

“Them” in John 19:16

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The Synoptic gospels Mark and Matthew both state that Pilate’s soldiers crucified Jesus. John 19:16, however, goes beyond Mark and Matthew by leading the reader to identify Jesus’ executioners as the Jews¹ rather than the soldiers.

The Question. What is the referent of the pronoun “them” (αὐτοῖς), the group to whom Pilate hands Jesus in John 19:16 to be crucified? Here is that verse within its immediate context:

19:14. And it was the preparation of the Passover, about the sixth hour, and he says to the Jews, Behold your king! [15] Those shouted out, Away! Away! Crucify him! Pilate says to them (αὐτοῖς), Shall I crucify your king? The high priests answered, We have no king but Caesar!

19:16. Then he delivered him to them (αὐτοῖς) to be crucified, so they took Jesus,

19:17. and bearing his own cross, he went out to the place called Skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha, [18] where they crucified him along with two others on either side, and Jesus in the middle.

Looking forward from v16, the “them (αὐτοῖς) to whom Pilate delivers Jesus in v16a are the same as those who then take him away in vs 16b and crucify him in v18. Looking back to v14-15, the “them” in v16 is also the same “them” to whom Pilate speaks in v15, who are there identified as “high priests” and in v14 as the “Jews.” The most natural reading of the unbroken series of pronouns from v14 through v18 is that the “them” in v16, who are the crucifiers of Jesus in v18, are indeed the same as the “them” in v15, the Jews and the high priests.

Raymond Brown has argued that this is not the case, since John’s readers all knew that, of course, it was the soldiers who crucified Jesus, so the writer made a “careless mistake” in his pronoun antecedents in 19:16.² I find, however, that this reading, though contrary to Mark and Matthew, was intended by the author of the Fourth Gospel as part of his emphasis on the role of the Jews in Jesus’ death.

Data. Working back from 19:16 to the beginning of the trial before Pilate in 18:28, we find that the plural pronoun “they” (αὐτοί) appears a total of nine times, once each in the nominative and accusative cases, and then seven consecutive times in the dative:

¹Some advocate translating Ἰουδαῖοι as “Judeans” rather than “Jews.” I am leaving the word as “Jews” for this article, with reservations which there is here no space to discuss.

²Brown *Death* 1/858; more recently, von Wahlde 2/787 similarly asserts that such a reading of Jn 19:16 is “overly literal.”

18:28. Then they-led Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium . . . And they-themselves (αὐτοῖ - nom) did not enter the praetorium, that they not be defiled.

18:29. Then Pilate went out toward them (πρὸς αὐτούς - acc) and said, What charge do you bring against this man?

18:31. Then Pilate said to-them (αὐτοῖς - dat), You yourselves take him and judge him according to your law. The Jews said to him . . .

18:38. Pilate says to him, What is truth? And having said this, he went out again to the Jews and says to-them (αὐτοῖς - dat), I find no fault in him.

19:4. And Pilate went out again and says to-them (αὐτοῖς - dat), Look I am bringing him out so you know that no fault do I find in him.

19:5. Then Jesus went out bearing the wreath of thorns and the purple garment. And he [Pilate] says to-them (αὐτοῖς - dat), See, the man.

19:6. Then when the high priests and the officers saw him, they shouted out, saying, Crucify! Crucify! Pilate says to-them (αὐτοῖς - dat), You take and crucify him . . .

19:14b-15. And he [Pilate] says to the Jews, Look, your king! Then those shouted out, Away! Away! Crucify him! Pilate says to-them (αὐτοῖς - dat), Shall I crucify your king? The high priests answered him, We have no king but Caesar.

19:16. Then he [Pilate] handed him over to-them (αὐτοῖς - dat) to be crucified, so they took Jesus.

The Identification. We can now confidently identify the “them” to whom Pilate delivers Jesus in Jn 19:16 and who crucify him in 19:18 as the same group of people who brought Jesus to the praetorium and have been accusing him before Pilate since 18:28. (1) Without exception, the referent for the first eight of these nine pronouns is the same group of people who accuse him before Pilate, variously identified as the high priests or the high priests and officers” or simply as “the Jews” (Ἰουδαῖοι). To further ensure that his readers know exactly who “the Jews” are, the author has Pilate speak to Jesus in 18:35 where he identifies the Jews as “your nation” (τὸ ἔθνος τὸ σοῦ). In the entire span of text from 18:28 through 19:15, the pronoun “they” has no other reference than this group of Jews. (2) As noted above, the first instance of αὐτοῖ in 18:28 appears in the nominative case as the subject of the verb “did not enter.” A separate pronoun is not needed as the subject of a Greek verb unless the writer wishes to emphasize that subject, so the grammatically redundant pronoun αὐτοῖ may be seen as alerting the reader that the αὐτοῖ bringing Jesus to Pilate are only those who were concerned to keep from defilement so they could eat the Passover. Thus the reader is led to infer that this group does not include any of the Roman cohort who had earlier worked with the Jews to arrest Jesus in 18:3-12. The reader is also alerted to watch the following trail of αὐτοῖ pronouns to their conclusion in 19:16. (3) The text never uses the pronoun αὐτοῖ to refer to the soldiers anywhere in the Passion Narrative. Pilate is never seen interacting or speaking with the soldiers throughout the entire narrative; only with the Jews and with Jesus himself. There is no reason for the reader to identify the final αὐτοῖς in 19:16 with anyone other than the Jews/high priests.

At first glance, 19:23 seems to change direction and charge the soldiers with the actual crucifixion:

19:23 – Then the soldiers, when they-had-crucified (ὅτε ἐσταύρωαν) Jesus, they-took his garments and made four portions, a portion for each soldier, and his tunic. And the tunic was seamless, woven from the top throughout.

On closer inspection, however, we see the writer has constructed for us an awkwardly ambiguous sentence. The structural sequence of 19:23 is as follows:

- (a) Definite article / οὖν / subject (“then the soldiers”)
- (b) Subordinate ὅτε clause (“when they-had-crucified Jesus”)
- (c) Main verb and object (“they-took his garments and made four portions, a portion for each soldier . . .”)

First, I note that of the other 102 instances of the particle ὅτε (“when”) in the New Testament, there is only one other occurrence where the subject of the verb in the ὅτε clause appears before ὅτε itself; in the remaining 101 the subject is always after ὅτε. That one occurrence is in Jude 9:

But the archangel Michael, when (ὅτε) disputing with the devil he-argued about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgement upon him, but said, “The Lord rebuke you.”

Construing “the soldiers” as the subject of the verb “took” in 19:23 may then be grammatically possible, but should not be presumed.

Second, I note that of the 11 times when John includes both οὖν (“then/therefore”) and ὅτε (“when”) in the same sentence, 19:23 is the only time when οὖν appears first.³

Third, the writer could have used, as elsewhere,⁴ an aorist participle rather than a ὅτε clause, which would have unambiguously identified the soldiers as the crucifiers:

οἱ οὖν στρατιῶται σταυρώσαντες τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἔλαβον τὰ ἱμάτια

As 19:23 now stands, however, the construction is similar to 19:31, where the subject of the sentence is not the subject of the subordinate ἐπεὶ clause. Thus, a plausible reading of 19:23 might begin as follows:

“Then, when they [the Jews] had crucified him, the soldiers took . . .”

Conclusion. The writer of John did not make a “careless mistake” in the pronouns of 19:16, while crafting the account of what is the climax of his previous narrative. He artfully leads the reader from 18:2 onward to mentally identify the referent of the ninth and final αὐτοῖ in 19:16 as “the Jews and High Priests” just like all the prior eight, and definitely not as “the soldiers” who are bookended on either side of the crucifixion act. Yet he nevertheless refrains from explicitly saying “the Jews” crucified Jesus; instead, he leaves it for the reader to make that identification explicit. Perhaps we should read 19:23 as a literary wink to the reader – “Yes, how could I forget that the soldiers actually did the awful deed?” – in order not to openly contradict other extant Passion narratives. But he has already implicated “the Jews” as the crucifiers of Jesus by a strategy of misdirection in his carefully nuanced narrative.

³The other ten are 2:22, 4:45, 6:24, 12:17, 13:12, 13:31, 19:6, 19:8, 19:30, and 21:15.

⁴The sequence article/subject/aorist participle clause/verb is in 6:14, 12:3, 18:3, and 19:13.

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I am gratified to find that Robert Fortna had come to the same conclusion as mine, though with different data, when he wrote that the John editor restructured his Passion source of the account of Jesus' trial so as to implicate the Jews in Jesus' crucifixion.⁵ Fortna suggests that the narrative of the trial before Pilate in the predecessor Signs Gospel (SG) had what is now the text John 19:1-3 immediately before 19:16, so that the "them" to whom Pilate delivers Jesus is clearly the soldiers rather than the Jews:

19:1. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him whipped. [2] And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head and put a purple cloak on him. [3] And they came up to him and said, "Hail! the King of the Jews!" and they hit him. [16a] So [Pilate] turned him over to them to be crucified.⁶

Fortna's reconstructed source text is much shorter and has a more flowing narrative than canonical John, and more closely parallels the Synoptic sequence. The result for John 19:16 is that there is no confusion about who the "them" and "they" are who receive Jesus from Pilate and crucify him; it was the soldiers. This is probably closer to the historical sequence: official condemnation, scourging, and crucifixion.

The John editor (Fortna's 4E), however, moves the scourging by Pilate and the mocking of the soldiers away from the crucifixion (19:1-3), inserting dialogue between Pilate and "the Jews" (19:5-15) and his Judgement scene, before he hands Jesus over to "them" in 19:16a. This is part of 4E's recasting of SG's trial account into a finely balanced 7-scene drama. Thus, 4E creates a narrative gap between the soldiers and the crucifixion and then fills that gap with his final three scenes of Pilate's back-and-forth with "the Jews" and with Jesus. So, when coming to 19:16, the reader will naturally conclude that the "them/they" are indeed the Jews/high-priests, not the soldiers.

If Fortna is correct, the John editor still did not need to leave the direct and indirect object pronouns in 19:16a unspecified ("him" to "them"), nor did he need to leave the verbs of 19:16 without named subjects as he found them in his source. John's usual style is to identify the subjects and objects of his staged actions. Why so ambiguous in 19:16? So the reader is led to make the identification "them/they" = "the Jews" without himself explicitly saying so. The John editor's rearrangement of his source narrative, as well as his strategic sequence of pronouns throughout 18:28-19:16 that I outlined above have prepared the reader to come to just that conclusion. As Fortna has indicated, has not John covertly prepared the reader from chapter 2 onward to expect "the Jews" to kill Jesus? His finesse in making that final identification occur in the reader's mind, rather than on his written page, is masterful, if not insidious.

Works Cited

- Raymond E Brown. *The Death of the Messiah*. Doubleday 1994
 Robert Fortna. *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor*. Fortress 1988
 Urban C von Wahlde. *The Gospel and Letters of John*. 3v Eerdmans 2010

⁵Fortna **Fourth Gospel** 167-176.

⁶From Fortna's translation of his Passion source, p164.