



[Luke 23:8-12](#)

Jesus before Herod

Date: 1st CE

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Luke

Reference:

23:8-12

Commentary:

After being questioned first by the Jewish authorities (Luke 22:66-71) and then by the Roman governor, Pilate ([Luke 23:1-7](#)), Jesus is now brought before the Tetrarch, Herod Antipas. Jesus was taken by the Jewish authorities to Pilate with the hope that he would find Jesus guilty of insurrection. Ultimately, this attempt was unsuccessful, and Pilate has sent Jesus to Herod Antipas after learning that he falls under his jurisdiction. The implication made by the Lukan author is that Pilate would rather not have to deal with Jesus's case (in Luke 23:4 he has pronounced that he cannot find Jesus guilty of anything), and takes the first opportunity to pass him back to the Jewish authorities. Herod Antipas served as tetrarch (his father was Herod the Great, who had served as a client-king to Rome until his death in 4 BCE, in recognition of him having aided them in battle; Herod's kingdom was divided up by Augustus between his sons after his demise).

As Jay Harrington explains, this passage is much debated, with scholars having been divided over the years as to whether the Lukan author has based it on inherited material, including elements of Mark, drawn on Psalm 2 (which describes kings as being against the Lord and his anointed) or Paul's experience before Agrippa in Acts 26:1-19, created it entirely himself, or a mixture (for a comprehensive bibliography on the debate, see Jay Harrington, *The Lukan Passion Narrative*, p. 710). Regardless, it is for the most part agreed that this pericope functions to show Jesus's innocence, with some commentators also believing that it is intended to show that Christianity is not a political threat to Rome, and/or that Israel is once again (as is commonly presented in Luke) rejecting God's chosen one. For Harrington, the passage is Luke's own redaction, as it is found only in his account of Jesus's trial, and fits well within Luke's wider context (see Gerhard Schneider, "Das Verfahren gegen Jesus," p. 127). Moreover, this passage contains material that is found in Mark, but yet omitted in the parallel places in Luke, such as the mocking of Jesus by Herod's soldiers, rather than the Roman soldiers at the praetorium. Raymond Brown suggests that Luke is transmitting here an early tradition about Herod Antipas, which probably had some historical basis, but by the time it found its way to Luke had been developed beyond this. The Lukan author therefore interweaves this tradition into his narrative in order to highlight Herodian involvement in Jesus's fate (see Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, p. 785-786, 778-779). In general, this episode further emphasises Luke's apologetic that excuses Pilate and increases the responsibility of the Jewish authorities in Jesus's execution (Jay Harrington, *The Lukan Passion Narrative*, p. 711-712). This seems to be supported by the fact that the episode with Herod Antipas does not seem to serve any other clearly identifiable purpose – it does not further the understanding of "Jesus' person or fate" (see Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 1480).

In both Pilate's interactions with Jesus (see Luke 23:1-7 and [23:13-25](#)), he is shown by the Lukan author as proclaiming Jesus's innocence and trying on more than one occasion to set him free, only eventually deciding to execute him because of pressure from the Jewish authorities and crowds. This episode with Herod Antipas, on the other hand, which is unique to Luke's Gospel, shows the tetrarch and his soldiers treat Jesus with nothing but disdain and humiliation. With the Jewish authorities, the chief priests and the scribes, standing by, still hurling their own accusations at Jesus (Luke 23:10), Herod Antipas and his soldiers mock him, and dress him in expensive clothing to make fun of the fact that he supposedly claims a position of great honour (i.e. King of the Jews) (Luke 23:11) (see Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, "Conflict in Luke-Acts," p. 116). It is significant that in Mark and Matthew's version of Jesus's trial (see [Mark 15:16-20](#) and Matthew 27:27-31), it is the Roman soldiers at the praetorium who degrade Jesus by mocking and beating him, also dressing him in expensive garments and an ironic crown of thorns. That Luke moves this process to when Jesus is under the jurisdiction of the Jewish tetrarch is extremely telling. Jesus has previously been accused by the Jewish authorities of calling himself the Christ, a



future king, and misleading, or “perverting” God’s people (Luke 22:66-71; 23:2). In the LXX, the term ?????????? is used both in relation to leading people into idolatry (see Exodus 32:7, for example) or uncleanness (see Deuteronomy 32:5, for example), so it is a label carrying seriously negative connotations. Moreover, as far as the Jewish authorities are concerned, Jesus is not the Christ that they say he claims to be, and so is dangerous in that he pretends publically to be someone of huge religious significance (Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, “Conflict in Luke-Acts,” p. 110-111). Ultimately, however, Herod also dismisses the charges that are brought against Jesus, and sends him back to Pilate (Luke 23:15).

The author’s reference to the fact that prior to Jesus’s trial Herod Antipas and Pilate had been enemies is interesting, especially when read alongside Acts 4:25-27, where Peter and John, upon being released from prison, pray to God claiming that Pilate and Herod once met together “with the Gentiles and the people of Israel” to plot against Jesus. For Joshua Yoder, this detail indicates that Pilate is in fact a co-conspirator in Jesus’s death, and provides evidence for the argument contrary to the view of a large majority of scholars, that the Lukan author does in fact seek to portray the Roman authorities negatively, and responsible for Jesus’s death (see Joshua Yoder, *Representations of Roman Rule*, p. 197). The wider body of evidence in Luke’s Gospel seems to suggest otherwise, however.

The Lukan author’s villainising of the Jewish authorities here (the chief priests, the scribes, and the Jewish tetrarch), in the midst of a trial where the Roman authorities are seen to proclaim Jesus’s innocence and attempt to free him, is consistent with the wider outlook of the Gospel as a whole, which frequently emphasises Jewish sin, often in conjunction with an avoidance of criticism of the Roman imperial system, or even a positive portrayal of its representatives. For example, earlier in Luke’s Gospel Jesus chastises a group of Jews who complain to him about violence done to a group of Galilean Jewish pilgrims by Pilate, the Roman governor (see [Luke 13:1-3](#)); rather than condemning the act of the Roman official, Jesus tells the complainers that they must repent or else also perish. It has often been stated, for example by Philip Esler, *Community and Gospel*, p. 203, that Luke is more concerned with highlighting Jewish misguidedness than making specific anti-imperial statements.

Bibliographical references: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, [The Gospel According to Luke](#) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981)

Philip F. Esler, [Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lukan Theology](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

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