

Trinity College Cambridge  
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**PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**  
Pilate

Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 18: 55–59     Mark 15: 1–15

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On the basis that the world's two billion or so Christians regularly give creedal affirmation to three human figures, one of whom is Pontius Pilate, it might be suggested that he has done rather well for himself. He keeps exclusive company with Jesus and Mary. Pilate, together with Mary, comprise two-thirds of the human population contained in the catholic creeds of the Church, and both have been deemed worthy of inclusion in this termly series devoted to people of the New Testament. Of the significant biblical figures which get a mention in the creeds, only Jesus has failed to make the cut for this sermon series, perhaps reinforcing the suspicions of many about Oxbridge collegiate religion. In Jesus' absence, I am hopeful that we shall be able to withstand the charge of majoring in the minors.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven,  
And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary,  
And was made man,  
And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.

*from The Nicene Creed*

Pontius Pilate was the fifth prefect or governor of the province of Judæa, which position he held for just over a decade from 26 to 37 A.D. Judæa, which today incorporates parts of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, had been under Roman rule for only two decades when Pilate arrived on the scene. He was, in effect, a colonial ruler in an uneasy place: a complex and ethnically diverse region, full of religious sensitivities, and requiring a prefect (a pagan, Roman official) with great skill in maintaining ties with the high priest (in Pilate's case, a man called Caiaphas) and other members of the aristocracy. Pilate's brief, working under the Roman Cæsar Tiberius, was threefold: maintain law and order in the region, oversee legal matters and collect taxes.

Most of us are familiar with Pilate through association. The creeds mention him in relation to Jesus of Nazareth. That Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate is one of the surest facts of Christianity, which means that questions of Pilate's historicity need not detain us; it is attested to not only by the earliest Christian traditions and writings but also by the Roman historian Tacitus and by the Jewish writers Philo (*Embassy to Gaius*) and Josephus (*Jewish War* and the *Antiquities of the Jews*). Within the New Testament writings, all four gospel writers mention Pilate, exclusively within the context of their respective versions of the Passion narrative, with a single exception in which St Luke includes a cryptic reference to Pilate in connection with the slaughter of the Galileans (Luke 13: 1).

Pilate, like Judas Iscariot, is a figure about whom much dispassionate speech seems nearly impossible. How salvageable is the character of the man under whose authority Jesus met his death? Philo and to a greater degree Josephus, first century contemporaries of both Pilate and Jesus, offer two accounts which shed some light (albeit highly politicised and polemicized) on Pilate's character, especially his concern for maintaining stability within the region for which he bore responsibility. Behind Philo's strong rhetoric, which is both political and theological, a view of Pilate emerges which shows him as chiefly motivated by a desire to honour the king, Cæsar, rather than to please the people, though Philo describes him as one who is able to show some sensitivity to the Jewish people's wishes. Such sensitivity, Philo believes, finds clear expression in one particular incident, occurring around the year 26 A.D., which involves the bringing of military standards containing images of Cæsar (a move which would cause great offence to the Jews) into Jerusalem. Rather than mounting the standards along the walls, Pilate places them within the Prætorium, the governor's residence, out of the sight of the Jewish crowds, in order to cause minimal offence.<sup>1</sup>

Josephus, though a Jew, has an interest in portraying the Romans favourably and the Jews less favourably. He takes the view that God has abandoned the Jewish people in favour of the Romans (his position being not unlike that which is found throughout the Old Testament, in which God uses foreign and hostile forces and peoples to enslave and punish the Israelites until such time as they repent and return to their God). Josephus, like Philo, refers to Pilate in connection with two separate incidents: the bringing of the standards into Jerusalem and the building of an aqueduct to bring water into Jerusalem (c. 26 A.D.), a project paid for with Temple money.<sup>2</sup> Josephus' account of the image-bearing standards has much in common with that of Philo; Pilate's decision to have the standards brought into Jerusalem under the cloak of darkness and hidden from public view was done so as not to arouse undue agitation. Pilate seems to approach such matters with some sensitivity, clearly wishing to avoid provocation. The building of the aqueduct, which inspired a significant Jewish protest against Pilate, ended with a substantial loss of Jewish life, a situation which Josephus blames (predictably) on the riotous Jews rather than on any action of Pilate. With such widespread unrest, Pilate had legitimate cause for fear: he was a man on edge.

The gospels offer a more detailed portrayal of Pilate. St Mark's description of him, especially of his role in handing over Jesus for crucifixion, constitutes an early account. Pilate appears twice in Mark's gospel, both times in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter within the Passion narrative: the arrest, sentencing, handing over and crucifixion. Far from the vicious and aggressive Pilate of much popular characterisation, he seems a thoughtful, shrewd, if occasionally manipulative and indecisive leader, convinced of Jesus' innocence and primarily interested in securing his release, but ultimately forced to comply with the wishes of the crowd. It is worth remembering that his position as prefect was one of an unwelcome stranger in a foreign land, a precarious role requiring his compliance with the will of the people. Whether this account represents an attempt by Mark to portray the Romans favourably by shifting blame onto the Jews, it is difficult to say.

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<sup>1</sup> Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 299–305, in Philo X, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 55–62, in Josephus XII, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard, 1965).

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, had unanimously convicted Jesus, and Pilate enters the story 'straightway in the morning', according to the first verse of the text. For Jesus, his status has changed from simply being accused of a crime to being physically bound and condemned to death, at which time he is handed over to Pilate. Jesus' condemnation by the Sanhedrin was as a result of his assertion 'I am' in response to the question of the high priest, 'Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' (14: 61–62). This claim 'I am' carried the charge of blasphemy. Pilate's question 'Art thou the King of the Jews?' merely repeats the earlier question of the high priest. He is unlikely to have been interested in the religious meaning of messiah-ship. He would, however, have cared about its potential political repercussions. Pilate then asks if Jesus has anything to say in his defence, to which he receives no response, the silence constituting an admission of guilt under Roman criminal law. At this silence, this unwillingness to mount a defence, Pilate marvelled.

Pilate ultimately decides to link Jesus' fate with the release of a prisoner, and the insecurity of the chief priests, of their own influence and position, adds further to the volatility of the moment. The chief priests have no loyalty to Rome, but they have every reason to fear for their own position, and Pilate would wish to handle the situation with great care. In control and testing the crowd, Pilate then asks 'What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews?' (15: 12). Faced with the problem of knowing how best to deal with Jesus and keep the peace, he cleverly reverses roles and places the people in the role of judge. What do you wish me to do with the one you call the King of the Jews? Far from a demonstration of weakness, he appeals to the voice of the people; they could not decide the outcome of a trial, but the Romans valued their opinion in determining whether a particular decision might be politically viable. Get the people to implicate themselves in the decision, and the Roman authorities could hardly be blamed for an execution carried out with overwhelming popular support. In response to shouts demanding crucifixion, Pilate strengthens his position and further rallies the crowd by asking 'what evil hath he done?' (15: 14). They order Pilate to carry out the sentence.

The decision of the Sanhedrin, confirmed by the great crowd assembled to denounce Jesus' offensive messianic claims, cannot allow for a complete exoneration of Pontius Pilate. The Jewish court may have presented Jesus to Pilate with such claims, but Pilate interprets the claims not as religiously offensive but as threatening Roman stability and interests. Though not initiating the sentence against Jesus, Pilate confirms it. The guilt is shared (Luke 10: 33–34). The reader – and this includes the people for whom Mark would have been writing – knows that Pilate is mistaken in his acceptance of the condemnation and that Jesus was not claiming an earthly, political kingship. Christians today, as ever, have committed themselves to following the innocent Son of Man who gave his life as a ransom for many, not to a failed political rabble-rouser.

It is difficult to know how to regard Pilate. In some ways, the challenge has been taken from us by the Church, which early on enshrined Pilate as a baddie, and not a reformed and loveable baddie like Mary Magdalene. Commending Pilate, Nietzsche (admittedly in a state of irreversible mental breakdown) believed Pilate to be the one noble figure in all

the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Others rightly see in Pilate little more than a confirmation of the saying ‘cowardice is the worst of vices’. But perhaps we should regard Pontius Pilate in a similar way to the proto-man Adam, both of them tragic figures whose decisions have found some positive interpretation within the Christian tradition’s wider salvation history. In the words of a 15<sup>th</sup> century English text:

Adam lay ybounden, bounden in a bond.  
Blessed be the time that apple taken was.  
Deo gracias.

If Adam’s decision warrants a ‘thanks be to God’, then what about Pilate’s? If we can be grateful for that tempting piece of fruit as revealing a God willing to take up our distorted and compromised humanity into himself, in order to purge and purify it and present it spotless, then the person of Pontius Pilate serves as a powerful reminder of just what was required to achieve such an end – for us and for our salvation.

Is Pilate a figure with whom we can sympathise? He is conflicted and compromised, has competing loyalties, finds himself in near-impossible situations, is keen to preserve peace and order and knows that his decisions bear great weight. His inclusion in the creeds, rather than standing as a permanent judgement against the man (however justified), establishes our faith, and the tradition which supports it, in human history and time. To confess Jesus Christ as born of the Virgin Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate is to affirm Jesus’ humanity, just as it is to confess that our humanity stands completely and constantly in need of God. With the arrival of Lent in three days’ time, again we are given direction in reflecting not only on the historical events and figures which define the seasonal stories, but also on our own individual places within the story.

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesu, hath undone thee.  
‘Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee:  
I crucified thee.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘The Anti-Christ’ 46, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (CUP, 2005), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *The New English Hymnal* (The Canterbury Press, 1986), p. 147.