

Pontius Pilate: Villain, Hero, or Fool

The Roman governor of Jerusalem who served from 26-36 A.C.E., Pontius Pilate, is a pivotal character in the gospel according to John. Pilate is responsible for the torture and subsequent execution of Jesus Christ after the local religious officials deliver Jesus to Pilate's praetorium (palace or headquarters). Though described as one of the final judges in Jesus' trials following his arrest—and therefore traditionally portrayed as a villain—does Pilate act with malice? Is he motivated by personal or political influences? Does he believe that Jesus should die for the signs he has performed, the movement he has created, and the teachings he has expounded? Or, is Pilate a hero whose actions pave the way for salvation? Or, yet another option, is he a fool being played both by the religious authority and Jesus? This paper will explore Pilate's characterization by analyzing his narrative arc (John 18:28-19:16) in terms of his actions, words, responses, and conflict with other characters against the backdrop of 1st century Jerusalem under Roman imperial rule.

Narrative Overview and Analysis

John's gospel and its narrator do not offer a vivid description of Pilate in terms of his physical appearance nor a direct discussion of his personality. "The Bible typically presents stories of characters *in action*,"¹ and as such, readers glean insight into Pilate's motivations by taking note of the contextual clues. Prior to his central story arc Pilate is introduced implicitly in John 18:3 wherein Judas Iscariot has "procured a band of soldiers" in addition to some officers

¹ Dr. Jordan Ryan, class lecture, 3.3: *Characterization*, accessed 9/18/18.

from the chief priests and the Pharisees to seize Jesus in the garden. As the governor of the area, readers may assume that Pilate has some knowledge of the impending arrest, if not the details.

Pilate's first appearance takes place at the praetorium where the religious leaders have brought Jesus for judgment following Jesus' brief meeting with Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas the High Priest, and subsequent episode with Caiaphas which is not described. Pilate's initial action is meet the Judeans outdoors to respect their wishes not to become impure so close to the Passover (cf. Acts 10:28). Their interaction exhibits two items of note: first, Pilate's desire not to become unnecessarily involved in the affairs of the religious leaders of the land over which he has jurisdiction, and second, his willingness to accommodate them.

By distancing himself from the "criminal" (literally someone "doing evil" [κακον ποιων]) Jesus, who is bound and within the care of the Jewish leaders, Pilate reinforces his station as the Roman overseer—uninvolved with religious affairs that do not conflict with the criminal law in the land. Readers here infer that Pilate is representative of the Roman government. Because John's characters "show very little development, instead performing relatively stereotyped and predictable roles,"² Pilate's actions reflect the Roman control of the area: He possesses power and influence, as well as the privilege to take an audience on matters he chooses. The dynamic with the religious leaders introduced in the opening dialogue "exhibit[s] an efficient and at times astute working relationship marked by impatience, tension, and taunts as they negotiate each other's power in taking care of this threat from a provincial kingly pretender."³

Having received no clear description of charges against Jesus, Pilate re-enters his quarters and summons him. His first remark to Jesus is "*You* are king of the Judeans?" (emphasis added;

² Horsley, Richard, and Tom Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 105.

³ Carter, Warren, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 82.

18:33) (Σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων;). This question reveals two additional pieces of information about Pilate's character: First, Jesus' reputation precedes him, and therefore readers see that Pilate knows more than he let on during the conversation outside. Second, Pilate appears incredulous of Jesus' title, as shown in that "you" is in the emphatic position in the original Greek text.⁴ After Jesus responds with questions of his own, Pilate doubles down on the personality traits implied thus far with his response, "I am not a Jew, am I?" (Μητι ἐγὼ Ἰουδαῖος εἰμι;): Clearly, he wants to be recognized as separate from the Jews, and he appears haughty and defensive. As the questioning continues, Jesus offers his discourse about his kingdom/kingship and Pilate cryptically responds, "What is truth?" (Τι ἐστὶν ἀλήθεια;). "If Pilate belonged to this kingdom, then he would understand Jesus."⁵ Therefore, his response may be read as a rebuke (cf. Klink, 766-767) or as a window into Pilate's train of thought; it may be the first moment in which Pilate questions the validity of Jesus' claims.

Pilate goes back outside and offers to release Jesus because he finds no case against him, even appealing to a custom to release one prisoner at the time of Passover each year. However, the Judean leaders vehemently oppose, and Pilate acquiesces and orders Jesus to be flogged. Notably, the verb for flogging or whipping (ἐμαστιγῶσεν) is in the third person singular, implying that Pilate is the one who literally carries out the punishment. Contextually, that is unlikely, but "the narrator explicitly links Pilate to the treatment and condemnation of Jesus, in spite of Pilate's own attempt to remove himself from the conviction of Jesus."⁶

⁴ Klink, Edward W. *John: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 763.

⁵ Haenchen, Ernst, Robert W. Funk, and Ulrich Busse. *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress Press, 1984), 180.

⁶ Klink, *John: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 775.

Following the physical punishment and verbal abuse Jesus suffers, Pilate says twice more than he finds no case against Jesus and tries (again) to push the Judeans to carry out their own punishment. When they explain that Jesus must die for claiming to be the Son of God (v. 19:7), the narrator shows a shift in Pilate: He becomes frightened. Here “his fear cannot be fear of the Jews; it must be fear connected with Jesus in some way.”⁷ Pilate is revealed to have a certain depth and glimmer of understanding as to what Jesus has told him about Jesus’ kingdom. Pilate goes back inside and interrogates Jesus one final time. Here, he shows his temper and pride after Jesus does not respond to a question. He throws his political weight around and threatens Jesus. When Jesus tells him that a) Pilate has no power over him and b) that those who arrested him have the greater sin (note: “the text does not exonerate Pilate; his sin is only relatively less than that of the person who handed Jesus over to him”⁸), Pilate appears convinced of the truth and wants (ἐζήτει) to release him.

From this point forward, any sense of conscience on the part of Pilate is overshadowed by the threats of the Judean leaders who appeal to Pilate’s allegiance to the emperor. Pilate ironically speaks of Jesus as their king—a title Jesus has not claimed, nor his captors have chosen. After the leaders mention the Roman emperor for a second time, Pilate unceremoniously hands Jesus over to be crucified. John’s portrayal of him is “anything but flattering... Pilate accedes to their [the Jewish authorities’] wishes, although he knows better and is in a different way also quite guilty.”⁹

⁷ Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John: Revised Edition*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 1995), 704.

⁸ Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 601.

⁹ Smith, D. Moody. *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1999), 349.

Character Study

“Characterization concerns actions, words, interactions, and conflicts.”¹⁰ Therefore, based on the observations above of Pilate’s key decision points and subsequent choices in John’s narrative, the following conclusions may be drawn about Pilate’s character. First, Pilate is hyperaware of his position as governor. Based on his attitude toward Jesus, his consistent attempted distancing from the affairs of the religious leaders, and his ultimate kowtowing to the name of the emperor, readers understand Pilate to be a man of station—but at a sort of middle management level. He is prideful and confident, until his own power is threatened.

Second, though Pilate appears at first to be merely symbolic of Roman power and government/political control, John does portray him as allowing himself to be affected by Jesus’ words. This softening occurs first with curiosity and incredulity in his questions (e.g., “*you are the king?*” and “*what is truth?*”). Then, Pilate reacts with fear and an initial decision to follow his conscience (i.e., attempting to free Jesus against whom he can find no criminal charges).

However, a third observation is that Pilate lacks the strength of character to hold firm to his newfound ideas about any validity in Jesus’ statements. Pilate states three times that he finds no case against Jesus, and the narrator indicates that Pilate tries to free Jesus; however, two mentions regarding allegiance to the emperor by the vocal mob outside his residence quashes any further desire to help. Pilate’s reactions to the cries for Jesus’ crucifixion imply that he values his own reputation, his relative peace with the religious leaders (who are often presented as “fearful of the reaction of the Romans”¹¹), and his own neck above the individual whom he has just met. This reflection about Pilate’s character is in line with the observation of historians who “have

¹⁰ Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, 49.

¹¹ Horsley and Thatcher, *John, Jesus, and the Renewal of Israel*, 107.

come to know [Pilate] as a morally weak and vacillating man who, like many of the same breed, tried to hide his flaws under shows of stubbornness and brutality.”¹²

It is worth noting Pilate is portrayed very similarly in the Synoptic Gospels. Though he interrogates Jesus only once and briefly, and in one case sends Jesus to Herod for judgment (cf. Luke 23:6-12), all three gospels indicate three similar findings: Pilate is amazed by Jesus’ replies to him, he claims to find not fault with Jesus, and ultimately he chooses to avoid a riot over holding firm to a non-guilty verdict of Jesus.

The biblical portrait of Pilate, then, is consistent: He is a prideful, semi-powerful man who has not met anyone like Jesus before (nor will he again). He does not experience a character arc in which he changes between the beginning and the end, but he is portrayed in John’s gospel as a person who experiences doubt and uncertainty. Ultimately, he succumbs to the expectations of his role as governor (i.e., separate and above the Judeans).

Conclusion

A character who at first glance appears to be flat, stereotypical, and basically symbolic of the imperial power in Jerusalem at the time, Pilate emerges as a flawed and conflicted leader whose fear and sense of power outweigh his conscience. He tries to distance himself both from Jesus’ case and sentence but ultimately holds the keys to deliver a verdict that pacifies Jesus’ accusers—accusers who not-so-subtly imply that Pilate must oblige them, lest he appear disloyal to Caesar.

Pilate is not a traditional villain who works for his own aims from beginning to end. However, he is far from a hero: His pride and fear drive his actions, even over his own conscience. He is certainly manipulated by the religious leaders. The most apt conclusion, then,

¹² Carson. *The Gospel According to John*, 590.

is that—like other ancillary characters in the gospel—Pilate’s interactions with Jesus serve a vital role in John’s story: He “move[s] the plot forward, highlight[s] the significance of Jesus, and manifest[s] aspects of God’s life-giving and just purposes.”¹³ Though his actions are necessary for the narrative, readers would be hard-pressed to feel compelled to exalt Pilate or even feel a great deal of sympathy for him.

¹³ Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, 83.

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