

22 Pilate – Securing a Hollow Victory

'Victory is by nature insolent and haughty' – Marcus T. Cicero

Pontius Pilate was Rome's representative in Judaea from 26 till 36/37 CE. Although Pilate is given no title in John's gospel, other sources designate him as 'procurator' (a financial officer of a province; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2:169; Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 1:299), 'prefect' (a military commander; according to an inscription at Caesarea, discovered in 1961), and 'governor' (a generic title for a leader; Matt. 27:2; Luke 3:1; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:55). As Rome's appointed agent in Judaea, Pilate was in charge of the Roman auxiliary troops, stationed in Caesarea (Galilee) with a detachment (one cohort) in Jerusalem. Although his headquarters were in Caesarea, he sometimes stayed in Jerusalem (e.g. during the Passover to ensure order). Pilate had the final say on cases of capital punishment, and could reverse death sentences that the Sanhedrin submitted to him for ratification. Pilate's verdict was legally binding and he was only accountable to the emperor.

Pilate has been variously characterized: from being weak, indecisive and accommodating to being tough, cruel and prone to flaunting his authority. This may be due to the seemingly disparate representations of Pilate in the Gospels (pathetic or sympathetic) and in Philo and Josephus (strong and able).¹ The writings of Josephus and Philo make it evident that Pilate did not like or understand the Jews. Although Pilate appears to have been a relatively competent governor, he provoked the Jews on various occasions. However, he may have done so unintentionally, being ignorant about and insensitive to the rigorous Jewish customs and laws. In his conflicts with the Jews, Pilate could stubbornly and wilfully resist the Jews but also give in – especially when his loyalty to the emperor was questioned. He could be decisive but also be non-committal, use brute force or show restraint.² We shall therefore examine whether the Johannine Pilate is indeed weak, indecisive and accommodating or more in keeping with the Pilate in Philo and Josephus.

¹ B.C. McGing, 'Pontius Pilate and the Sources', *CBQ* 53 (1991): 416–7; H.K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (SNTSMS 100; Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 174–5; Conway, 'Ambiguity', 333; Dunn, *Jesus*, 774–5.

² See especially McGing, 'Pilate', 416–38; Bond, *Pilate*, chs 2–3.

Jesus' Trial before Pilate

Since Pilate was the Roman prefect or procurator of Judaea, Jesus' trial in 18:28 – 19:16a is a trial before the Roman authorities, the greatest power of the then-known 'civilized' world. In line with the universal scope of John's gospel, Jesus' trial must unfold on the world stage because he was sent into the world and his saving act on the cross will have cosmic consequences. Structurally, this episode consists of seven rounds with Pilate moving in and out of his palace with each round. In rounds one, three, five and seven, Pilate comes *out of* his palace to interact with 'the Jews' (18:29; 18:38b; 19:4; 19:13); in rounds two, four and six, he goes *into* his palace to interact with Jesus (18:33; 19:1; 19:9).³ We must examine whether the structure of the passage holds any significance.

Round One (18:28–32). While presenting Jesus to Pilate, 'the Jews' do not enter the palace since that would render them ritually unclean and disqualify them from participating in the Passover meal (18:28). Ironically, their actions concerning Jesus make them spiritually 'unclean' and prevent them from partaking in the real Passover meal on the cross (cf. 1:29; 6:51–55). When Pilate comes out to inquire about the charges (18:29), his question is surprising since he must have known why 'the Jews' bring Jesus to him.⁴ The Roman cohort could only have been present at Jesus' arrest (18:3) with Pilate's consent, implying that 'the Jews' had contacted Pilate earlier and probably informed him about their scheme to kill Jesus (cf. 11:47–53).⁵ The reply of 'the Jews' that Jesus is an evildoer is not a legal charge and reveals some of their perplexity about Pilate's question (18:30). Pilate does not, however, humour 'the Jews', and, knowing that they want Jesus' death, he taunts them, flaunting his authority (18:31).⁶

Round Two (18:33–38a). Entering his palace, Pilate asks Jesus whether he is the king of the Jews (18:33). Pilate's question reveals he had contact with 'the Jews' prior to Jesus' arrest, when they probably told him that Jesus claimed to be a king – a political charge of insurrection against Rome (cf. 19:12). This explains Jesus' counterquestion in 18:34, but Pilate is quick to distance himself from 'the Jews' (18:35). Pilate may have assisted 'the Jews' to arrest Jesus – any potential insurrection would need to be investigated – but he does not side with them and probably wants to examine the case for

³ Many scholars have observed this structure. For an alternative structure, see C.H. Gibling, 'John's Narration of the Hearing before Pilate (John 18,28 – 19,16a)', *Bib* 67 (1986): 221–4. John's mention of the *praetorium* in 18:28 may well have been Herod's palace, adjacent to the temple.

⁴ It is unclear whether Pilate's coming out indicates that he is forced from the beginning to comply with the demands of 'the Jews' (Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 142) or whether he shows tact and courtesy (Bond, *Pilate*, 175).

⁵ Cf. Bond, *Pilate*, 167.

⁶ Some claim that John is historically inaccurate in 18:31b since there is enough evidence that the Sanhedrin had the authority to hand down death sentences in case of offences against Jewish religious law prior to 70 CE (e.g. T. Horvath, 'Why Was Jesus Brought to Pilate?', *NovT* 11 [1969]: 176–9).

himself.⁷ Going back to Pilate's earlier question about kingship, Jesus asserts that his kingdom is not from this world (18:36). This is a political statement because Jesus acknowledges that he has a kingdom – and hence is a king – and although his kingdom is 'from above' it exists and operates *in* this world. Besides, it is impossible to be loyal to both Jesus and his kingdom, and to the Roman emperor and his empire.⁸ Although in Greek Pilate's question in 18:37 expects the answer 'yes', he has probably concluded that Jesus' kingdom is not a threat to Rome and hence his statement seems condescending, 'You are a king then!'⁹ Perhaps knowing that Pilate searches for truth, Jesus extends an implicit invitation to discover truth – saving truth about the divine reality present in Jesus' teaching.¹⁰ Pilate's 'What is truth?' is not an earnest question (for he leaves immediately) but a dismissive remark, indicating that he does not take Jesus seriously and is probably irritated with Jesus' responses and his own lack of success in cracking the case. Not understanding Jesus, Pilate implicitly rejects him and his invitation.

Round Three (18:38b–40). Coming out of his palace, Pilate informs 'the Jews' that the charges against Jesus are baseless (18:38b). Although Pilate appears honest, he is also taunting 'the Jews'. This becomes more evident in 18:39 where Pilate, by referring to Jesus as 'the king of the Jews', is most likely mocking 'the Jews' about their nationalistic hopes. He does not seriously seek Jesus' release. If he had seriously considered Jesus a king, he would never have offered to release him.¹¹ Pilate has known since before Jesus' arrest that 'the Jews' want Jesus' death (cf. 18:31) – and he uses this knowledge to taunt 'the Jews' and flaunt his authority. In desperation and frustration, 'the Jews' shout out not to release Jesus (18:40).

Round Four (19:1–3). Pilate, though not convinced that Jesus poses a threat to Rome, resorts to cruel and calculated measures to extract truth from Jesus (19:1). Glancy makes a good case for understanding the scourging as an act of judicial rather than punitive torture, a means of interrogation to extract truth.¹² Pilate may not know the truth (cf. 18:38a), but he thinks he can get it out of Jesus: using a *mastix*, a whip studded with lumps of bone or metal, Pilate has Jesus tortured in order to extract a confession.¹³

⁷ Contra W. Carter who contends that Pilate has allied himself with 'the Jews' to remove Jesus (*Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003], 141–2).

⁸ Cf. Bennema, 'Sword', 54–7; *idem*, *John's Gospel*, 198–9.

⁹ Cf. B.D. Ehrman, 'Jesus' Trial before Pilate: John 18:28 – 19:16', *BTB* 13 (1983): 128; T.W. Gillespie, 'The Trial of Politics and Religion: John 18:28 – 19:16', *Ex Auditu* 2 (1986): 71.

¹⁰ For the concept of saving truth, see Bennema, *Power*, 121–2; *idem*, 'Christ', 114.

¹¹ Cf. Bond, *Pilate*, 181–2.

¹² Glancy, 'Torture', 107–36. Most scholars perceive the scourging to be punitive torture, aimed to inflict pain as punishment (e.g. Barrett, *Gospel*, 539; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 142; Rensberger, *World*, 93; cf. the scholars mentioned by Glancy, 'Torture', 121–2 n. 48), but this is unlikely in the *middle* of the interrogation. Convinced that the scourging is punitive and hence should come after the trial is over, Lindars concludes that John is unhistorical and has deliberately displaced this scene (*Gospel*, 553–4, 563–4).

¹³ Glancy, 'Torture', 121–2.

Round Five (19:4–7). Pilate is now convinced that there is no real case and that Jesus is innocent (19:4; cf. 18:38), but he also knows that ‘the Jews’ are determined to have Jesus killed. For those who view the scourging as a punishment, the phrase ‘to let you know that I find no case against him’ is problematic. However, Pilate’s statement makes perfect sense when the flogging is seen as judicial torture to extract truth. Pilate demonstrates to ‘the Jews’ that despite having Jesus whipped he gets no admission of guilt, and hence Jesus’ flogged body testifies to guiltlessness.¹⁴ With his exclamation, ‘See the man!’, Pilate scoffs at ‘the Jews’ about this pathetic figure whom he considers innocent and harmless (19:5).¹⁵ Aggravated, ‘the Jews’ demand Jesus’ crucifixion but Pilate continues to taunt them (19:6). For the first time, ‘the Jews’ level a (religious) charge: Jesus has blasphemed by equating himself with God (19:7; cf. 5:18; 10:33) – a capital offence according to the Mosaic law (Lev. 24:16).¹⁶

Round Six (19:8–11). Pilate becomes rather afraid, perhaps driven by a superstitious belief about divine matters, and wants to know Jesus’ origin (19:8–9).¹⁷ Annoyed by Jesus’ silence, Pilate tries to assert his authority and fails; instead, Jesus points out that Pilate’s authority is God-given (literally, ‘given from above’) (19:10–11).¹⁸ Jesus’ remark that the one who handed him over to Pilate (either Judas or Caiaphas/‘the Jews’) is guilty of a greater sin does not mean Pilate himself is guiltless – he rejects Jesus, does not use his God-given authority to do justice and will hand Jesus over to ‘the Jews’ (19:16a).¹⁹

Round Seven (19:12–16a). A mixture of belief in Jesus’ innocence, superstitious fear and Jesus’ words in 19:11 drive Pilate to make his first real attempt

¹⁴ Glancy, ‘Torture’, 125.

¹⁵ John may allude to Jesus’ humanity or to his title ‘Son of Man’. Cf. Bond, *Pilate*, 185–6. D. Böhler understands the phrase as a royal proclamation echoing 1 Sam. 9:17 (“‘Ecce Homo!’ (Joh 19,5) ein Zitat aus dem Alten Testament’, *BZ* 39 [1995]: 104–8).

¹⁶ D.W. Wead argues that ‘the Jews’ also accuse Jesus of being a false prophet who led people away from the Mosaic law, another offence warranting the death penalty (Deut. 13:1–5) (‘We Have a Law’, *NovT* 11 [1969]: 185–9).

¹⁷ Cf. Bultmann, *Gospel*, 661; Stibbe, *Storyteller*, 108; Giblin, ‘Narration’, 231; Bond, *Pilate*, 187. ‘Rather afraid’ makes more sense than ‘even more afraid’ (NIV) or ‘more afraid than ever’ (NRSV) since Pilate has not shown fear previously. Moloney observes that Pilate asks ‘the fundamental question of Johannine Christology: “Where are you from?”’ (*Gospel*, 495).

¹⁸ Jesus probably refers to the power God has given Pilate for this particular moment (Bultmann, *Gospel*, 662; Brown, *Gospel*, 2:892–3; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 339; Carson, *Gospel*, 601–2) rather than to a possible God-given authority of the state (cf. Rom. 13:1). For a critique of this latter concept, see J.H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (2d edn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), ch. 10. Ironically, Pilate presumes to have authority whereas in reality it is Jesus who does (1:12; 5:27; 10:18; 17:2).

¹⁹ Judas is most often the subject of the verb ‘to hand over’ in John, including in 18:2, 5. Here, the reference could be ‘the Jews’ who hand Jesus over to Pilate (18:30, 35) (Jesus’ use of the singular is perhaps generic) and/or to Caiaphas as the leader of ‘the Jews’ (although never related to the verb ‘to hand over’, he is the leading voice in 11:47–53). Whoever the subject, his/their sin is greater because while Pilate has God-given authority his/theirs comes from the devil (8:44; 13:2, 27).

to release Jesus. It comes too late, however, for ‘the Jews’ play their trump card. They skillfully manipulate Pilate by modifying their allegation from a religious (19:7) to a political one (19:12). By questioning Pilate’s loyalty to the emperor, they corner him leaving him no option to release Jesus. Hearing their words, Pilate sits on the judge’s bench to demonstrate his authority over ‘the Jews’.²⁰ Pilate knows what ‘the Jews’ want and while he realizes they have forced his hand, he too has a card up his sleeve. He taunts them saying, ‘See your king!’, causing the exasperated ‘Jews’ to demand Jesus’ crucifixion (19:14b–15a). Pilate now plays *his* trump card. With his ‘Shall I crucify your king?’, Pilate shrewdly manipulates ‘the Jews’ into admitting their allegiance to Rome and denying their religious loyalties (19:15).²¹ Having secured this victory, Pilate hands Jesus over to ‘the Jews’ to be crucified (19:16a).

Beyond the Trial. After Jesus’ trial, Pilate’s power play continues. In 19:19–22, Pilate mocks the nationalistic, messianic hopes of ‘the Jews’ with the inscription ‘Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews’ on the cross. He then flaunts his authority by refusing the alteration ‘the Jews’ suggest. Pilate’s power over the Jewish people is also apparent in 19:31, 38 when they need his consent on a religious matter.²²

Conclusion

Pilate is probably the most complex character in the Johannine narrative. In his dealing with Jesus, Pilate seeks to uncover the truth in his own cruel and efficient way. He misunderstands and disparages Jesus’ kingship and rejects the (saving) truth he has to offer, but he is also convinced that Jesus is harmless and innocent (18:38; 19:4, 6) and tries to release him (19:12). At the same time, he uses Jesus to manipulate and taunt ‘the Jews’. In his politically motivated game of mocking and manipulating ‘the Jews’ to admit their allegiance to Rome, he chooses to sacrifice the truth/Jesus. Pilate does not use his God-given authority to mete out justice, instead he rejects the truth/Jesus and thus condemns himself (cf. 3:20–21).²³ He knows what is true and just – Jesus is innocent and should be released – but he

²⁰ Although it is possible to translate 19:13b as, ‘and he [Pilate] seated him [Jesus] on the judge’s seat’, this is unlikely (cf. Bond, *Pilate*, 190; Conway, *Men and Women*, 161; contra O’Day, *Gospel*, 822).

²¹ Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 143; Giblin, ‘Narration’, 233, 238; Bond, *Pilate*, 191–3; Conway, *Men and Women*, 162; Carter, *Pilate*, 150–51. As Schnackenburg observes, both ‘the Jews’ and Pilate sacrifice their convictions – ‘the Jews’ their theological convictions and Pilate his conviction of justice (*Gospel*, 3:266).

²² Contra Culpepper, who contends that these are all Pilate’s efforts to atone for his concession to ‘the Jews’ (*Anatomy*, 143).

²³ In fact, Pilate is on trial and condemns himself (Ehrman, ‘Trial’, 128; R.E. Brown, ‘The Passion According to John: Chapters 18 and 19’, *Worship* 49 [1975]: 129–30).

does not act accordingly. In the final evaluation, Pilate does not come to the light (cf. 3:20–21) and his response to Jesus falters and fails.²⁴

Regarding ‘the Jews’, Pilate is cruel, taunting, condescending and manipulative. Knowing that they want to kill Jesus but need his approval, Pilate repeatedly taunts them and flaunts his authority. In return, ‘the Jews’ manage to manipulate Pilate when they realize he wants to release Jesus. Knowing he is cornered and must concede to their demands, Pilate extracts a high price – a declaration of their allegiance to Rome and a denial of their religious loyalties. A seemingly victorious Pilate becomes victim of his own political game because he too pays a price for his victory – denying and perverting truth and justice. Indeed, it is a hollow victory.²⁵

In our reading of the Johannine Pilate we differ from the majority of scholars who portray Pilate as weak and indecisive.²⁶ While we generally agree with scholars who view Pilate as a strong character, they seem to overrate Pilate’s control over the situation by downplaying the force of 19:12 where ‘the Jews’ finally get a grip on Pilate.²⁷ Pilate is a competent, calculating politician who wants to show ‘the Jews’ he is in charge while also trying to be professional in handling Jesus’ case. But he is unable to achieve either aim because he underestimates the determination and shrewdness of ‘the Jews’. He may have released the innocent Jesus had he not been manipulated into sacrificing the truth/Jesus to ensure his own political survival and triumph. He knows Jesus is innocent but does not use his God-given authority to bring justice for fear of losing the political game. Pilate ultimately chooses Caesar and the empire ‘from below’ instead of Jesus and his kingdom ‘from above’.

The narrator reveals two aspects of Pilate’s inner life: he is afraid (19:8) and he wants to release Jesus (19:12). Some scholars contend that the structure of the passage, in which Pilate alternately goes in and out of his palace, reflects his inner conflict – he goes back and forth in his mind, unable to take sides.²⁸ This picture seems incorrect. Pilate despises ‘the Jews’ and is clear about his strategy but he is also in search of truth about Jesus. Although he tries to play both sides and fails, he is not indecisive: he ultimately opts for the emperor and his own political survival at the expense of truth and justice. Nevertheless, Pilate does go back and forth in his mind, constantly weighing his political options and this is what the structure of the passage

²⁴ Culpepper concludes that ‘although he [Pilate] seems to glimpse the truth, a decision in Jesus’ favor proves too costly for him’ (*Anatomy*, 143). Cf. O’Day, *Gospel*, 825–6.

²⁵ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 143.

²⁶ E.g. Brown, *Gospel*, 2:864 (the honest, well-disposed man who adopts a middle position); Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 143 (Pilate avoids making a decision); Stibbe, *Storyteller*, 109 (Pilate is indecisive, representing the ‘impossibility of neutrality’).

²⁷ Rensberger, *World*, 94–5; Bond, *Pilate*, 190–92; Conway, *Men and Women*, 161; Carter, *Pilate*, 127, 150. O’Day presents a more balanced view (*Gospel*, 813–26).

²⁸ E.g. Stibbe, *Storyteller*, 106, 109. Earlier I also held this view (*John’s Gospel*, 204).

probably emphasizes.²⁹ There are some indications of development in Pilate. First, although Pilate is convinced early on about Jesus’ innocence, he does not attempt to release him but, surprisingly, he tries fervently to release him later. Second, it is rather surprising that Pilate, the calculating politician, is outmanoeuvred by ‘the Jews’ and forced to yield.

John’s portrait of Pilate does not differ too much from those of Josephus and Philo.³⁰ In John’s gospel, Pilate refuses to give in to the demands of ‘the Jews’ and mocks them but they find a way to pressure Pilate into yielding. Similarly, Josephus (*Jewish War* 2:169–174; *Antiquities* 18:55–59) and Philo (*Embassy to Gaius* 299–305) record incidents where Pilate provokes the Jews and refuses to give in to their wishes but eventually has to concede. Whether in John’s gospel, Josephus or Philo, Pilate appears cruel, decisive, calculating and provocative. He appears to choose the course of action which is to his advantage and ensures his political survival.

Pilate		
Appearances	References	18:29, 31, 33, 35, 37, 38; 19:1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 19, 21, 22, 31, 38 (2x)
Identity	Titles given	–
	Gender	male
	Age	–
	Marital status	–
	Occupation	Roman prefect or procurator of Judaea
	Socio-economic status	–
	Place of residence/operation	Herod’s palace in Jerusalem
	Relatives	–
	Group affiliation	Rome
Speech and actions	In interaction with Jesus	searches for truth, cruel/efficient; once willing to release him but in the end handing him over to be crucified
	In interaction with others	taunts ‘the Jews’, flaunts his authority, eventually gives in to their pressure but manipulates them
Character classification	Complexity	complex; multiple traits: cruel, calculating, taunting, manipulative, provocative, afraid
	Development	some
	Inner life	some
Degree of characterization		towards individual
Response to Jesus		inadequate: misunderstanding, rejection, compromising truth and justice, choosing Caesar rather than Jesus

²⁹ Cf. Lincoln, *Gospel*, 458. Brodie connects the inside/outside contrast with the idea of revelation: inside the praetorium Jesus gives revelation; ‘the Jews’ outside are without revelation (*Gospel*, 521).

³⁰ Cf. McGing, ‘Pilate’, 437–8. Contra Davies, *Rhetoric*, 314–5.