

Jesus of Nazareth

co-written and directed by Franco Zeffirelli

Study Guide for Hour Six

Scholars agree that the material that appears in Episode Six is an eye-witness history of the events that surround Jesus' crucifixion. The rest of the gospels are likely recordings of short oral histories that arose after the Christ event.

Hour 5, minutes :00-:07 depict The Last Supper according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (Read Matthew 26:26-30) The import of The Last Supper is as Jesus indicates. It is a ritual of remembrance of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice for sin at which his spiritual presence is promised. As usual, Zeffirelli harmonizes to include John. Although John does not include The Last Supper, he does include one of Jesus' seven "I am" speeches; in this case "I am the Bread of Life." In it, Jesus disputes the people who consider him a latter Moses providing them with manna. He insists that he is greater than Moses and the bringer of eternal life. He also includes from John excerpts from his final speech to his disciples in which he commands that his disciples, "Love one another" (Read John 13:34), that he is the "way, truth, and the life" (Read John 14:6), and in which he prays for his future followers (Read John 17:20). Zeffirelli is praised for his ability to reconcile four gospels that most consider irreconcilable.

Hour 5, minutes :07-:09 record Jesus' agony at Gethsemane. (Read Mark 14:32-42) His death immanent, Jesus falters then rallies before his father, as his disciples sleep.

Hour 5, minutes :09-:12 record Jesus arrest. Judas kisses him to identify him to the religious authorities. John takes a less favorable view of Judas. For John, Judas is no misguided revolutionary, but a common thief and a low life.

Hour 5, minutes :12-:21 record Jesus' trial by the San Hedrin. (Read Mark 14:53-65 and John 11:45-53) The trial is prejudicial. They are seeking grounds to execute Jesus, and when Caiaphus asks him point blank if he is the Messiah and the Son of God, he has grounds. Jesus has blasphemed because the Jews consider God to be one. The messiah was to be a descendent of David who would fulfill the election of Israel. The Old Testament comes, through the prophets, to realize the election of Israel could only be fulfilled by God, and the New Testament concurs, conflating the Messiah with the Son of God. The Jews, however, need a Roman sentence to execute him.

Hour 5, minutes :21-:47 are a long session recording Jesus and Pilate. (Read Matthew 27:1-31 and John 18:28-19:16) Peter's three-fold denial (Read Matthew 26:69-75) and the Roman mockery of Jesus (Read Matthew 27:27-31) are interspersed. The Romans will not execute Jesus on the grounds of blasphemy. They will, however, execute Jesus for claiming to be a king which stands by default in opposition to Roman rule. Pilate was known to be a ruthless leader, who however, sometimes resorted to appeasement to calm the unruly Jews. Pilate sees through the Jews but placates them by ordering Jesus executed and releasing Barabbas. In John's account, Pilate proclaims the immortal words, "Ecce Homo!" or "Behold the Man!" For John, all creation, even unwittingly proclaims Jesus the word made

flesh. In Matthew's account alone Pilate washes his hands of guilt in Jesus' death. This is because Matthew is extremely hard on the Jews, and if Pilate is not to blame, the blame is solely theirs.

Hour 5, minute :47- hour 6, minute :01 records the events around Jesus' crucifixion. He carries his unwieldy cross outside the walls of Jerusalem to Golgotha, where he is crucified. Crucifixion was public torture devised by the Romans for insurrectionists. The crowds who once loved him turn on them as a pretender. If he were the messiah, he could escape his fate. Matthew and Mark record crucifixions and deaths that are nearly identical. Jesus dies screaming, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It is the nadir of his death throes, but at the same time, he is quoting Psalm 22, which begins in despair and ends in victory. Luke softens Jesus suffering on the cross (Read Matthew 27:32-56 and Luke 23:26-46). Luke's tone is the most placid. He is addressing a Gentile audience and does not want to be excessively graphic or alarming. He softens throughout his gospel. (N.B. vs 39-46, absent from Matthew and Mark). John does not portray Jesus suffering from the cross (Read John 19:17-30). John portrays Jesus as the logos of God made flesh (Read John 1) and his Jesus is more divine than human.

Nicodemus quotes Isaiah 52:13-53:12. These are some of the most important lines of the Old Testament, along with Genesis 1 and II Samuel 7. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are written refracted through Isaiah. It is the means by which the early church comes to understand the meaning of his death.

Question for reflection. The church has produced a handful of atonement theories. None has risen to the level of a dogma (inviolable tenet) as did The Trinity. What does Jesus death mean for you? Is it a vicarious atonement for sin? Is it a ransom from the principality of evil? Is it an example of his love for God and humankind? Is it the ultimate and ironic display of witness to God's triumph? Is it the means to reconciliation to God over against the problem of sin? Is it the portal to eternal life? Is it all these things?