women during the Jewish war and especially in the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in which thousands of women and children were killed.

The story of Jesus crucifixion is told as a story of grief. Yet Jesus pronounces forgiveness. His words "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" are words of unspeakable grace in the context of an unjust execution. Both Pilate and the centurion who was in charge of the execution recognize that Jesus was innocent. This is another distinctive emphasis in Luke: the charges against Jesus were wholly false and he was both innocent and righteous. Jesus is a model of the righteous sufferer and of the innocent one victimized by an unjust judicial system.

One of the major motifs in this story is the mockery of Jesus, first by the leaders, then by the soldiers, and finally by the criminals. In the background of this narrative element is a tradition present throughout the Roman Empire. In the Roman era, those who were crucified were either traitors against Rome and guilty of sedition, or were slaves. Outside the gates of all the major cities of the Roman Empire were crucifixion businesses. You could get a slave crucified for what would amount to three or four dollars. If your slave burned the food or wouldn't have sex with you or spoke in a way that you didn't like, you would just take your slave and have him crucified.

One of the traditions reflected in many of the most popular dramas in the Roman world was slaves being crucified. An element in these dramas was mockery. People going into the city would make fun of these slaves hanging on crosses. That's the background of this mocking of Jesus by the rulers, by the soldiers, and the criminals. He endured mockery that was like the mockery endured by slaves who were crucified. You can tell this story in a way that reflects that ancient cultural experience. Jesus was mocked in the same manner as slaves.

The death of Jesus is reported by Luke as Jesus crying out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." That's to be said in a "loud voice." It's not soft. It's really important that you do it with significant volume.

The end of the story is a description of the response that Luke hopes his listeners will have: Luke's hope is that the listeners will join the crowds gathered at the execution and will return home after hearing the story, beating their breasts as a sign of grief and recognition of their own involvement in Jesus' death. Such recognition was the meaning of the beating of the breast.

The centurion who is in charge of Jesus' execution recognizes the innocence of Jesus. This story has many of the same dynamics as the movie *The Green Mile*. It too is the story of the execution of an innocent man at which even his executioners wept.

The conclusion of Luke's story describes the women who are watching from a distance. It is implied that they were weeping as they watched. It is another invitation to identify with those who grieved as they watched Jesus die.

I hope this commentary will help you to identify the dynamics of Luke's story about Jesus' passion. I encourage you to learn it by heart and to tell the whole thing on Palm Sunday.