

JESUS ON THE JUDGE'S SEAT: ADJUDICATING ἘΚΑΘΙΣΕΝ IN JOHN 19:13

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Abstract: *This study addresses the interpretive choice the reader must make at John 19:13. It summarizes the majority opinion that Pilate took his seat on the judge's bench to pronounce capital judgment on Jesus, then argues for the transitive reading of ἔκαθισεν, concluding that Pilate seated Jesus on the judge's seat. This study disputes the objections to the latter view on linguistic, historical, and theological/literary grounds (with attention to the other Gospel accounts and historical sources) and contends that the seating of Jesus is not only plausible but is the reading John intends. Readers who see Jesus seated on the judge's seat experience the satisfaction of having been shaped by the rhetoric of John's Gospel. As insiders who perceive Johannine irony, they adopt the "from above" view that Jesus is seated in John 19:13, rather than the "from below" view that Pilate is seated.*

Key words: *Jesus as judge, trial of Jesus, trial before Pilate, Johannine trial, Johannine irony, judgment seat, judge's seat, judge's bench, καθίζω, βήμα*

In John 19:13 we read, "When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat (βήμα) at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha)."¹ However, the Greek verb for "sat down" (ἔκαθισεν) is ambiguous: it can express the transitive or intransitive function.² Therefore, it may be translated as follows: "When Pilate heard these words, he led Jesus out and seated him on the judge's bench (βήμα)" (CEB).³ This study argues that the transitive reading—that Pilate seated Jesus on the βήμα—is the better interpretation. It first reviews the majority opinion against the transitive view and in support of the intransitive view. Then it counters that position and argues for the alternative.

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¹ Ὁ οὖν Πιλάτος ἀκούσας τῶν λόγων τούτων ἤγαγεν ἔξω τὸν Ἰησοῦν, καὶ ἔκαθισεν ἐπὶ βήματος εἰς τόπον λεγόμενον Λιθόστρωτον, Ἐβραϊστὶ δὲ Γαββαθα. Unless otherwise noted, English quotations of Scripture are from the NIV and Greek quotations are from the SBLGNT.

² C. Schneider, "κάθηναι, καθίζω, καθεζομαι," TDNT 3:442.

³ Other English translations that adopt the transitive reading are C. B. Williams, NABRE, and the New Catholic Bible.

I. THE CASE FOR PILATE SITTING ON THE JUDGE'S SEAT

Most modern translations have Pilate sitting on the βήμα according to John 19:13.⁴ The majority of scholars concur with this understanding for three main reasons: usage, history, and theology.

First, many exegetes choose the intransitive meaning based on the Greek grammar of the statement and the NT usage of καθίζω. Various forms of καθίζω are found forty-seven times in the NT.⁵ Apart from the disputed instance in John 8:2, the exact verb form ἐκάθισεν is used only one other time in John (12:14), where it is clearly intransitive: “Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it [ἐκάθισεν ἐπ’ αὐτό].” The phrase καθίσας ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος occurs three times in Acts (12:21; 25:6, 17). These are all intransitive: either Herod or Festus sits on the βήμα.⁶ Scholars supporting the intransitive reading observe that this is the more common usage of the word, particularly when καθίζω is followed immediately by ἐπὶ.⁷

Based on NT usage and the absence of the pronominal object αὐτόν, Rudolf Bultmann asserts that “ἐκάθισεν without doubt is meant intransitively.”⁸ Gary Burge notes that Josephus “uses the same syntax to describe Pilate sitting on his tribunal” on a different occasion (*J.W.* 2.172).⁹ Raymond Brown observes that “no Greek Father read it transitively, nor did any of the main ancient versions.”¹⁰

From a historical perspective, Brown states that “a historical kernel in the Roman trial” is that “Pilate sentenced Jesus to die on the cross.”¹¹ Many insist Pilate must have sat on the judge’s seat when pronouncing that sentence. Rudolf Schnackenburg asserts, “It cannot be denied that the obvious meaning according to the historical situation ... [is] ... that Pilate sat himself on the judgment-seat.”¹² Craig Keener also opposes the transitive reading—that Pilate seated Jesus—on

⁴ For example, NASB, NIV, NRSV, ESV, NLT.

⁵ This count excludes two disputed instances found in the longer ending of Mark (16:19) and the Johannine pericope about the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2).

⁶ In Acts 12:21, “Herod ... took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them.” In Acts 25:6, Festus “took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought in” (ESV). In Acts 25:17, the same phrase recurs, as Festus summarizes events for King Agrippa II. The Herod in Acts 12 is Agrippa I. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 608.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. George R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 664n2; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 544; Carson, *John*, 608; Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*, SNTSMS 100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 190.

⁸ Bultmann, *John*, 664n2. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII–XXI: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 880; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave; A Commentary of the Passion Narrative in the Four Gospels*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1390.

⁹ Gary Burge, *John*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 507.

¹⁰ Brown, *Death*, 2:1390. See his appendix about debate over the translation of John 19:13 (1388–93).

¹¹ Brown, *Death*, 1:725.

¹² Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, trans. David A. Smith and G. A. Kon (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 3:263–64.

historical grounds: "this act would have breached Roman protocol so thoroughly that it is inconceivable that Pilate would have done it."¹³

The assumption is that Pilate is acting officially as judge—pronouncing a death sentence—and that such a sentence must be pronounced from the βήμα. D. A. Carson claims, "Here is the personal representative of Rome offering his judicial decision."¹⁴ Several also assert that the narrator's note of the time and place supports the official sentence being in view.¹⁵

Another assumption is that Pilate's alleged seating of Jesus on the βήμα would be motivated by Pilate's continued mockery of Jesus. Urban von Wahlde remarks, "that Pilate would allow the symbolism of the βήμα to be demeaned by such an action is very unlikely."¹⁶

From a literary and theological perspective, opponents of the view that Pilate seated Jesus on the βήμα say, "Although the kingship of Jesus is a strong theme throughout this chapter, the theme of Jesus as judge is not."¹⁷ The theological point of this narrative, they explain, is that Pilate (acting as judge) orders the crucifixion of the true king, who is not enthroned on the βήμα—which has legal rather than royal significance—but is lifted up/exalted/glorified on the cross, where the trilingual inscription ironically proclaims his royal identity.¹⁸

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:1129. Brown states, "If John's statement means that Pilate set Jesus upon the judge's bench, the evangelist has abandoned the guise of history" (*John XIII–XXI*, 880). Leon Morris asserts, "It is impossible to imagine the governor doing such a thing." Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 799n29. See C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 119; F. F. Bruce, "The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol. 1 of *Gospel Perspectives*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 17; Carson, *John*, 608; Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, IVPNTC 4 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 454–55; Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, NAC 25B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 256; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 536; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 940–41; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 2: *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 786; Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 388; Norman H. Young, "'The King of the Jews': Jesus before Pilate (John 18:28–19:22)," *ABR* 66 (2018): 40.

¹⁴ Carson, *John*, 603. See Josef Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus: The Jewish and Roman Proceedings against Jesus Christ Described and Assessed from the Oldest Accounts*, 2nd ed., trans. Isabel and Florence McHugh (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1959), 241; A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978), 47; Dodd, *Fourth Gospel*, 119; Bultmann, *John*, 664; Morris, *John*, 799; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 570; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 342; Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 191; Burge, *John*, 507; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 65; Michaels, *John*, 940–41; Thompson, *John*, 388.

¹⁵ Morris, *John*, 799–800; Lindars, *John*, 570; Bart D. Ehrman, "Jesus' Trial before Pilate: John 18:28–19:16," *BTB* 13 (1983): 125; Brown, *Death*, 1:485; Michaels, *John*, 940–41.

¹⁶ Von Wahlde, *John*, 2:786. See Morris, *John*, 799; Lindars, *John*, 570; Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 190; Burge, *John*, 507.

¹⁷ Carson, *John*, 608. See Schnackenburg, *John*, 3:264; Robert Kysar, *John*, ACNT (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 283; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 342.

¹⁸ Schnackenburg, *John*, 3:264; David Rensberger, "The Politics of John: The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 103.3 (1984): 410; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 342.

II. THE CASE FOR JESUS SITTING ON THE JUDGE'S SEAT

Let us proceed now to critique the majority view—that Pilate was sitting on the βήμα—and argue for the transitive alternative—that Pilate seated Jesus on the βήμα.

1. *Response to the issue of syntax and the usage of καθίζω.* For scholars such as Bultmann and Brown, the absence of the pronominal object αὐτόν in John 19:13 is against the transitive reading (see note 8). However, Ignace de La Potterie points out that “when two co-ordinated verbs have a common direct object it is almost always placed *between* the two verbs, and in this case it is not repeated pronominally after the second verb.”¹⁹ He concludes that in John 19:13, “*ton Iēsoun* is the direct object of *ekathisen* as well as of *égagen*,” and the absence of *auton* following *ekathisen* “is no cause for surprise: in fact it is the normal construction.”²⁰ Several scholars echo his conclusion or at least acknowledge that syntax and usage are not persuasive against the transitive reading.²¹

Regarding the more common usage of καθίζω as intransitive, there are two counterpoints. First, this fits with the nature of this verb. It is much more common to speak or write about someone sitting or sitting on something than to speak of someone seating someone else on something.²² However, that does not negate the minority instances. It is true that καθίζω is usually intransitive, except when it is not. Each instance must be assessed individually. John uses this word only in 12:14 and 19:13 (excluding the later addition at 8:2). Interpreters must not assume he uses this word *only* intransitively based on this scant record of usage.²³

Second, the other intransitive usages of καθίζω in the NT and by Josephus are clearly understood that way in the context of the events being narrated, but that is not determinative for the extraordinary event occurring in John 19:13. In John 12:14, “Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it” (εὕρων δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὄναριον ἐκάθισεν ἐπ’ αὐτό). It would make no sense to think that Jesus seated the donkey;

¹⁹ Ignace de La Potterie, “Jesus King and Judge according to John 19:13,” trans. J. O’Hara, *Scr* 13 (1961): 100. He claims to “have found seventeen examples of this in the fourth gospel” (100). Many subsequent scholars engage La Potterie’s transitive argument. Artemio M. Zabala provides one of the more thorough treatments in two articles: “The Enigma of John 19:13 Reconsidered: A Survey of the Contemporary Discussion and a Suggestion,” *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 22 (1981): 16–28; and 23 (1982): 1–10. Zabala adopts the intransitive reading (1982:10).

²⁰ La Potterie, “Jesus King and Judge,” 100.

²¹ Charles Homer Giblin, “John’s Narration of the Hearing before Pilate (John 18,28–19,16a),” *Bib* 67.2 (1986): 234; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, BNTC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 469; Giorgio Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 36; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in John’s Gospel* (2000; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 134; Lidija Novakovic, *John 11–21: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, BHGNT (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 255. Giblin, Lincoln, and Agamben choose the transitive reading; Novakovic prefers the intransitive.

²² Giblin, “Hearing before Pilate,” 234–35.

²³ BDAG states that “Jn 19:13 is probably to be understood in this sense [i.e., transitively]” (“καθίζω,” 491–92). Peter Corssen claimed that “der Richter führt den ganzen Prozeß von Anfang bis zu Ende auf dem βήμα oder tribunal und setzt sich nicht etwa erst zum Schluß darauf” and concluded: “Nein, nicht Pilatus setzt sich, sondern er läßt Jesus ἐπὶ βήματος sich setzen als König und höchsten Richter der Juden.” Peter Corssen, “Ἐκάθισεν ἐπὶ βήματος,” *ZNW* 15 (1914): 339–40.

he sits on the donkey in order to ride it. In Acts, a king (Herod) or governor (Festus) sits or takes his seat on the βῆμα (καθίσας ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος). In Acts 12:21, Herod acts alone when he takes his seat; there is no other character mentioned for him to seat. In Acts 25:6, Festus “took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought in” (ESV). This is a judicial hearing of a Christian leader before a Roman political official, and the Greek text includes our key words καθίζω and βῆμα. However, despite the superficial similarities of these events, they diverge in important ways. Paul is not dressed as a king, nor is any claim or accusation of his kingship in view in his legal matter or Luke’s theology. Moreover, the sequence of actions in Acts 25 makes it clear that Festus took his seat and *then* ordered Paul to be brought in. No one thinks Festus seated Paul on his lap on the βῆμα!

In order to see Jesus sitting on the βῆμα in John 19:13, one does not need to resort to the transitive reading of ἐκάθισεν. It is also possible to read the verb as intransitive, but with Jesus as the subject of the verb.²⁴ In this reading, Ἰησοῦν is the direct object of the preceding verb (ἤγαγεν) and the subject of the following one (ἐκάθισεν). “Pilate brought out Jesus and he [Jesus] sat on the judgment seat.” Reading it this way, the subject of ἐκάθισεν is the nearest antecedent proper name (Ἰησοῦν).²⁵

Josephus employs terms regarding Pilate in the context of the affair of the standards and his response to Jewish upheaval in Caesarea (ὁ Πιλάτος καθίσας ἐπὶ βήματος ἐν τῷ μεγάλῳ σταδίῳ) that are used of Herod and of Festus in Acts 12:22; and 25:6 and 17.²⁶ The intransitive reading is natural and undisputed: “Pilate sat on the tribunal-platform in the great stadium.”²⁷

2. *The historical plausibility of Pilate seating Jesus on the judgment seat.* The majority of scholars insist Pilate must have personally sat on the βῆμα as part of procedural protocol when passing sentence. Assuredly, crucifixion was a Roman means of execution.²⁸ Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers, and Pilate the Roman prefect is the one to whom appeal was made regarding the placard over the cross and the release of Jesus’s body. These facts strongly imply that Pilate authorized the execu-

²⁴ Joseph Verheyden, “I. de la Potterie on John 19,13,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. G. van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 830.

²⁵ Some modern translations insert punctuation not present in UBS⁵. By doing so, they make it possible for the reader to assume that the subject of the verb ἐκάθισεν is the nearest antecedent—Jesus. For example: CSB: “When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside. He sat down on the judge’s seat”; CEV: “When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out. Then he sat down on the judge’s bench.” See similar punctuation (either a period or dash) in The Passion Translation, The Message, the Evangelical Heritage Version, and the Literal Standard Version.

²⁶ Josephus, *J.W.* 2.172. See Aldo Schiavone, *Pontius Pilate: Deciphering a Memory*, trans. Jeremy Carden (New York: Liveright, 2017), 86–90. Bond dates this event early in his term of office, which began in 26 CE (*Pontius Pilate*, 79).

²⁷ David W. Chapman and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus: Text and Commentary*, WUNT 344 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 175.

²⁸ Paul Winter defends this assertion against the claim that the Jews had adopted crucifixion as an alternative death penalty. Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, 2nd ed., SJ 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 90–96.

tion of Jesus by crucifixion. However, the Gospel sources neither quote nor narrate a sentencing.²⁹

Mark and Matthew explain that Pilate knew the Jews had handed Jesus over to him due to envy (Mark 15:10; Matt 27:18); so Pilate appealed to the custom of releasing someone during the Passover festival (Mark 15:9; Matt 27:17, 21). In response to the crowd's call for the crucifixion of Jesus, both Mark and Matthew quote Pilate as asking, "Why? What crime has he committed?" (Mark 15:14; Matt 27:23). Mark writes, "Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified" (Mark 15:15). Matthew adds that Pilate, seeing "that he was getting nowhere" in his effort to release Jesus, "took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'" (Matt 27:24), and the crowd answered, "Let his blood be on us and our children!" (v. 25).³⁰

Luke's account directly quotes Pilate declaring the innocence of Jesus three times (Luke 23:4; 14–15; 22).³¹ The first quote is succinct: "I find no basis for a charge against this man" (v. 4). The second is embellished: He tells the Jews he has "examined him" and "found no basis for your charges against him" (v. 14). Pilate cites corroboration by Herod and reiterates, "as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death" (v. 15). Continuing the longest single speech of Pilate in any of the Gospels (forty-six words in the Greek text), he concludes, "Therefore, I will punish him and then release him" (v. 16). When the crowd keeps shouting for Jesus to be crucified, Luke includes the same questions as Mark and Matthew: "Why? What crime has he committed?" (v. 22). However, Luke introduces this quote by noting, "for the third time he spoke to them," and then provides the content of his thrice-stated assessment: "I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore, I will have him punished and then release him" (v. 22). These are the last quoted words of Pilate in the Synoptic accounts of the trial. Note that there is no quotation of direct speech containing a formal pronouncement of guilt or passing of sentence. However, there are direct-speech declarations of innocence. Note also that there is no narration of a formal sentencing in Mark or Matthew, and arguably not in Luke either. They only state that Pilate released Barabbas, had Jesus flogged, and delivered him over (*παρέδωκεν*) for crucifixion (Mark 15:15; Matt 27:26; Luke 23:25).

²⁹ Ernst Bammel states that though "the condemnation [is not] rendered in unmistakable words ... the verdict is presupposed; it is the basis of the following scenes." Ernst Bammel, "The Trial before Pilate," in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 417.

³⁰ R. T. France observes that the Jewish crowd "are willing to be answerable for his death, which they, unlike Pilate, believe to be deserved." R. T. France, *Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1056. Grant Osborne remarks, "Pilate capitulates to the crowd" but fails to convince us of his own innocence. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1020. Ulrich Luz observes that Matthew stresses the innocence of Jesus, not Pilate: "After Judas (v. 4) and Pilate's wife (v. 19), Pilate is the third person who delivers this testimony." Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 500.

³¹ "Luke's major apologetic purpose in 23.1–25 is to use Pilate as the official witness to Jesus' innocence." Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 159.

Regarding the narration of Pilate delivering Jesus over, Luke again augments it. In response to the crowd's insistent demands for crucifixion, Luke writes, "Their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided [ἐπέκρινεν] to grant their demand" (23:23–24).³² The clause after ἐπέκρινεν is essential. Pilate did it because of the demand or request of the Jews.³³ Luke's other augmentation of the Synoptic accounts is in this final phrasing. Instead of reporting that Pilate "handed him over to be crucified" (Mark 15:15; Matt 27:26), Luke explains that he "delivered Jesus over to their will [τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν παρέδωκεν τῷ θελήματι αὐτῶν]" (Luke 23:25, ESV). The same main verb (παρέδωκεν) is used, but Luke accentuates the influence of the Jews and the capitulation of Pilate by changing the object of the verb—"to their will."³⁴ Even if we understand this action as the issuing of a formal death sentence, Howard Marshall clarifies that "it is ... the will of the Jews, not of Pilate, that leads to the sentence."³⁵ To Darrell Bock, Luke's emphasis is on Pilate's declarations of the innocence of Jesus and his capitulation to the wishes of the Jews.³⁶

The assumption that Pilate formally sentenced Jesus to crucifixion (which makes his seated position on the βῆμα in John 19:13 more likely) is based more on inference than a close reading of the Gospel sources.³⁷ Since people know Jesus

³² The Greek text is "καὶ κατίσχυον αἱ φωναὶ αὐτῶν. καὶ Πιλάτος ἐπέκρινεν γενέσθαι τὸ αἷτημα αὐτῶν." English translators are divided on how to render the verb ἐπέκρινεν, used only here in the NT. The KJV, RSV, GNT, NLT, and others translate it, "Pilate gave/passed sentence" or "sentenced." Others such as the NRSV say he "gave his verdict." However, in addition to the NIV, the NASB, ESV, CSB, and others have, "Pilate decided." Joel Green notes that the verb "generally refers to pronouncing an edict, but in its other two usages in the Greek Bible [2 Macc 4:47; 3 Macc 4:2] it is used as it is used here, in co-texts insinuating a miscarriage of justice." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 811. Bond sees Pilate as passing sentence, but stresses that it is to grant the Jews' demand (*Pontius Pilate*, 158–59). Agamben claims that the verb "is never used in a trial-related sense" (*Pilate and Jesus*, 47–48); however, in 2 Maccabees 4:47 it clearly refers to the passing of a death sentence. Brown interprets it to mean Pilate "passes a sentence on Jesus (23:24: *epikrinein*)" (*Death*, 1:757; see also 853, 860). Bammel describes it as "the word that comes nearest to a juridical description," but he concludes that "it does not describe the giving of sentence, but rather a decision" ("Trial," 429).

³³ Ironically, the word for "demand" here (αἷτημα) is used only two other times in the NT—for prayer requests (Phil 4:6; 1 John 5:15). Is Luke hinting that the importunate supplications of the Jews to the governor of the occupying Gentile empire prevail and their wish-prayer is granted, namely, the execution of the Messiah, who was sent in response to their longstanding prayers to YHWH in more spiritual times? Due to scant usage, we cannot be confident of this.

³⁴ Gerard S. Sloyan declares, "Pilate, in Luke's gospel, ... literally cannot condemn him. This absence of a verdict by Pilate is not accidental.... He has Jesus delivered up, not 'to be crucified,' but 'to their wishes' (23:25)." Gerard S. Sloyan, *Jesus on Trial: The Development of the Passion Narratives and Their Historical and Ecumenical Implications* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 108.

³⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 861. He sums up Luke's account thus: "The innocence of Jesus could not be more firmly underlined" (861). See Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 158–59.

³⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, BECNT 3B (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1823.

³⁷ For example, France remarks that this is "the nearest Matthew gets to recording the official judicial condemnation of Jesus which resulted in his execution" (*Matthew*, 1058). Simon Légasse infers, "The trial will have ended with a sentence pronounced in due form by Pilate from his rostrum." Simon Légasse, *The Trial of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1997), 69. See James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *Jesus on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 87–88; Mark D. Smith, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Thrill of Defeat, the Agony of Victory: A Classical Historian Explores Jesus's Arrest, Trial, and Execution* (London: Lutterworth, 2018), 162, 173. Bammel acknowledges "the nearly complete absence of

was crucified by the Romans, they infer that Pilate officially passed the death sentence on him from the βήμα. But neither the Synoptic Gospels nor John's Gospel quote any such sentence.³⁸ Instead, they quote multiple pronouncements by Pilate of Jesus's innocence, and they narrate the delivering of Jesus for crucifixion as a capitulation to Jewish will, demands, and machinations.³⁹ Pilate is not absolved. Despite his dramatic hand-washing and spoken denial of responsibility (Matt 27:24), he bears guilt.⁴⁰ However, regarding who sat on the βήμα according to John 19:13, it strengthens the argument for Pilate seating Jesus when we observe that—though he must have authorized or approved the execution of Jesus—the Gospel sources do not explicitly support the assertion that Pilate uttered an official sentence of death.⁴¹

Matthew is the only Synoptic Gospel that explicitly places Pilate on the βήμα at all: "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's bench ..." (Καθημένου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος, Matt 27:19). Does this coincide with the event narrated in John 19:13?

details of a strictly judicial procedure," but infers the sentencing in a variety of ways ("Trial," 415–51; quote from 430).

³⁸ Nancy Kuehl refers to the "so-called trial" that was "simply an investigation into the facts of the case." Nancy Kuehl, *The Book of Evidence: The Trials and Execution of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 2013, 140. "Sentence must have been, by Roman law, pronounced while sitting on the bema inside the praetorium. This was not done" (143). "Pilate found no fault with Jesus" (142–43). But Schiavone believes Pilate made a declarative statement, "I shall crucify your king" (that is, he sentenced Jesus) rather than asking a mocking question in John 19:15 (*Pontius Pilate*, 166). See Giblin, "Hearing before Pilate," 235; Amben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 36, 47–48.

³⁹ Two extrabiblical historical sources imply that Pilate passed sentence. Josephus (*Ant.* 18.64) writes, "When Pilatus had condemned him [Jesus] to the cross (σταυρῶ ἐπιτετιμῆκτος Πιλάτου)," and Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.44) writes of "Christus, who had been executed during the rule of Tiberius by the prefect Pontius Pilate [*Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat*]." Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial*, 187, 192–93. These statements also may be explained as understandable inferences based on the historical facts of Jesus's hearing before Pilate, Jesus's crucifixion, and the historians' knowledge of the usual procedure. Outside the Gospels, the NT has four mentions of Pilate (Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:28; 1 Tim 6:13). In the Acts instances, the stress is on the Jewish leaders seeking the death of Jesus. In 1 Timothy, Paul highlights the "good confession" of Christ Jesus "while testifying before Pontius Pilate" (6:13). These verses witness to Pilate's infamous role in the death of Jesus, but they present no obstacle to the transitive reading of John 19:13. They neither characterize Pilate as seated on the βήμα nor do they ascribe to him an official sentencing of Jesus to execution. Concerning John 18:38 ("I find no basis for a charge against him"), Simon Greenleaf concludes, "Here was a sentence of acquittal, judicially pronounced." Simon Greenleaf, *An Examination of the Testimonies of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*, 2nd ed. (London: Maxwell, 1847), 520. Blinzler asserts that Pilate's sentence against Jesus in John's Gospel is expressed in his mocking proclamation, "Behold, your king" (*Trial*, 238), which La Potterie says is "hard to see" ("Jesus King and Judge," 98).

⁴⁰ Brown highlights that Pilate is one in the chain of multiple instances of Jesus being given over (*paradidonai*) (*Death*, 1:854).

⁴¹ Ralph Gorman supplies what he infers Pilate must have said: "Sitting on his curule chair as official representative of the Roman Emperor, he pronounced the final fateful words of sentence: 'Ibis in crucem,' 'To the cross thou shalt go.'" Ralph Gorman, *The Last Hours of Jesus* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 197. See Blinzler, *Trial*, 243. That is just the sort of dramatic direct quotation one would expect to be in the Gospel records if it was really said, akin to Paul declaring, "I appeal to Caesar!" and Festus responding, "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!" (Acts 25:11–12). But see Brown, who counters that "'in order to be crucified' is tantamount to 'You will go to the cross'" and observes that "one can cite a whole series of examples of trials with condemnatory sentences that use a variety of verbs but not the technical ones" (*Death*, 1:854).

Kurt Aland's harmony of all four Gospels shows that it does not.⁴² While he is sitting on the judgment seat (Matt 27:19), Pilate has the exchange with the crowd about whom to release, and the crowd shouts for Jesus to be crucified (Matt 27:15–23; Mark 15:6–14; Luke 23:17–23; John 18:39–40). Then Jesus is scourged and mocked by the soldiers (Matt 27:28–31; Mark 15:17–20; John 19:1–3). Then John inserts events not contained in the Synoptic Gospels. John provides the account of Pilate *going out again*—if he is moving, he is not sitting—to present Jesus to the crowd (19:4–6). Unnerved by the new charge that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, Pilate *enters the praetorium again*—he is on the move again—to question Jesus (vv. 7–11). Then, without narrating movement (the reader infers that Pilate went out again), John reveals that Pilate seeks to release Jesus, but the Jews threaten Pilate by impugning his loyalty to Caesar (v. 12). Finally, in our focal verse (13), Pilate brings Jesus out and someone sits on the *βήμα*. From this sequence, the reader deduces that Pilate's seated posture on the *βήμα* in Matthew 27:19 is separated from the seating in John 19:13 by multiple comings and goings relative to the praetorium and multiple ups and downs relative to the *βήμα*. This opens the possibility that Pilate did not always take his seat. He was on the move some of the time, may have stood sometimes, and may have seated Jesus at the last.

Regarding the marking of the time and location of the seating in John 19:13, the emphasis it betokens works for either interpretation. Ernst Haenchen, who reads John 19:13 transitively, declares that this is “the most dramatic scene in the Gospel of John”:⁴³ “the true king sits where he belongs, on the seat of judgment.”⁴⁴

Opponents of the transitive interpretation claim that a Roman prefect simply would not have seated the accused on the *βήμα* in the midst of a legal proceeding—that it is an unthinkable flouting of Roman protocol (see note 13). There are three responses. First, this objection overestimates the homogeneity of conditions and conformity to norms in remote portions of the empire. Pilate serves in a far-flung, difficult region, where conformity to strict protocol is less likely.⁴⁵ Second, this objection underestimates how distressed Pilate is and how motivated he is to provoke and humiliate the Jewish leaders. They are prevailing, but Pilate resorts to an unusual, dramatic gesture to tweak their noses (which elicits blasphemy from them) immediately before he capitulates.⁴⁶

Third, this is a unique time, to say the least. These events are part of the acme of the cosmological, salvific mission of the incarnate Son of God, and strange things are afoot. According to the Gospel accounts, soon there will be a three-hour period of midday darkness (Mark 15:33; Matt 27:45; Luke 23:44–45) and an earthquake (Matt 27:51), the veil of the temple will rip from top to bottom (Mark 15:38;

⁴² Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: English Edition* (New York: American Bible Society, 1982), 312–14.

⁴³ Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 7–21*, trans. Robert Funk, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 188.

⁴⁴ Haenchen, *John 2*, 187.

⁴⁵ See Greenleaf, *Examination*, 521; A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 17; Schiavone, *Pontius Pilate*, 9, 61–65.

⁴⁶ Brown, *John*, 2:894; Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 191.

Matt 27:51; Luke 23:45), and deceased saints will emerge from tombs and appear on the streets of Jerusalem (Matt 27:52–53). The opponents of the transitive view say it is “inconceivable” or “impossible” that Pilate would seat Jesus on the βῆμα. However, is it any more historically plausible that the Jewish high priests would profess, “We have no king but Caesar”? Both the Roman prefect and the Jewish high priests break protocols in shocking ways—each party provoking the other, and spurred on by the unique challenge of dealing with Jesus the Son of God. One unprecedented historical event (Pilate seating Jesus) incites the other (the high priests stating their exclusive fealty to Caesar).

There are also two early Christian traditions that place Jesus on the βῆμα. Justin Martyr writes, “They tormented Him, and set Him on the judgment-seat, and said, Judge us” (1 *Apol.* 35).⁴⁷ Paul Foster notes that “Justin Martyr, while living in Rome itself, understood Jesus as the one who had been seated upon the βῆμα.”⁴⁸ The Gospel of Peter 7 says, “They were clothing him in purple and they sat him on the seat of judgment saying: ‘Judge justly King of Israel.’”⁴⁹ These traditions are intriguing specimens demonstrating that from early days, Christians pictured Jesus seated on the βῆμα as part of his trial ordeal.⁵⁰ Let us press on now to the literary and theological case for John 19:13 depicting Pilate seating Jesus on the βῆμα.

3. *The literary and theological case for Jesus seated on the judgment seat in John 19:13.* This final section addresses the issue of Jesus being depicted as both king and judge; comments on the characterizations of Pilate, the Jews, and Jesus; and demonstrates that the faith-shaping rhetoric of the Johannine narrative highlights choices in a way that leads the reader to see Jesus seated on the judgment seat.

a. *Both king and judge.* A common objection to the transitive interpretation is that John is depicting Jesus as the true king in the Johannine trial narrative, not as the true judge. While the motif of kingship is predominant, the judgment of Jesus is also well established in this Gospel.⁵¹ For example, “The Father judges [κρίνει] no one, but has entrusted all judgment [κρίσιν] to the Son” (5:22). Besides, these themes are anything but mutually exclusive. Indeed, many scholars acknowledge the validity of the judge motif along with the king motif in the trial scene.⁵² The

⁴⁷ ANF 1:174. The relevant Greek text is: “διασύροντες αὐτὸν ἐκάθισαν ἐπὶ βήματος καὶ εἶπον· Κρίνον ἡμῖν.” Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis. Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone* (1994; repr., Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 83. This document is dated about 155 CE. Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers*, LCC 1 (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 230.

⁴⁸ Paul Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary*, TENTS 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 265–66.

⁴⁹ Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 199. The relevant Greek text from verse 7 is: “ἐκάθισαν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ καθέδραν κρίσεως λέγοντες· Δικαίως κρίνε, βασιλεῦ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ” (198). Foster dates this document to 150–190 CE (172).

⁵⁰ Bultmann, *John*, 664n2; Gail O’Day, *NIB* 9:822n653 (preferring the transitive reading); Lincoln, *John*, 469; Michaels, *John*, 940. The value of these extrabiblical accounts to the present study is limited by the fact they are depicting the abusive, mocking treatment of Jesus by the soldiers or the Jews, not the action of Pilate.

⁵¹ La Potterie cites John 3:19; 5:22, 24, 27; 9:39; 12:48 (“Jesus King and Judge,” 107).

⁵² Brown, *John*, 2:880; Zabala, “Enigma of John 19:13” (1982): 5–6; Burge, *John*, 507; Borchert, *John* 12–21, 253; Lincoln, *John*, 469–70.

two ideas are often related in the Greco-Roman world.⁵³ The Apostle Paul did not utter his judicial appeal to a higher court or to the Roman Senate, but to Caesar (Acts 25:11–12). In the Gospels, Pilate the Roman prefect of Judea has the (earthly) authority to examine Jesus and render a judgment, and he appeals to King Herod Antipas for his decision as well (Luke 23:6–12). Therefore, there is no justification for denying or filtering out the depiction of Jesus as the true judge in John, as if that depiction would crowd out his depiction as king. The former goes with the latter: As the true king, he is also the ultimate judge. Andrew Lincoln sums it up: “Jesus has already been dressed up as king; now the judge’s bench serves as his throne in this mock coronation.... [There is] irony that the one on trial is the real judge while the judge is himself put on trial.”⁵⁴

In addition, limiting John to the motif of kingship and denying or minimizing the judge motif does violence to John’s rhetorical inclusivity regarding the identity of Jesus. John is not satisfied with presenting Jesus in only a few ways. Instead, he is eager to reveal Jesus in a great variety of exalted ways.⁵⁵ Jesus is the Word and he is God (1:1–2, 14), the incarnation of grace and truth (1:14, 17). He is life and light (1:4), the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29, 36). He is the Son of God (1:14, 18, 34, 49; 3:16–18, 35–36; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31), the Messiah or Christ (1:17, 41; 4:29; 7:31, 41–42; 9:22; 11:27; 17:3; 20:31), the Savior of the world (4:42); the Prophet (6:14; see Deut 18:15, 18), the Holy One of God (6:69); the son of man (1:51; 3:13–14; 5:27; 6:27, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23; 13:31). He is from above (3:31; 8:23; 19:11), sent by the Father (3:34; 4:34; 5:23–24, 30, 36–38; 6:29, 38–39, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28–29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42, 44–45, 49; 13:16, 20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21). He came from the Father and is returning to him (8:14; 13:3; 16:28). In his ἐγὼ εἰμι sayings, he announces that he is the bread of life that came down from heaven (6:35, 41, 48, 51); the light of the world (8:12; 9:5); the gate for the sheep (10:7, 9); the Good Shepherd (10:11, 14); the resurrection and the life (11:25); the way, the truth, and the life (14:6); and the true vine (15:1, 5). He uses ἐγὼ εἰμι absolutely (with no predicate) in some passages that amount to a claim to being YHWH incarnate (6:20; 8:58; 18:5; see Exod 3:14). He existed before John the Baptist (1:15) and Abraham (8:58), is superior to Jacob (4:12) and Moses (1:17; 5:46; 6:32), and is the one the Scriptures testify of (5:29), the one whose own words come to fulfillment (2:22; 18:32).

⁵³ Foster observes, “The messianic, royal and judicial images (or varying pairs) exist in various intertestamental texts ... [and] a juridical aspect is often combined with both kingly and priestly offices in the ancient Mediterranean or Near-Eastern worlds” (*Gospel of Peter*, 266). See Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 193.

⁵⁴ Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 134. See Per Jarle Bekken, who supports the transitive reading: “The kingship of Jesus is interpreted in a legal framework in an imperial Roman context, in which the roles of Pilate and Jesus are reversed: It is Jesus the victorious king, and not the Roman governor Pilate, who is seated on the judgement seat (βῆμα) of the Roman Emperor.” Per Jarle Bekken, *The Lawsuit Motif in John’s Gospel from New Perspectives: Jesus Christ, Crucified Criminal and Emperor of the World*, NovTSup 158 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 256. See page 206 for his transitive interpretation. See also John J. O’Rourke, “Two Notes on St. John’s Gospel,” *CBQ* 25.2 (1963): 126.

⁵⁵ Beasley-Murray, *John*, lxxxii–lxxxiv.

The Fourth Gospel depicts him as the fulfillment of various institutions of Judaism: the temple and synagogue (chap. 2); the rabbinic tradition (chap. 3); the Sabbath (chap. 5); the Passover and Exodus (chap. 6); the Feast of Tabernacles (chaps. 7–9); and the Feast of Dedication (chap. 10).⁵⁶ He is the true high priest (18:19–27);⁵⁷ the true king of Israel (1:49; 6:15; 18:33; 19:2–3, 5, 14–15) and of the whole world (19:19–22); and he is the true judge (5:22, 27; 18:28–19:15). This sampling demonstrates that John leaves no stone unturned in presenting Jesus's exalted identity. Therefore, from a literary/theological point of view, one should not be surprised to find Jesus seated as judge while also proclaimed as king.

b. *The characterizations of Pilate, the Jews, and Jesus in the Johannine trial.* Pilate (representing worldly power) is shown to be weak, dull, spinelessly unjust, expedient, and earthbound in comparison with Jesus and the Jews.⁵⁸ Because the Jews refuse to enter his quarters, he must shuttle in and out multiple times instead of holding court and summoning others to himself, thus weakening his characterization.⁵⁹ He is befuddled and transcended by Jesus, accentuated by the discontinuity of their dialogues (18:33–38; 19:9–11).⁶⁰ He determines Jesus does not deserve death, yet caves to the murderous wishes of the Jews. He is combative toward them but loses the battle with them (that is, they achieve their objective—the execution of Jesus).⁶¹ However, he inflicts significant humiliation on them as well, provoking them to blasphemy (19:15) and refusing to change the placard on the cross (19:21–22).

In sharp contrast to Jesus, Pilate is earthy, political, “from below.”⁶² He fails to master the interrogation of Jesus or the negotiation with the Jewish leaders. He does not grasp Jesus's responses, scoffs at the notion of truth when Truth incarnate is standing before him (18:38), unjustly and cruelly flogs him (19:1) despite declaring his innocence (18:38; 19:4, 6), seeks to release him (18:39; 19:12), then uses him to goad the Jews (19:13–15) before turning him over to them for crucifixion (19:16).

⁵⁶ Borchert details some of these and other themes, stressing he is not being exhaustive (*John 12–21*, 350–53).

⁵⁷ Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ZECNT 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 741, 750.

⁵⁸ Mark A. Bradley, “The Functions of Questions in the Fourth Gospel: A Narrative-Critical Inquiry” (PhD diss., Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994), 155–94.

⁵⁹ Raymond E. Brown, “The Passion according to John: Chapters 18 and 19,” *Worship* 49 (1975): 129; Brown, *Death*, 1:744, 758; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 106; Sherri Brown, “What Is Truth? Jesus, Pilate, and the Staging of the Dialogue of the Cross in John 18:28–19:16a,” *CBQ* 77.1 (2015): 86. Some deny Pilate is characterized as weak here. See David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1989), 98; Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 169, 174, 192.

⁶⁰ A. D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St. John* (London: Methuen, 1980), 129–31. See Bradley, “Functions of Questions,” 159–94, especially the tables on pages 160–61 that identify how the responses of Jesus are nonanswers, transcendent, and answers to earlier questions, all of which demonstrate “Jesus’s unflappable integrity and strength in stark contrast to the burgeoning befuddlement of Pilate” (159).

⁶¹ Ronald A. Piper, “The Characterisation of Pilate and the Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel,” in van Belle, *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 145, 151–52.

⁶² Brown, *Death*, 1:841.

In seating Jesus on the judgment seat (19:13), Pilate unknowingly stages a truth, just as Caiaphas prophesies unaware (11:49–53).⁶³

The Jews are characterized as blind, hypocritical, and apostate relative to the ideological point of view of this Gospel and the identity and mission of Jesus, but shrewd and (mostly) dominant relative to Pilate.⁶⁴ They are blind to the reality of Jesus's messiahship, despite Scripture, many signs, and works that testify to it. They are hypocritical in their religious scrupulosity to refuse to defile themselves by entering a Gentile domicile (18:28) while clamoring for the execution of the true king of Israel. They are shrewdly effective in their political threat to Pilate about his status with Caesar (19:12), thus securing their objective—the death of Jesus. However, they also descend to the unfathomable nadir of their characterization in swearing sole allegiance to Caesar (19:15).⁶⁵

Characters and plot are naturally intertwined: the speech and actions of characters are integral to the progression of narratives. The plot point of Jesus being handed over for execution is a “kernel” event—it is essential; it must happen.⁶⁶ Through the characterization of Pilate as an impotent potentate and the chief priests as apostatizing politicians, the author solves the rhetorical problem of how to narrate Jesus's capital condemnation without characterizing him as guilty, weak, or vanquished.

Jesus, despite his incarceration, interrogation, suffering, and eventual crucifixion, is composed, bold, rhetorically powerful, and transcendent. Though ostensibly a passive pawn and victim, he is truly regal and entitled to judge his accusers, his inquisitor, and all of us.⁶⁷ His words are being fulfilled before he utters a word in this trial (18:32). He takes command of the interviews with Pilate from his first utterance, answering his question with a question that exposes Pilate as doing the bidding of the Jewish leaders (18:33–34). He testifies to the true nature of his kingship and mission in ways that go right over Pilate's head, because his kingdom “is

⁶³ O'Rourke, “Two Notes,” 125n6.

⁶⁴ Piper, “Characterisation,” 159.

⁶⁵ Mark Stibbe points out that the Jewish high priests “misquote the passover Nismat in 19.15, changing the words, ‘We have no King but Thee’ (Yahweh) to ‘We have no King but Caesar!’” (*Storyteller*, 111). See Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, NovTSup 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 76–77; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief: 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), 135; Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 192. Paul Duke labels this “a sacrilege no Jew could utter without forfeit of faith.” Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 135. Lindars declares, “So with splendid irony John makes the Jews utter the ultimate blasphemy in the same breath as their final rejection of Jesus” (*John*, 572). R. Alan Culpepper understands that irony can play in different ways: “The implied author does not wink or smile. Is that grim satisfaction or tears in his eyes?” R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 169.

⁶⁶ Seymour Chatman explains, “Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic.” Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 53. J. A. du Rand calls the death of Jesus “the kernel of the narrative.” J. A. du Rand, “Plot and Point of View in the Gospel of John,” in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African NT Scholars Presented to Bruce Manning Metzger During His Visit to South Africa in 1985*, ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 167.

⁶⁷ Meeks, “Prophet-King,” 76. He affirms La Potterie and the transitive reading (73–76).

not of this world [οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου],” “is not from here [CSB] [οὐκ ἔστιν ἐντεῦθεν],” and Pilate is the epitome of worldly, unspiritual earthiness (18:36).

The idea of Jesus being “from above” and “above all” is a potent theme in this Gospel, which comes to dramatic culmination in juxtaposition to Pilate.⁶⁸ “The one [Jesus] who comes from above [ὁ ἄνωθεν] is above all [ἐπάνω]; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth [ὁ ὢν ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἐστὶν καὶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς λαλεῖ]” (3:31). When Jesus tells Pilate he would have no authority over him “if it were not given to you from above [ἄνωθεν]” (19:11), he is discontinuously answering Pilate’s earlier question (“Where are you from?” [19:9, ESV]). Jesus is announcing to Pilate what the narrator reveals about Jesus at 3:31—that he is from above.⁶⁹ He demonstrates in this episode that he is far above Pilate and exposes the derivative nature of Pilate’s authority: it is not only given to him from Caesar (which Pilate understands) but from God (which Pilate misses).⁷⁰ By answering (and not answering) Pilate’s questions discontinuously, Jesus seizes and maintains control of the dialogues in ways that elevate his characterization and impugn Pilate’s competence, understanding, and authority.⁷¹ In spite of being handed over (*παρέδωκεν*) from Judas to the Jews to Pilate to the Jews—in spite of being arrested, beaten, mocked, and crucified—Jesus rises above it all, so that his crucifixion is depicted as an exaltation/enthronement as the King of Israel.

c. *The Johannine trial narrative features choices that prompt the reader to choose Jesus by faith.* Pilate offers the Jews a choice of either Jesus or Barabbas for release. He wants them to choose Jesus, but to their discredit and his frustration, they choose Barabbas. They blackmail Pilate into choosing between Jesus and Caesar. Despite his honest assessment of the innocence of Jesus, Pilate expediently chooses loyalty to Caesar while denying justice, to his everlasting infamy.⁷²

Pilate—likely stinging with bitter hatred—in turn provokes the Jews to choose either Jesus or Caesar as their king, and they swear their exclusive loyalty to Caesar in the context of a sacred Jewish festival that commemorates deliverance by YHWH from a foreign tyrant king. La Potterie concludes, “This is the choice which judges them. One can, therefore, realize how striking is the fact that, *at this precise moment, Jesus, silent before them, faces them as a judge.* He is their judge because they will not have him as their king.”⁷³

⁶⁸ Culpepper declares that “the conflict between that which is from above and that which is from below” is “the central conflict in the gospel” (*Anatomy*, 200). See Brown, *Death*, 1:750; Piper, “Characterisation,” 156–57.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Death*, 1:841–42.

⁷⁰ See Schnackenburg, *John*, 3:261; Rensberger, “Politics of John,” 409; Borchert, *John 12–21*, 253; Keener, *John*, 2:1127.

⁷¹ For a fuller exposition, see Bradley, “Questions,” 155–94.

⁷² Caiaphas argues that the death of Jesus is expedient for the good of the nation (11:50); Pilate decides the death of Jesus is expedient for his personal political future.

⁷³ La Potterie, “Jesus King and Judge,” 108 (his emphasis). On the devastating choice the Jews make, see Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 76; Piper, “Characterisation,” 139; Bekken, *Lawsuit Motif*, 247.

The reader takes in all this and is persuaded to avoid their ruinous decisions and choose Jesus as rightful king, judge, high priest, and savior.⁷⁴ In the midst of all these decisions, the reader must make another: how to interpret ἐκάθισεν in 19:13. Several scholars suggest this represents ambiguity for the reader. C. K. Barrett opines, “Probably, John was conscious of both meanings of ἐκάθισεν.... We may suppose then that John meant that Pilate did in fact sit on the βῆμα, but that for those with eyes to see behind this human scene appeared the Son of man, to whom all judgment has been committed (5.22), seated upon his throne.”⁷⁵

If, historically, Pilate sat on the judgment seat, then John wants us “to picture Pilate taking his place on the bench, when in fact it is Christ who is passing judgment on his accusers.”⁷⁶ But this compromise is problematic. Schnackenburg asserts that “there is no middle, no double-meaning, because the reader has to decide whether he wishes to see Pilate *or* Jesus on the judgment seat.”⁷⁷ Yes, the reader must decide. He sees Jesus seated there, not just because he “wishes” it, but because he has been led to it by the faith-shaping rhetoric of this Gospel.⁷⁸

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the narrative promotes and shapes the faith of the reader. The reader learns that the proper object of faith is Jesus (3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 69; 7:38–39; 9:35–38; 12:44; 13:19; 14:1, 10–11; 17:20–21; 20:25, 27–29), which results in eternal life or its equivalent (3:16, 36; 4:42; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25–27; 12:36; 20:31) and enables him to avoid judgment or its equivalent (3:18, 36, 8:24; 10:26; 12:46–50; 16:8–11).

The characterization of Pilate in this Gospel—including that he is the epitome of a “from the earth” person—provides implicit commentary to the reader that aids in the interpretation of the verb ἐκάθισεν in 19:13. As Alan Culpepper observes, “Pilate is a study in the impossibility of compromise, the inevitability of decision, and the consequences of each alternative.”⁷⁹ The evangelist is maneuver-

⁷⁴ See Young, “King of the Jews,” 42; Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 305. Sherri Brown asserts, “Pilate’s physical and mental ambivalence becomes the ultimate catalyst for audience members to stop vacillating and make the decision for themselves. The audience is incited to step in and offer an answer, thereby determining its own destiny in faith” (“What Is Truth?,” 86). Piper denies the reader is confronted with a choice (“Characterisation,” 32).

⁷⁵ Barrett, *John*, 544. See Duke, *Irony*, 134–35; Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 538–39; Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 190; Jo-Anne A. Brant, *John*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 249; Klink, *John*, 783; Young, “King of the Jews,” 40–41. Brown rejects this: “In previous Johannine instances of double meaning, the phenomenon has not been based on syntactical ambiguity, nor is it usual for the second meaning to be the opposite of the first” (*John*, 2:881). See Schnackenburg, *John*, 3:264; Köstenberger, *John*, 536. Chatman’s concept of narrative inference is relevant here (*Story and Discourse*, 27–31). Building on Chatman, Bradley asserts, “While such trivial matters as the color of a character’s clothing can remain *unbestimmt* (undetermined) in narrative, the audience must imagine either Jesus or Pilate sitting on the judgment seat” (“Functions of Questions,” 184).

⁷⁶ Kysar, *John*, 283. See Duke, *Irony*, 134–35, 191n53; Young, “King of the Jews,” 41.

⁷⁷ Schnackenburg, *John*, 3:264. See La Potterie, “Jesus King and Judge,” 97.

⁷⁸ On the intended faith-shaping effect of John’s Gospel on the reader, see Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 98, 148, 225–26, 231–37; Brodie, *John*, 31–39; Borchert, *John 12–21*, 353–55; Klink, *John*, 40, 49–50.

⁷⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 143. See Brown, *Death*, 1:830.

ing “to force the reader to a decision regarding Jesus.”⁸⁰ The intransitive reading is more of a “from the earth” or “from below” reading. It appeals to the earthly, political, judicial protocols of historical Roman prefects and finds it inconceivable that Pilate would seat Jesus on the βῆμα. The transitive reading is the “from above” interpretation: Pilate seats Jesus on the βῆμα precisely for his earthbound, politically vindictive motive of provoking the Jewish leaders who have manipulated him, ironically blind to the transcendent truth he enacts by doing so.

d. *The role of irony in the reader's decision.* The Fourth Gospel is renowned for its use of irony, “providing a compelling vehicle for leading the readers of John's Gospel to faith in the Lord Jesus for eternal life.”⁸¹ The attentive reader perceives multiple ironies in the trial narrative, and these observations are consistent with the transitive reading of ἐκάθισεν. First, Pilate unknowingly enacts a profound truth. Just as he was oblivious to the dramatic irony of asking, “What is truth?” of Jesus the truth (John 18:38; 14:6), so here he does not realize that by placing Jesus on the judge's bench, he not only provokes the Jewish leaders and indicts himself, he also unwittingly dramatizes an aspect of the identity of Jesus. He seats Jesus there as part of his contest with the Jewish leaders, but not because he believes Jesus is the ultimate, eschatological judge of all. Yet there Jesus is, sitting on that bench and transcending it in truth, in the moment of Pilate's eucatastrophic decision.⁸² The ostensible, “from below” judge is judged by the true, “from above” judge who sits before him.

Second, the chief priests reject their true, heavenly king (YHWH), who is above, and they instead proclaim allegiance to the worldly, temporal, “from below” Caesar of the earthly empire that is oppressing them. This supports Jesus's statement to Pilate that “the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (19:11), which is a statement of judgment.⁸³ One might expect a mundane politician to pervert justice for expedience, but not the highest-ranking religious leaders of a sublime faith. Their greater knowledge, privileges, and position make them more culpable. These hypocrites who are too religiously scrupulous to set foot in the Gentile governor's residence end up choosing Caesar over YHWH a short time later.

⁸⁰ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 143.

⁸¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, BTNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 150. See his section on Johannine irony (150–55). For more on Johannine irony, see Duke, *Irony*; R. Alan Culpepper, “Reading Johannine Irony,” in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 193–207; Gary M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 91–93.

⁸² Coined by J. R. R. Tolkien, “a eucatastrophe is a ‘good catastrophe.’ Jesus' crucifixion was the most evil event in history, but it secured the redemption of those who believe in Jesus' substitutionary atonement for their salvation.” Leland Ryken, *Jesus the Hero: A Guided Literary Study of the Gospels* (Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2016), 77.

⁸³ Schiavone, *Pontius Pilate*, 156.

Third, the chief priests utter their apostasy in the presence of their seated but silent judge and king, which prefigures their eschatological judgment. Here is the Messiah they supposedly seek, about to be executed due to their machinations.

III. CONCLUSION

Given all the above, the reader who has been shaped by this narrative and all its devices recognizes the ambiguity of ἐκάθισεν and knows that, while his “born from above” (3:3, 5) perspective enables him to see Jesus seated on the throne, others “from below” will sadly miss it and envision Pilate seated.⁸⁴ This endows the reader with the trademark satisfaction that irony supplies—he is in the “community of superior knowledge” with the author.⁸⁵ Regarding other motifs in which the reader of the Fourth Gospel is schooled, he is in the know and in the faith, while others neither know nor believe. He sees John’s subtle intent and responds to his wink with faith in Jesus the seated king and judge, who sits in silent judgment on worldly power and religious hypocrisy, keenly interested in the faith response of all who encounter this narrative.

⁸⁴ “The misunderstandings, ironies, and symbols point to the central conflict of the gospel, the conflict between that which is from above and that which is from below.” Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 200.

⁸⁵ Duke, *Irony*, 29. See Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 28.