

IS THE TWO-FLOGGINGS HYPOTHESIS A VIABLE OPTION? A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ORDER OF THE FLOGGINGS OF JESUS

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Abstract: *The Gospels of Matthew and Mark describe Jesus's flogging differently than Luke and John. While some scholars dismiss the two-floggings hypothesis (e.g. Raymond Brown), and some simply conclude that there were different traditions (e.g. C. H. Dodd), the two-floggings hypothesis deserves further consideration. Promoted by scholars such as F. F. Bruce, D. A. Carson, and A. N. Sherwin-White, it deserves a more detailed defense than it has received. By analyzing the historical background of Greco-Roman floggings, examining the different Greek words used by the Gospel authors, and focusing on the order of events in each Gospel, a satisfactory explanation can be given for the differences: Jesus received a light flogging in the hopes that this would satisfy his enemies; when it did not, Pilate ordered him to be crucified and he was severely flogged.*

Key words: *Two-floggings hypothesis, scourging, whipping, crucifixion events*

The flogging of Jesus has been a point of contention regarding the historical accuracy and consistency of the Gospel accounts.¹ C. H. Dodd concluded that the Gospels simply preserve “more than one tradition” regarding certain details of Jesus’s flogging, death, burial, and resurrection.² John 19:1 says, “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged severely” (NET). Why does the NET Bible include the word “severely”? Is this an accurate translation based upon the lexical meaning of the Greek word used in the verse? Is it added because of the historical brutality associated with flogging? Matthew 27:26 says, “Then he released Barabbas for them. But after he had Jesus flogged, he handed him over to be crucified” (NET). Is this describing the same flogging as in John 19:1? In comparing the floggings in Matthew/Mark versus John, Norman Young said that a “startling difference is the FG’s positioning of the scourging and the Roman soldiers’ mocking of Jesus in the midst of Pilate’s investigation of the charges against Jesus.”³ Can John’s Gospel and Matthew/Mark be reconciled?

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¹ While some scholars differentiate “beating,” “flogging,” and “scourging,” I will use “flogging” as the word that covers the entire category involved.

² C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 103.

³ Norman H. Young, “The Flogging of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel,” *Society for the Study of Early Christianity Newsletter* 80 (September 2014): 7. Young completed his doctoral research under F. F. Bruce.

I. FLOGGING HYPOTHESES IN RECENT RESEARCH

There are at least six different ways scholars have offered solutions to this situation, and four of the six include two floggings.

1. *Single-flogging solutions.* Some scholars have argued that Matthew and Mark's accounts allow for a gap between the flogging and Jesus being handed over for crucifixion. This gap can account for the fourteen verses in John 19. Blomberg and Beasley-Murray argue for this, relying upon the work of Blinzler.⁴ Beasley-Murray says that "he handed [him] over in order to be crucified" refers to the announcement of the death penalty (meaning: "he condemned him to the death of the cross").⁵ They both conclude that the aorist participle communicates that the death sentence was passed *after* the flogging. If that is the case, synchronizing the events in Matthew/Mark with John becomes much easier. These scholars view the depiction in the Gospels as historical accounts.

Raymond Brown believes that John intentionally rearranged the events for a dramatic impact: to focus attention on Jesus as a mocked king and that this humiliated man was the Davidic King. More will be said about Brown below,⁶ but he believes that John has rearranged the material for literary purposes and is therefore not a historical rendering of what occurred.

2. *Two-floggings solutions.* The variations within this category are slightly nuanced from each other. The differences are really about the motivation and purpose for the initial flogging. Scholars in this category have essentially concluded that the flogging discussed in Luke 23:16, 22 and John 19:1 was an initial light flogging before the judgment and that the Matthew and Mark floggings were more severe and after the judgment.

M. L. Skinner has suggested that Luke 23:16, 22 and John 19:1 are parallel events and that the first light flogging was an attempt at an inquisitional torture of Jesus because he refused to cooperate. He says it was "inquisitional torture meant to extract truth from the man in custody, in contrast to the penal torture seen before the crucifixion in Mark and Matthew."⁷ Pilate wanted to establish the truth and release Jesus.⁸ This view is imputing a specific motive to the first flogging, its "inquisitional nature." It is hard to be certain whether this was Pilate's purpose or not.⁹

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 243. See Joseph Blinzler, *Der Prozess Jesu* (4th ed.; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1969).

⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Dallas: Word, 1999), 335–36. In turn, Blinzler was citing L. Wenger, *Die Quellen des römischen Rechts* (Vienna: Adolf Holzhausens Nfg., 1953), 287 n. 11.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave; A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (2 vols.; AYBRL; New York: Yale University Press, 1994), 851–53.

⁷ Matthew L. Skinner, *The Trial Narratives: Conflict, Power, and Identity in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Know, 2010), 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81, 98.

⁹ Note that David Rensberger, "The Politics of John: The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 103 (1984): 402, says the following of Pilate's motivation: "Rather, his aim is to humiliate 'the Jews' and to ridicule their national hopes by means of Jesus."

Several scholars believe that the initial flogging was intended to cause the Jewish authorities to pity Jesus. Pilate's hope, then, was to convince them to release him. Haenchen, while clearly doubting the historicity of the Johannine account, holds to this view.¹⁰ Young's reply to this theory is that the "severe scourging that preceded the crucifixion was hardly designed to evoke sympathy."¹¹ However, this argument holds that the initial flogging would have been a light flogging, a position that Young concludes is an assumption.¹²

Bultmann believes the initial flogging was to make Jesus look pathetic and harmless: "Clearly the purpose in this is to make the person of Jesus appear to the Jews as ridiculous and harmless, so that they should drop their accusation."¹³ Bultmann strongly disagrees with Haenchen, saying: "There is not a hint that Pilate wishes to awake the sympathy of the Jews, and it is little credible."¹⁴

Finally, some scholars believe that the initial light flogging was done with the intention to release Jesus afterwards. Scholars such as Carson, Neyrey, and Sherwin-White have advocated this view.¹⁵ This is the view that will be defended here.

¹⁰ Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 2 (trans. R. W. Funk; ed. R. W. Funk and U. Busse; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 180–81. See also Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 73; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 108.

¹¹ Young, "Flogging," 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9. He also says that Pilate referring to Jesus as king would have caused the Jews to be angry, not have pity. For good insights on Pilate's motivation for this, see Martinus C. De Boer, "The Narrative Function of Pilate in John," in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts* (ed. G. J. Brooke and J.-D. Kaestli; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 200), 153. Rensberger, "Trial," 404, also rejects the pity motivation.

¹³ R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches; Johannine Monograph Series; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 659. See also de Boer, "Pilate," 153.

¹⁴ Bultmann, *John*, 659 n. 2. Note that Young, "Flogging," 8, concluded that Bultmann held to the arousing pity view, which he clearly rejected.

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 596–98; Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 300; A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 27–28.

Table 1. Summary of Flogging Solutions

Single-Flogging Solutions	Two-Floggings Solutions
1. Gap Theory: Blomberg, Beasley-Murray, Blinzler	1. Initial flogging was inquisitional torture: Skinner
2. John is not historical: Brown	2. Initial flogging to evoke Jewish pity: Haenchen, Stibbe
	3. Initial flogging to make Jesus look pathetic: Bultmann, de Boer
	4. Intention to release after initial flogging: Carson, Neyrey, and Sherwin-White

II. ROMAN FLOGGING

It is typically thought that Roman soldiers administered three types of floggings:

(1) *fustigatio*: the least severe beating given for light offences, typically accompanied by a severe warning not to commit the light offence again;

(2) *flagellatio*: a severe flogging given to criminals who committed more serious crimes; not a precursor to capital punishment but a more severe flogging than the first kind;

(3) *verberatio*: the most severe form of flogging, always associated with another punishment, usually capital punishment, including crucifixion.¹⁶

Most interpreters appear to believe that Jesus received the third type: *verberatio*. While there were basically three main categories for Roman floggings, and these descriptions are fairly accurate, there were not always clear-cut divisions between them.¹⁷

Historically, flogging was so horrible that some men would die from the flogging alone. In his treatise against Flaccus, Philo says that people “were flogged with such severity that some of them the moment they were carried out died of their wounds, while others were rendered so ill for a long time that their recovery was despaired of.”¹⁸ Josephus mentions a Jew, Jesus the son of Ananus, who was brought before Albinus and “was whipped till his bones were laid bare.”¹⁹ Eusebius, in discussing martyrs before the time of Polycarp, says that during the floggings, some “bystanders were struck with amazement when they saw them lacerated with scourges even to the innermost veins and arteries, so that the hidden inward parts

¹⁶ See Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 27. He is following *The Digest of Justinian* (ed. T. Mommsen; 4 vols.; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985), 48.19.7, which is a compendium of Roman law compiled in the 6th century. See also Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21* (NAC 25B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 246. For a similar description, see Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 851.

¹⁷ P. W. Walaskay, “The Trial and Death of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke,” *JBL* 94 (1975): 90; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2003), 2:1119.

¹⁸ Philo, *Flacc.* 10.75 (Yonge).

¹⁹ Josephus, *J. W.* 6.304 (Whiston).

of the body, both their bowels and their members, were exposed to view.”²⁰ The scourge would typically be constructed of a wooden handle and have several leather straps with metal, glass, or bone tied into the straps.²¹ The criminal typically had his hands tied to a post so that his back would be stretched out,²² making the skin tight, so that when the whip came across the back with the metal, glass, or bones in it, it would easily tear the flesh.

While a contradiction between the Gospel accounts is theoretically possible, a close examination of the description of the floggings in each account should be conducted before reaching that conclusion. Once each account is understood on its own terms, then they can be compared to one another.

III. A CLOSER LOOK AT MATT 27:26 (PAR. MARK 15:15)

In Matthew 27, Jesus was on trial before Pontius Pilate. After Pilate finished interrogating Jesus, Matthew mentioned that the custom of the Roman governor was to release one prisoner during the Passover festival. Pilate asked if they wanted Barabbas, a notorious prisoner, released or if they wanted Jesus. The Jewish rulers persuaded the crowds, and they asked for Barabbas. Pilate asked them what he should do with Jesus. The crowds demanded that he be crucified. At this point, Pilate seemed reluctant to crucify Jesus. He washed his hands, symbolically saying he was not really responsible, and then said, “See to it yourselves!” (Matt 27:24, CSB). When Pilate said this, he had made his decision to have Jesus crucified and Barabbas released. Then Matt 27:26 says, “Then he released Barabbas to them and, after having Jesus flogged, handed him over to be crucified” (CSB). Matthew is clear that the crowds asked for Barabbas (v. 21). The decision to crucify Jesus was made in verse 25; in 26a Barabbas was released; and in 26b Jesus was flogged.

That is the order of events in Matthew. Therefore, Blomberg’s objection that “Mark’s wording thus allows for the flogging to have happened at any time prior to the conclusion of Jesus’ trial”²³ should be questioned. The order for Jesus to be flogged occurred after the crowd asked for Barabbas instead of Jesus and after the crowd pressured Pilate. Also, Pilate had decided to crucify Jesus before he ordered the flogging.

The Greek text of Matthew 27:26 says, τότε ἀπέλυσεν αὐτοῖς τὸν Βαραββᾶν, τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν φραγελλώσας παρέδωκεν ἵνα σταυρωθῆι (“Then he released to them Barabbas, but having flogged Jesus, he gave (him) in order to be crucified”). The aorist participle (φραγελλώσας) precedes the aorist main verb. Normally, this communicates antecedent action (the action of the participle is before the action of the main verb), but it will often be contemporaneous action (the action of the par-

²⁰ Eusebius of Caesaria, *Church History* 4.15.4 (NPNF² 1:189).

²¹ See Borchert, *John* 12–21, 246.

²² Cf. Acts 22:25. See Keener, *John*, 2:1119, esp. n. 455 for historical evidence for this.

²³ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 243. Note that Keener, *John*, 2:1119, recognizes that these are different floggings being described, though he does not attempt to offer a synthesizing of the accounts.

ticiples happens at the same time as the action of the main verb).²⁴ Essentially, context is the key to figuring out if the actions are simultaneous or not. When the action is simultaneous, the context usually makes this clear. In Matthew 27:26, the actions of “flogging” and “being handed over to be crucified” do not demand simultaneous action but allow for it. The construction connects these two verbs closely. However, if it is understood as simultaneous, then the actions still occur after releasing Barabbas. So, while the flogging and being handed over could refer to a unified action, the use of the conjunction *δέ* between “releasing” Barabbas and “flogging” Jesus indicates a development in the narrative.²⁵

The Greek text in Mark is different: *καὶ παρέδωκεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν φραγελλώσας ἵνα σταυρωθῆ* (“and he handed Jesus over, having him flogged, in order to be crucified”). While Matthew has the aorist participle preceding the aorist main verb (which leads to an ambiguous time connection), Mark has the aorist participle following the main verb. Carson says, “when an aorist particle (*φραγελλώσας*) follows the finite verb on which it depends (*παρέδωκεν*), it usually refers to a succeeding event.”²⁶ So while Matthew’s text is somewhat ambiguous, Mark’s is less so, indicating that Jesus was handed over to be crucified and then flogged.²⁷

The argument that the phrase *παρέδωκεν ἵνα σταυρωθῆ* (“he handed him over to be crucified”) refers to the death sentence is interesting. Carson argues that the “actual death sentence is not pronounced.”²⁸ The word *παρέδωκεν* occurs many times in the NT in reference to Jesus’s death. In Luke 24:20, it says, *ὅπως τε παρέδωκαν αὐτὸν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ ἄρχοντες ἡμῶν εἰς κρίμα θανάτου καὶ ἐσταύρωσαν αὐτόν* (“and how our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be condemned to death and they crucified him”). Here the construction is different, but Luke differentiates between Jesus being handed over and Jesus being crucified. Many other references to Jesus being “handed over” or “giving up himself” occur with the same verb that are not “death sentences” (for a few examples, see Mark 15:1, 10; Luke 24:7; John 19:11; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25).

Four more items seem to lean against interpreting the flogging of Matt 27:26 as taking place before the sentence of crucifixion. (1) Matthew 27:3 contains the word *κατακρίνω*. This word does refer to the pronouncing of a sentence: “pronounce a sentence after determination of guilt.”²⁹ Matthew knows and uses a word for a death sentence, but instead uses a word that simply means “handed over” in 27:26. (2) While the gap between the flogging and being handed over in Matthew/Mark is a few *words*, in John’s Gospel it is *fourteen verses*. This discrepancy still

²⁴ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 624.

²⁵ Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2010), 31. Runge says that this development can be logical or temporal (*ibid.*, 36).

²⁶ Carson, *John*, 597.

²⁷ Logically, the following paragraph notwithstanding, Jesus had to first be given to the soldiers before they could flog him.

²⁸ Carson, *John*, 606.

²⁹ BDAG 519.

needs an adequate explanation. (3) Brown mentions that John 19:1–5 seems to imply that the flogging took place inside the praetorium while Matt 27:26–29 seems to imply that it took place outside the praetorium.³⁰ (4) The actual decision by Pilate seems to occur in Matt 27:24 when he washes his hands and tells the crowd to take care of Jesus themselves.

The verb used in Matthew 27 to describe Jesus's flogging is *φραγελλῶ*, meaning "to flog or to scourge." BDAG defines it this way: "a punishment inflicted on slaves and provincials after a sentence of death had been pronounced on them."³¹ This word is used when a flogging would take place *after* the sentence of death, possibly crucifixion, had been given. It is a reference to *verberatio*, the most severe type of flogging.³² The account in Mark 15:15 reads the same as Matthew. Mark uses the same words, terminology, and (essentially) order, though he does not include as many details as Matthew.

IV. A CLOSER LOOK AT LUKE 23:16, 22

Luke's Gospel describes the flogging in 23:16 and 22. This Gospel follows a similar pattern as Matthew's, but has some differences. After Pilate interrogates Jesus and is provided with no reason to find Jesus guilty (Luke 23:4), he sends Jesus to Herod Antipas to get a second opinion. Herod Antipas was the ruler in Galilee (where Jesus was from), so Pilate was allowed to send Jesus for a second opinion (Luke 23:7). Herod talks to Jesus and sends him back to Pilate. Pilate explains to the crowds that neither he nor Herod found Jesus guilty of anything (Luke 23:14–15). In verse 16, Pilate says, "Therefore, after flogging him I will release him." Pilate was going to have Jesus flogged and released, not crucified. The Greek word for "flogged" in Luke 23:16 (*παιδεύω*) refers generically to the concept of punishment, possibly by a whip or a rod. The verse does not actually state that Jesus was flogged; it just states that Pilate's plan was to flog Jesus and then have him released.³³

After Luke 23:16, the crowd started asking for Barabbas to be released, and Luke states in 23:20: "Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again." Pilate's desire was to punish Jesus and then have him released. But Pilate was being pressured by the Jewish crowds to release Barabbas instead. After insisting that Jesus had done nothing wrong, Pilate declared again in 23:22, "Therefore, after flogging him I will release him."³⁴ This is identical to what was stated in 23:16. Jesus had not yet been flogged, but Pilate was planning on having Jesus punished by flogging and then releasing him. This most likely refers to the light flogging dis-

³⁰ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 851–53.

³¹ BDAG 1064. Notice the order in which BDAG says it took place: first the sentence of death, then the flogging.

³² Cf. Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 852.

³³ Cf. Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC 24; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 580.

³⁴ For background information on a whipping given before judgment, see Elias J. Bickerman, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History: A New Edition in English Including the God of the Maccabees* (ed. Amram Tropic; 2 vols.; Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity; Boston: Brill, 2007), 2:455–56.

cussed earlier: *fustigatio*.³⁵ A parallel can also be found in 2 Cor 11:25 where Paul mentions that he had been beaten with rods three times. BDAG mentions that the word used for “beaten” (ῥαβδίζω) refers to “the punishment known formally in Lat. legal terminology as *admonitio*” and concludes that it is a reference to *fustigatio*.³⁶

The account continues in 23:23–25: “But they kept up the pressure, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified. And their voices won out. So Pilate decided to grant their demand and released the one they were asking for, who had been thrown into prison for rebellion and murder. But he handed Jesus over to their will” (CSB). If the only Gospel account of Jesus’s trial were from Luke, we would not know if Jesus was ever flogged before the sentence of crucifixion was given. Luke simply does not say. It was Pilate’s *intention* to have him flogged, but the time period between verses 23 and 24 is unknown.³⁷ Since an answer cannot be gleaned from Luke’s Gospel, the examination will now turn to the Gospel of John.

V. A CLOSER LOOK AT JOHN 19:1

Pilate interrogated Jesus and concluded in John 18:38 that Jesus had done nothing wrong. Pilate offered to release Jesus according to the custom of the festival. The crowds shouted back that instead they wanted Barabbas. In response to their request for Barabbas, Pilate had Jesus flogged. The verb used to describe Jesus’s flogging is *μαστιγῶ*. Matthew and Mark use *φραγελλῶ* (a flogging that occurred after a sentence of death had been given); Luke uses the verb *παιδεύω* (a general term for punishment, but it could include punishment by [light] flogging); and John uses *μαστιγῶ* (a punishment typically decreed by a synagogue). In fact, BDAG recognizes the confusion over what is specifically being referred to in John 19:1, saying that it might be equivalent to the flogging of Luke 23:16, 22.³⁸ John 19:1 appears to be referring to *fustigatio*, the light flogging discussed in Luke 23. While Luke never said it took place, John says it did occur.

³⁵ Cf. Mark Strauss, “Luke,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (ed. Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 490. See also Stein, *Luke*, 580. Cf. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 851. Contra Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse* (Osborne NT Commentaries; Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 534, who says it was “the middle type of beating,” *flagellatio*.

³⁶ BDAG 902.

³⁷ Interestingly, there is no declaration in John’s Gospel that Barabbas was actually released. However, I have not read anyone suggesting that John was trying to communicate that Pilate did not release him.

³⁸ BDAG 620.

Table 2. The Greek words used to describe the flogging(s) of Jesus in the four Gospels

Gospel	Matthew & Mark	Luke	John
Greek word used	φραγελλῶ (<i>phragelloō</i>)	παιδεύω (<i>paideuō</i>)	μαστιγῶ (<i>mastigoō</i>)
Definition	a severe flogging that occurred after a sentence of death had been given	a general term for punishment, but it could include punishment by whipping	a punishment typically decreed by a synagogue

If John 19:1 is referring to the *verberatio* (the most severe form of flogging followed by a further punishment), then both the preceding and following verses are difficult to explain.

Preceding: “I find no grounds for charging him” (John 18:38b, CSB).

Following: “Pilate went outside again and said to them, ‘Look, I’m bringing Him outside to you to let you know I find no grounds for charging Him’” (John 19:4, CSB).

According to Neyrey, Pilate’s verdict is declared in John 18:38b.³⁹ Why would Pilate declare Jesus innocent and then have him flogged in such a way that he could have died? Pilate declared *after*⁴⁰ the flogging in 19:4 that he found no reason for Jesus to be crucified. Would Pilate say this after having him flogged in such a way that he could have died? Would he command the *verberatio* and then bring him out and say he did nothing wrong? Blomberg concluded: “It is thus unnecessary to assume that Jesus was flogged twice within the same hearing, a supposition for which there is no obvious historical precedent.”⁴¹ But neither the Gospel writers nor proponents of the multiple flogging theory are saying that multiple floggings were intended or normal. By comparing the two accounts, it appears as if Pilate intended on having Jesus lightly whipped and then releasing him. De Boer concludes: “the scourging and mocking of Jesus [in John’s Gospel] constitutes *an attempt by Pilate to release him*.”⁴² However, that did not happen, and he had Jesus flogged twice.

Glancy wrestles with the concept that Pilate may have been directly involved in the flogging of John 19:1. She concludes that “scourging of a prisoner would typically be ordered rather than executed by a person in authority.”⁴³ She provides a

³⁹ Neyrey, *John*, 300. Note that Neyrey actually says 18:39, but the verse he means is 18:38.

⁴⁰ Note that L. H. Cohick, “Trial of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (2nd ed.; ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 976, recognizes that there is a difference between Matthew-Mark and John: “Pilate has Jesus flogged before the sentence is rendered.”

⁴¹ Blomberg, *John*, 243.

⁴² De Boer, “Pilate,” 143 (emphasis original).

⁴³ J. A. Glancy, “Violence as Sign in the Fourth Gospel,” *BibInt* 17 (2009): 111. Note also the conclusion by Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonial Studies and New Testament Studies* (Bible in

good rationale through historical precedent and culture, but another key aspect is the verb itself. In his section on the active voice, Wallace includes a category of causative or ergative active. He defines it as when the “subject is not directly involved in the action, but may be said to be the ultimate source or cause of it.”⁴⁴ He continues, saying that this concept is often built into the lexeme, especially with $\delta\omega$ and $\iota\zeta\omega$ verbs. Robertson says that this “idiom is due to the fact that what one does through another he does himself.”⁴⁵ Both Robertson and Wallace include John 19:1 as an example, and the latter concludes: “Pilate **caused** Jesus to be scourged, but did not perform the act himself.”⁴⁶

John 19:6 says, “When the chief priests and the temple police saw Him, they shouted, ‘Crucify! Crucify!’ Pilate responded, ‘Take Him and crucify Him yourselves, for I find no grounds for charging Him’” (CSB). Pilate is still trying to get Jesus released without further punishment. Then John says, “From that moment Pilate made every effort to release Him” (John 19:12, CSB). John does not describe a sentence of crucifixion followed by a flogging, as in Matthew and Mark. Instead, Pilate had Jesus lightly flogged and then attempted to release him.⁴⁷ John 19:16 says, “So then, because of them, [Pilate] handed Him over to be crucified. Therefore they took Jesus away” (CSB). Pilate decided in John 19:16 to have Jesus crucified.

VI. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Here is a comparison between the order of events in Matthew and John.

Table 3. Order of events in Matthew and John

	Gospel of Matthew	Gospel of John
1	The crowds asked for Barabbas (27:20–21).	The crowds asked for Barabbas (18:40).
2	A decision to crucify was made (27:24).	Jesus was flogged (19:1).
3	Barabbas was released (27:26a).	A decision to crucify was made (19:16).
4	Jesus was flogged (27:26b).	

The main difference is that in Matthew there is a decision to crucify followed by a *flogging*, and in John there was a flogging followed by a *decision to crucify*. By going through the order of events in all four Gospels in the following way, they fit together well.

There are eight steps to this flogging reconstruction:

the Modern World 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 58: “So far as I have been able to ascertain, even the most encyclopedic Johannine commentaries, for all their exhaustive industry, fail to register Pilate’s direct agency in the scourging as even an easily dismissible interpretation.”

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 411. Similarly, Matthew L. Skinner, *The Trial Narratives: Conflict, Power, and Identity in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Know, 2010), 98 n. 29, says that the verb “underscores Pilate’s agency in the torture.”

⁴⁵ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (3rd ed.; Leicester: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919), 801.

⁴⁶ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 412 (bold in original).

⁴⁷ See a similar assessment by Borchert, *John 12–21*, 246.

1. Pilate threatens to flog Jesus lightly and then release him (Luke 23:16).
2. The crowd asks for Barabbas instead (Matt 27:21; Luke 23:18; John 18:40).
3. Pilate threatens (again) to flog Jesus lightly and then release him (Luke 23:22).
4. The crowd pressures Pilate (Matt 27:22–24a; Luke 23:23).
5. Pilate has Jesus lightly flogged (*justigatio*) (John 19:1).
6. Pilate tries to release Jesus after the flogging (John 19:2–15).
7. Pilate gives in to the pressure and sentences Jesus to crucifixion (Matt 27:25; Luke 23:24; John 19:16).
8. Pilate has Jesus flogged again (*verberatio*) (Matt 27:26).

Jesus received two floggings: the least severe and the most severe. Some scholars have postulated, based on Deut 25:1–3, that Jesus was whipped thirty-nine times. While that could be true, why would a Roman soldier constrain himself in the amount of lashes given to a criminal based on the Mosaic law?⁴⁸ Roman law did not necessitate the instrument used or the number of lashes. The soldiers themselves decided on the severity of the lashing. Borchert concluded, “The severity of such a beating depended on the ruthlessness or blood thirstiness of the officer in charge.”⁴⁹ Jesus might have been lashed thirty-nine times, but it could have been much higher, maybe fifty or sixty lashes.⁵⁰ This reconstruction does help explain why Jesus struggled to carry the cross beam to the site of the crucifixion: he had been flogged twice.

VII. RESPONDING TO RAYMOND BROWN

While some scholars have adopted the two-floggings hypothesis,⁵¹ Raymond Brown is one of its strongest opponents. Brown’s major reasons for objecting to this hypothesis are as follows:

In terms of historicity no harmonization of a scourging in mid-trial (John) followed by a flogging at the end (Mark/Matt) should be attempted (pace Bruce, “Trial”), even if a double whipping would explain why Jesus died so quickly. Despite Luke’s omission of all chastisement of Jesus (perhaps from a delicate preference not to have Jesus undergo such physical violence), the tradition contained reference to one whipping of Jesus that Mark/Matt and John used in different ways. In John’s highly theological arrangement of the Roman trial in seven episodes (p. 758 above) the scourging is part of the middle episode; the Mark/Matt localization is historically more probable, as the examples of type (c) cited in n. 56 indicate. The sequence in John 19:1, 5 implies that the scourging

⁴⁸ Note that when Paul says he received the thirty-nine lashes it was from the Jews, not the Romans (2 Cor 11:24).

⁴⁹ Borchert, *John 12–21*, 246.

⁵⁰ Cf. Michael J. Wilkins, “Matthew,” in *ZIBBC*, 176. See also David E. Garland, “Mark,” in *ZIBBC*, 297.

⁵¹ F. F. Bruce, “The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol. 1 (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), 7–20 (this is the best summary of the two-floggings hypothesis; see esp. p. 15); D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 597.

was done inside the praetorium; the sequence in Mark 15:15–16; Matt 27:26–27 implies that the flogging was done outside the praetorium, perhaps in Pilate’s presence, before the *bēma* (Matt 27:19). The latter is where scourgings take place in Josephus’ account of the crucifixions carried out in Jerusalem thirty-five years later by the procurator Florus (*War* 2.14.9; #308).⁵²

It seems that Brown finds a more satisfactory conclusion in describing John as being theologically arranged and Luke preferring to downplay physical violence. But in his discussion on the differences between the descriptions in Matthew/Mark and the Gospel of John, it becomes all the more clear that these are separate events. Why should a harmonization not “be attempted” at all? Why is it not even possible that the Gospels are describing different floggings?

While the historical accuracy of the Gospel of John has been significantly questioned since the Enlightenment, that does not mean *de facto* that scholars should assume errors and discontinuities without a close examination. To simply write off Luke for such a subjective reason does not seem fair to the author. A more substantial reply than those attempted by Brown and Blomberg would further the discussion rather than quick dismissals.

VIII. CONCLUSION

There are good reasons to see the four Gospels’ description of the floggings of Jesus as fitting into a coherent story rather than as contradictory. To avoid attempting to unify the story reveals a presupposition against the historical reliability of (at least) one of the Gospels (likely, John). By giving them the opportunity to present the floggings within their own literary context, the Gospels paint a picture of Pilate having Jesus lightly flogged in order to satisfy the Jews’ desire for Jesus to be punished. Once Pilate realizes that he failed in that attempt, he ordered the crucifixion, preceded by a more severe flogging. Therefore, the Gospels portray Jesus as being flogged twice.⁵³

⁵² Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 851–53.

⁵³ Thanks to Phil Thompson for help in researching this article.