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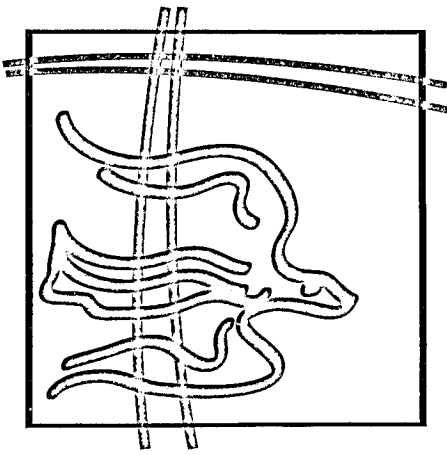
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THE CRUCIFIXION AND THE WILL OF GOD ACCORDING TO JOHN

Craig R. Koester



The crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah was a theological problem for early Christians. If the term “Messiah” was associated with Israel’s hopes for a strong and righteous ruler, crucifixion was a punishment given to rebels, slaves, and violent criminals. If the Messiah was expected to reign with honor, death on the cross meant defeat and disgrace. John’s gospel is fully cognizant of this (12:32–34). The gospel relates that Jesus was interrogated, subjected to scourging, and ridiculed by his captors (19:1–3). On the way to the place of execution Jesus carried his own cross, creating a degrading spectacle that warned the public about the consequences of wrongdoing (19:17). Crucifixion was supremely painful, as nails were driven through the wrists and ankles, so that when placed on the cross the body would weigh down on the wounds (19:18; 20:25). Some forms of execution allowed the victim to retain a measure of dignity, but crucifixion did not. To crucify someone was to hang him on the tree of shame.

The fourth evangelist, like other early Christians, could respond that Jesus’ crucifixion was exceptional because it was followed by his resurrection. Death was not the end, and life triumphed. Resurrection is essential to John’s theology. Yet the problem of crucifixion remains: if the resurrection shows that victory belongs to life, then why was the Messiah crucified at all? Was the crucifixion a triumph for Jesus’ adversaries, which made it necessary for God to reverse the situation by raising Jesus from the dead? Or does the crucifixion itself have a place in God’s designs?

Theologically, John’s gospel offers a paradoxical response to such questions. On one level, the evangelist recognizes that Jesus was crucified because his adversaries regarded him as a political problem. In addition, the evangelist discerns the power of Satan at work, so that he can say that Jesus’ execution took place because of human sin and the power of the evil one. On another level, however, the gospel gives the crucifixion a central place in God’s plans. Jesus speaks

of the necessity of being “lifted up” in crucifixion (3:14) and with his last breath can say, “It is accomplished,” for his death completes the work God gave him to do on earth (19:30). By considering each dimension in turn, we can better discern the meaning of the crucifixion in Johannine theology.

Human Agency

Jesus’ crucifixion takes place in part through the actions of human beings, including the Jewish authorities and Pilate the Roman governor. Modern readers might trace the ways the parties maneuver through society’s structures of power in order to secure their own interests. In John’s worldview, however, these political dynamics manifest an underlying power of sin. In a primary sense, sin is the estrangement from God that is manifested in sinful actions. Sin alienates people from God, and this is revealed in the way that people relate to the Messiah and each other.

On the political level the Jewish leaders see Jesus as a potential rebel against Roman rule, a figure whose popularity threatens to make the Romans take military action against the Jewish people. Therefore, to prevent the movement from growing, they determine to put Jesus to death (11:47–50). They tell Pilate, the Roman governor, “Everyone who makes himself king opposes the emperor” (19:12).

The fourth evangelist, however, seeks to show that Jesus’ kingship cannot be understood in ordinary political terms, since Jesus does not “make himself” a

king and does not allow other people to do so. His kingdom is not of this world, for his power comes from God above, not from human beings below (18:10–11, 36). The implication is that those who reject Jesus reject the power that comes from God above, and this is what the Jewish authorities do, according to John. When Pilate asks whether he should release King Jesus, they reject this idea and ask for

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Barabbas the insurrectionist, a figure associated with the violence of the world (18:40). While turning away from Jesus, whose power comes from above, they embrace the power of the world below.

The disclosure of the Jewish authorities' estrangement from God continues when they tell Pilate, "We have a law and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself Son of God" (19:7). This marks the culmination of disputes that have developed throughout the gospel. Jesus used the expression "I Am" for himself in ways that had divine overtones, and claimed to be one with the Father. His Jewish listeners regarded these as blasphemous attempts to make himself God, which warranted death under the law (5:17-18; 8:58-59; 10:30-33).

The conflict reaches its climax when Jesus and the Jewish authorities come before Pilate's judgment seat. Having previously supported the release of Barabbas the insurrectionist, they now tell Pilate that they have no king but Caesar (19:15). From a political perspective, this tactic is successful, for Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified. But from the gospel's perspective, affirming Caesar's exclusive lordship means rejecting God's lordship. Having denounced Jesus for trying to make himself Son of God, the Jewish leaders support the claims of the emperor, the man who was called "son of god" since he occupied the throne of his deified predecessors. They reject the king who has come from above and embrace the powers of the world below, whether in the form of Barabbas or Caesar.

Pilate the Roman governor plays a different political role. Pilate initially appears to be ineffectual, since he proposes releasing Jesus only to have the Jewish leaders block his action by demanding Barabbas instead. Yet Pilate's actions finally serve Roman political interests quite well. He does not agree to crucify Jesus until the Jewish authorities reaffirm their loyalty to the emperor, and the sign Pilate puts above the cross simply calls Jesus

the king of the Jews, which suggests that he is publicly crucifying Jewish national aspirations along with Jesus.

Beneath Pilate's political maneuvering, however, the evangelist discerns another factor: the power of sin. Pilate asks, "What is truth?" and, even though Pilate does not wait for an answer, readers soon learn that he knows the truth in at least a limited sense: he knows that Jesus is not guilty, which is true, and he declares Jesus' innocence three times (18:38; 19:4, 6). Pilate also has pretensions of being powerful, claiming that he has the power to release Jesus and the power to crucify him (19:10). Yet when Pilate is given the opportunity to exercise his power, he knowingly hands over an innocent man to be crucified. By his action he rejects the truth, and rejecting the truth is sin. Socially and politi-

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cally, Pilate and the Jewish authorities have different interests, but beneath their differences the evangelist discerns a common reality: the presence of sin, the power of unbelief.

Satan's Activity

Another dimension of the story is how Satan works along with human beings to bring about the death of Jesus. Satan's role is closely linked to Judas. This is sobering for Christian readers because it shows that evil is not confined to the Jewish or Gentile adversaries of Jesus. Satan works even among Jesus' own followers. At the last supper, the gospel says, God put all things in the hands of Jesus, who is God's agent, and that the devil put betrayal into the heart of Judas, who is the evil one's agent (13:2-3).

Jesus then washes the feet of all his disciples, which shows his love for them, yet Judas remains unclean. This continued uncleanness points to a hardened resistance to the love Jesus offers (13:1, 10-11). Later, Jesus dips a piece of bread into the dish and gives it to Judas as a way of identifying the betrayer. Although giving food was a common way to show favor, Satan immediately enters Judas, who departs into the night (13:27-30).

Jesus tells the remaining disciples that "the ruler of this world is coming" (14:30-31), and in the garden they are met by Judas and both Roman soldiers and the Jewish police—a force that represents "the world" hostile to God and His Messiah (18:1-3). They come with weapons to show they are capable of the violence through which the world exercises power (18:3, 5, 36). Transcendent forces are contending in the garden, for Jesus identifies himself using the expression "I Am," which recalls the name of God, and these words bring his opponents to the ground. Nevertheless, they remain unwavering in their intentions, and soon they bind Jesus and take him away (18:12-13).

Satan is not explicitly mentioned in the remainder of the gospel, but readers can detect his handiwork in the scenes leading up to the crucifixion. The devil works through falsehood, and the evangelist enables readers to see that the accusations made during Jesus' trial are false. He is charged with doing evil, although he is innocent (18:30, 38); with seditiously making himself a king, although his kingship comes from above (18:37; 19:12); and with unlawfully claiming to be Son of God, although God is the one Who sent him (5:19-30; 19:7). By condemning Jesus, his opponents reject the truth he brings, showing that they have come under the influence of falsehood. Moreover, the devil wields power by bringing death, and those who condemn Jesus serve as the agents of death. Human unbelief and the power of Satan work together to bring about the crucifixion of Jesus.

*Jesus' Obedience to God
and Love for His Own*

Another dimension, however, is disclosed through the words and actions of Jesus, which enable readers to see his death as an act of love for others and obedience to God. Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep (10:17b-18a). Jesus does not take his own life; he is killed by his adversaries. Nevertheless, he does not die because he is trapped by the powers of evil. Like the hired hand he could run away from danger, but he refuses to do so. By laying down his life for the sheep, he reveals how much he cares for them. Moreover, Jesus says that he has the power to lay down and take up his life (10:18b). It

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is not startling that the shepherd has power. What is startling is that he uses it to lay down his life for others.

Jesus lays down his life because he has been commanded to do so by his Father (10:18c). This perspective runs counter to that of Jesus' opponents, who insist that he should be put to death for violating God's will by trying to make himself into the Son of God. Here, however, Jesus insists that the opposite is true: he does what his Father commands. His death does not result from his rebellion against God but from his obedience to God.

The themes of obedience, power, and love shape John's passion account. At his arrest, Jesus confronts the forces

of the ruler of this world with the divine "I Am," bringing his adversaries to the ground and showing that the ruler of this world has no power over him (14:30; 18:1-9). Nevertheless, Jesus does not use his power to save himself but overpowers the opposition just long enough to secure the release of his disciples (18:8). Jesus uses his power for the deliverance of others, but he himself is taken away. Jesus spoke about laying down his life in obedience to God and out of love for others, and his deeds match his words. Jesus' final word from the cross is *telelestai*, meaning "It is completed," for by laying down his life Jesus showed complete obedience to God and complete love for those whom God had given him (19:30).

*Revelation of God's Love
for the World*

This finally brings us to God, Whose presence is unseen, but Whose purposes shape John's account of Jesus' passion. The fourth evangelist recognizes that the crucifixion is the product of human sin and satanic evil, but this does not make the cross a victory for sin and evil. It is God's will to turn the power of falsehood toward the revelation of truth, the power of hatred toward the revelation of love, and the power of death toward the giving of life.

References to the Scriptures being fulfilled reveal that God knew there would be hostility to Jesus and wove this into His plans. The evangelist observes that when the hour of the passion arrived, there was widespread unbelief among the people. This fulfilled what Isaiah said: "Lord, who has believed our message?" and "He has blinded their eyes" (Isaiah 53:1; 6:9; John 12:37-40). These Scripture quotations show that unbelief was the response to the message of truth and that blindness was the response to the coming of light. The evangelist does not quote the Scriptures to relieve people of responsibility for rejecting the truth and light that Jesus

brings, but to show that their unbelief was divinely foreknown. This is underscored when Jesus later says that his words and actions leave people without excuse for their unbelief, for the Scripture said, "They hated me without a cause" (John 15:22, 25; cf. Psalms 35:19 and 69:4).

The betrayal is also brought within the sphere of God's purposes through the citation of Scripture. At the last supper Jesus indicates that the betrayal fulfills what is written in the Scriptures, "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9; John 13:18). He refers to this again by saying that none of those whom God gave him was lost, "except the son of destruction, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled" (17:12). The use of

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Scripture has sometimes been taken to mean that Judas was predestined for his role as betrayer, but this does not fit the wider context. Throughout the gospel Judas was given the same favor that the other disciples received: he was chosen for inclusion among the twelve but remained a devil (6:70-71), he was washed but remained unclean (13:10-11), and he was fed only to have Satan enter him (13:26-27). The betrayal comes from the devil, not God, but God turns satanic evil and human hatred toward his own life-giving purpose.

God's purpose in the crucifixion is indicated in the third chapter where Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the

serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (3:14-15). This reveals how something resulting from opposition to God can be transformed into a means of giving people life with God. Both the serpent on the pole and the Messiah on the cross display the results of human sin and alienation from God. The people of Moses’ time sinned by speaking in mistrust against God and Moses, so that God sent serpents among them, and many died. The serpent on the pole was a visible reminder of sin and God’s judgment upon it (Numbers 21:4-7). By analogy, the people of Jesus’ time sinned by acting in unbelief against him and lifting him up to die by crucifixion. This makes the crucified Messiah the visible expression of sin (John 8:28; 12:32-33). At the same time, both episodes show God transforming the result of sin into a means of giving life. In the Old Testament story, people are to turn to the

serpent on the pole and receive life by being restored to health, and in John’s gospel, people are to turn to the crucified Christ and through him receive eternal life.

People receive eternal life by being brought to faith. Throughout John’s gospel, faith is the opposite of sin. Where sin brings death by alienating people from God, faith brings life by drawing people into relationship with God. According to the fourth Gospel, eternal life is a present reality for those who believe, for in faith people come to know God and so pass from death to life (3:18; 5:24). Physical death remains a reality for people of faith, yet the life that faith brings is called “eternal” because it is a life lived in relationship to the God Who is eternal. What begins now in faith continues beyond the death of the physical body through the power of the resurrection (11:25-26).

The crucifixion gives people eternal life by revealing the divine love

that evokes faith. Jesus explains that the Son of Man was lifted up because “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). In the fourth Gospel, the world is dominated by the evil ruler of this world and the world’s stance toward God is unbelief. Therefore, if people are to receive eternal life, their estrangement from God must be overcome. The crucifixion does this by revealing God’s love for the world that hated Him. And when the love of God calls forth faith, it overcomes the world’s hostility by bringing people back into relationship with the one Who made them. This accomplishes the will of God, according to John. **LF**

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