

of the Jews?’ Luke, however, has the Sanhedrin presenting a three-fold charge: inciting revolt, opposing taxes, and only then ‘claiming to be Christ, a king’. In all three gospels Jesus’ reply is the same, ‘it is you who say it’.



Matthew and Mark then introduce the episode about Barabbas, but Luke has Pilate sending Jesus to Herod first.

Matthew and Mark imply that it is Pilate who brings up the option of releasing Barabbas, but Luke instead states that Pilate is immediately in favour of freeing Jesus, arguing that neither he nor Herod have found any fault with him, and it is the Sanhedrin who shout for Barabbas to be freed and Jesus executed. Pilate is presented as arguing **three times** for Jesus’ release before finally granting the Sanhedrin their demand. Luke seems determined to present a robust defence of Pilate and the Romans and a strong condemnation of the Sanhedrin and the Jews. This view is reinforced by the fact that Luke **omits** the other gospels’ record of the Roman guards crowning Jesus with thorns, dressing him in a purple robe and mocking him.

## Jesus on the Cross

All three authors are remarkably consistent in their accounts: Jesus’ clothes were shared out by lot, he was crucified with two thieves, a notice was placed on the cross calling him ‘King of the Jews’, he was mocked by the Sanhedrin as well as the ordinary people, on his death the veil in the temple ripped, the centurion gave him praise (although Matthew and Mark state he called Jesus ‘Son of God’ but Luke only has him say ‘this was an upright man’) and women disciples were present. On Jesus’ death Matthew describes a rising of the dead, but this should be understood as a theological pointer to Jesus’ resurrection.

The only words of Jesus that Matthew and Mark record are ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’ but Luke has Jesus speaking 3 times: ‘Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do’; to the repentant thief ‘in truth, today you will be with me in paradise’; and finally, at his death, ‘into your hands I commend my spirit’.

# Jesus in the Gospels

## 18. The Passion Narrative in the Synoptic Gospels.



### Questions

1. How can the differences in the synoptic accounts of the Passion be explained?
2. Who is to blame for Jesus’ execution, the Sanhedrin or Pilate?
3. Why does Luke’s Gospel try to mitigate the role of the Romans in Jesus’ death?

### For Reflection

## The Events of the Passion

The synoptic authors all incorporate similar stages in their Passion accounts, but Matthew (ch.26 and 27) and Mark (ch.14 and 15) are closer in their accounts than Luke (ch.22 and 23).

The stages followed are as follows:

- Jesus' Prayer in Gethsemane
- Jesus' is arrested, as Judas betrays him
- Jesus is on trial before the Sanhedrin and Peter's denials of Jesus
- Jesus is questioned and tried by Pilate
- Jesus carries his cross and is assisted by Simon of Cyrene
- Jesus on the cross and his death
- Jesus is taken down from the cross and buried

In addition, Matthew records two more incidents:

- the **death of Judas**, where, in line with his general approach, he tries to show that Judas' fate complied with OT prophecy, but he inaccurately mixed the prophecies of Zechariah and Jeremiah
- the fact that the Sanhedrin asked Pilate the next day to place a **guard on the tomb** 'for fear that his disciples would come and steal him away and tell the people he had risen from the dead'. This is unlikely to be true, as the Romans would not be concerned about such a rumour. Matthew was probably aware of such rumours when he was writing his gospel and included this extract to try and undermine that rumour.

Luke also records some additional information:

- Prior to going to Gethsemane, Jesus is depicted as saying that it was time for the disciples to **sell their cloak and buy a sword**. The disciples responded by saying they had two swords.
- Jesus was **mocked by the Temple guards** during the night before he was taken to the Sanhedrin, being blindfolded and asked to prophecy who hit him. This piece of detail must have been provided by an eye-witness, possibly a subsequent believer
- As Jesus was carried his cross, he met **women weeping for him**. He told them to weep for themselves instead, forecasting a great



tribulation. No doubt, this is Luke inserting an extract to show Jesus prophesying the fall of Jerusalem. However, this is unlikely to be original to Jesus as Luke has already made a direct reference to the siege and fall of Jerusalem in 70AD as part of his Temple discourse(ch.21).

- Jesus was **also taken to Herod Antipas**, ruler of Galilee. This detail could have come from a follower called Manaen, who is recorded in Acts 13 as having known Herod
- One of the thieves crucified with Jesus repented and Jesus promised him paradise.



Mark records the interesting detail that when Joseph of Arimathaea asked Pilate for Jesus' body, Pilate was amazed that Jesus had died so quickly and summoned the centurion who was present at the crucifixion to verify that this was true.

### Jesus' Trial before the Sanhedrin

Matthew and Mark describe how the Sanhedrin sought to establish evidence to convict Jesus, bringing forward several witnesses to try and do this. Matthew states that eventually two men reported how Jesus claimed to have power to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in 3 days. Mark does not mention the 2 men specifically, rather that some people lay the same charge against Jesus, but even their evidence was conflicting. Luke does not record this intermediate stage at all. However, all three authors describe how the High Priest asks Jesus if he is the Christ, the Son of God. It is Jesus' answer that condemns him 'I am, and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand and coming with the clouds of heaven' The charge of the Sanhedrin against Jesus, then, was **blasphemy**.

### Jesus' Trial before Pilate

When Jesus is taken to Pilate, it is clear that the Sanhedrin wanted Jesus put to death, because they changed the charge against Jesus to **treason**, that Jesus claimed to be '**King of the Jews**', a capital offence. Matthew and Mark make this clear with Pilate asking Jesus 'are you the King