

# Pilate the Villain: An Alternative Reading of Matthew's Portrayal of Pilate

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## Abstract

Several recent commentaries have assessed Matthew's portrayal of the figure of Pilate in ways that range from having at least some positive characteristic attributed to him to a thoroughly exonerating portrayal. Yet, these views rely on the assumption that Matthew had complete creative control of his representation, unimpeded by the negative traditions concerning the historical figure. This article argues that attributing to Matthew a depiction of Pilate that is in any way positive is incongruent with Matthew's historical context, his view of Jewish Law, as well as numerous internal aspects of his gospel. Rather, it is argued that Matthew crafts a vehemently negative portrayal of Pilate, culminating in 27:24, which would have been recognized as such by and found resonance with his community. An examination of how Matthew modifies and adds uniquely to his source Mark indicates that Matthew was familiar with traditions concerning the historical Pilate, shared a similar -- if not even harsher -- view, and created a narrative which reflects this.

In recent years several Matthean commentators have assessed Matthew's treatment of Pilate, and in particular verse 27:24, in ways that vary from thoroughly exculpating to primarily condemning. Robert Gundry argues that Matthew gives a resoundingly favorable portrayal of Pilate, a "portrait of Pilate as a Christian" and that his hand washing and declaration of innocence at 27:24 highlight this (561). A more moderate reading of Matthew's treatment of Pilate is that of Davies and Allison, who propose that Matthew depicts a Pilate who, although perhaps wanting to release Jesus, does not exercise his authority to do so, and as such is deemed culpable to some degree by Matthew. Matthew's Pilate, they assert, undertakes a few feeble attempts at releasing Jesus before turning to self-interest. Hence, his denial of his own responsibility in his hand washing and declaration of innocence is understood by Matthew as ironic. Donald Hagner also ascribes to Matthew a portrayal of a somewhat culpable Pilate who relents to the demands of the crowd. Hagner suggests that Matthew's Pilate, although "willing, indeed perhaps inclined" to release Jesus, instead pursues his own interest in striving to please his Judean subjects (824). Hagner asserts that Pilate's hand washing was an attempt to distance himself, yet one which "cannot, however, veil his own complicity, even if reluctant and passive, in the death of Jesus" (826). None of these commentators understand Matthew's treatment of Pilate as overtly polemical, and for each Matthew's Pilate has some redeeming characteristic: he makes an attempt, if half-hearted, to free Jesus (Hagner), or shows reluctance to execute him (Davies & Allison) or even serves as a model of piety

who employs a purity ritual to demonstrate this (Gundry). In so doing, these commentators appear to envision Matthew as dealing with Pilate solely as a literary figure, subject only to his editorial manipulations and unconstrained by social memory. Such a view suggests that Matthew was at liberty to do what he wished with the character, and as such could disregard any other perceptions of the *historical* Pilate. In this article I will argue that Matthew's portrayal of Pilate, as evidenced both by his changes to Mark and especially in his special material, is best understood as giving a strongly negative depiction that would have been understood as such *by* and found resonance *with* his community.

Matthew's polemical depiction was prompted by an awareness of the actions of and traditions concerning the historical Pilate. Matthew's depiction culminates in the striking anomaly of a Gentile ruler, notorious for his insensitivity to Judean law and sensibilities, engaging in the motions of a purity ritual described in the Hebrew Bible. Viewing Matthew's depiction as exonerating (as Gundry does) is incongruent with not only the historical context of Matthew and Matthew's view of the Mosaic law, but also with numerous internal aspects of his Gospel. Far from exonerating Pilate, Matthew constructs his depiction of Pilate to evoke

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memories amongst his community of what they held to be Pilate's unjust actions. Moreover, a negative portrayal of Pilate enabled Matthew to enrich and strengthen several overarching aims of his narrative.

### The Force of Social History and Other Depictions of Pilate

As noted, the above commentators all treat Matthew's depiction of Pilate as though he were a literary creation, existent solely within the boundary of Matthew's narrative, and as such free from the inertia of historical memory. While it is true that Matthew's Pilate *is* in many regards a literary figure, it is erroneous to suppose that Matthew viewed him *exclusively* as such, or that his audience would agree to just any depiction of Pilate. For, in Matthew's time Pilate *was* a well-known historical figure: within the Jesus movement as the governor who oversaw Jesus' trial and execution, and within Judean circles as an imperial authority with whom they had had numerous contentions. Indeed, Josephus, a near contemporary of Matthew, depicts a remarkably different Pilate than the one which commentators assert that Matthew did.

In *Word-Processing in the Ancient World*, F. Gerald Downing stresses the pivotal role that an audience played in the composition of a work in antiquity. He purports that in addition to a public oral presentation to an audience being the primary *end* of a work, several preliminary oral presentations of the work contributed to its finalized form. "The audience's anticipated and expressed expectations would seem to have a powerful effect in social composition and the effect would for the most part have been 'conservative' in the sense of largely conserving their preconceptions and prejudices" (Downing: 32–33). Regardless of how an author might wish to portray an event or person, he was significantly limited by what his audience knew or held to be true. What he wished to say had to cohere with his audience's expectations. A probable consequence of this would be that the author was prohibited from a flagrant departure from what his audience held to be true.

It will be fruitful at this juncture to examine other depictions of Pilate from Judean authors of antiquity. Josephus and Philo can at least provide an indication of the sort of traditions and opinions about Pilate that were circulating in the first century, even if they should not be read as faithful history.

Josephus relates the story of Pilate's introducing ensigns, replete with effigies of the emperor, into Jerusalem. Josephus intimates that by doing this during the night, Pilate knew that they would not be well received. Indeed, he asserts that Pilate did this "in order to abolish Judean Laws" (JEWISH ANTIQUITIES 18.55; Whiston: 590) and this move was viewed by the Judeans "as indications that their laws were trodden underfoot" (THE JEWISH WAR 2.170;

Whiston: 740). Moreover, Josephus asserts that the "great tumult" that this violation excited was not limited to boundaries of the city proper, but was more widespread amongst the Judeans, "a vast number [of whom] came running out of the country" in order to protest to Pilate (THE JEWISH WAR 2.170; Whiston: 740). One inference to be taken from Josephus' account is that Pilate was seen as all the more villainous because his actions evinced a deliberate and provocative disregard of Torah. Being aware of the law—evidenced by acting during the night—renders the transgression of it all the more offensive. According to Josephus' account, Pilate undertook this violation in order to make a point and to be deliberately antagonistic. Philo relates a similar account (or, as Brown discusses [702–04] an account of the same incident) in which Pilate is perceived to disregard Judean mores for the sole purpose of being provocative: "He, not so much to honor Tiberius as to *annoy the multitude*, dedicated in Herod's palace in the holy city some shields cased with gold" (THE EMBASSY TO GAIUS 299; Colson: 151; my emphasis). Josephus relates the story of Pilate appropriating money from the Temple treasury in order to pay for the construction of aqueducts—a gross misappropriation in the minds of the Judeans, "many ten thousands [of whom] got together and made a clamor against him" (JEWISH ANTIQUITIES 18.60; Whiston: 590). The result of this protest was significant bloodshed. Josephus' story coheres well with Philo's assessment of Pilate's career as governor: "the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty" and the description of his personal character traits of "vindictiveness and furious temper" (THE EMBASSY TO GAIUS 302; Whiston: 153). Moreover, both authors stipulate that Pilate's disregard for Judean values was unprecedented under imperial rule. Josephus asserts that Pilate "was the first who brought those images [the ensigns] to Jerusalem" and that because these ensigns in Jerusalem contravened the law "the former procurators were wont to make their entry into the city with such ensigns as had not those ornaments" (JEWISH ANTIQUITIES 18.56; Whiston: 590). In broader terms, Philo asserts that "throughout all the preceding ages [these values and laws] had been safeguarded without disturbance by kings and emperors" (THE EMBASSY TO GAIUS 300; Colson: 151). In effect, Pilate was fairly widely perceived to be the first Roman prefect in Judea to so disregard the sensibilities of the Judean people. (Josephus' treatment of Judean prefects prior to Pilate, by comparison, is remarkably mild. None of them is depicted as culpable of any wrong doing, or as being antagonistic.) As such, Pilate marked something of a turning point: a course of openly expressed discordance between imperial Rome and the people of Judea emerges under his governorship and begins to escalate.

Helen Bond rightly insists that an understanding of these depictions must be tempered with recognition that both Philo and Josephus had their own motivations for depicting Pilate as harshly

as they did. Although the historical Pilate may not have been as villainous as he is depicted by Philo and Josephus, Bond allows that he was probably *perceived* as such by Judeans of the time. Indeed, although the rhetoric with which they related events might be unique to these particular authors, the core facts of the story are not disputed. Given this, it is unlikely that any Judean of the first century, aware of Pilate's actions, could perceive him in anything but hostile terms. The *perception* of Pilate is all that concerns the following argument. Moreover, just as Philo and Josephus had their own motivations for their perceptions and rhetoric regarding Pilate, so too did Matthew and his community. In addition to the transgressions *of* and insensitivities *to* the Mosaic Law, for Matthew and his community Pilate was also responsible for the execution of the Messiah.

Given that Pilate was the first of prefects to antagonize the Judean populace, and that "Judeans everywhere" of this period showed concern for their holy city, it is not surprising that, as Davies and Allison assert, Pilate had a degree of notoriety within the Judean tradition (554). As such, and given that Josephus testifies to the far-reaching hostile attention that Pilate's actions attracted (although his figures are somewhat suspect), it seems unlikely that Matthew and his Judean community were not also aware of these traditions surrounding Pilate. Indeed, even Mark's predominantly Gentile community was aware of these traditions. According to J. Andrew Overman Mark included Pilate in his narrative because "he was known, or notorious, and as a notable Roman figure could represent Rome's distance for Jesus' predicament and death" (379).

Matthew not only incorporates Mark's references to Pilate (which should be read against occurrences where Matthew omits from Mark names and characters which have no significance for his community), but he also emphasizes and expands on them. The way in which Matthew interchanges "Pilate" with "the governor" has a notable pattern when read against the context of traditions surrounding the historical Pilate. Matthew, in contrast to Mark, refers to Pilate in two different ways. "*The governor*" participates in fairly innocuous procedural undertakings in that they are what a governor would be expected to do (with perhaps the notable exception of offering to release a prisoner, the historical likelihood of which is discussed by Brown [814–20]). It is "the governor" whom Jesus stands before, who vocalizes the charge that Jesus was brought before him for, who "wonders greatly" at Jesus' silence, and who offers the choice of prisoners that he might release. It is "*Pilate*" who engages in unique actions that are quite distinct from a generic administrative role, and are, as will be argued in depth below, decidedly negative in nature. These alterations are perhaps best illustrated in the chart on the following page.

That all of Matthew's alterations and additions regarding Pilate will be shown to be negative in nature indicates that Matthew

is attempting to present a figure who would be as reviled as the historical Pilate was. If Mark introduces Pilate because he was well known, Matthew brings into his depiction what Pilate was well known for.

### How Elements of the Traditions concerning the Historical Pilate are Present in Matthew

Echoes of the historical tradition regarding Pilate surface in aspects of Matthew's treatment of what he encounters in Mark, reflecting not only an awareness of the historical Pilate, but also an opinion of him similar to those of Philo and Josephus. Philo states that Pilate had no inclination "to do anything which would please his subjects" (THE EMBASSY TO GAIVS 303; Colson: 153) which renders Matthew's omission of Mark's Pilate "wishing to satisfy the crowd" (15:15) all the more striking, and is in keeping with the historical traditions about Pilate. Josephus relates that Pilate acquiesced to the demands of the people (with regard to the ensigns) in the face of an implacable crowd endowed with a "firm resolution" (JEWISH ANTIQUITIES 18:59; Whiston: 590). Matthew's Pilate also relents to the demand of the people once he sees that "he could do nothing" (27:24). That Matthew would depart from the historical episode in which Pilate relents to pressure from a crowd by altering the nature of their demand (from preserving the law to executing whom Matthew held to be its true interpreter, and from the noble characteristic of passive resistance to the volatile "a riot was beginning") is justified by his overarching aim of vilifying the Judean leaders and people in this scene. Moreover, it enables him to undermine the Judean leaders, a riot being what they had planned to avoid in Matthew 26:5. Matthew also alters the depiction of Joseph of Arimathea's interaction with Pilate. He omits from Mark that Joseph "took courage" in approaching to Pilate (Matt 27:58; Mark 15:43). Matthew's Pilate is not a figure deserving of this elevation, especially from a disciple of Jesus (as Matthew's Joseph, unlike Mark's, is [Matt 27:57, cf. Mark 15:43]). As a disciple, Joseph will no more cower before this repellent figure than Jesus did.

Similarly, he alters Mark's "granted [*edoresato*] the body" to Joseph to "ordered [*ekeleusen*] it to be given him" (Matt 27:58; Mark 15:45). Whereas Mark's Pilate is presented as doing someone a favor, mercifully "granting" a request, Matthew's Pilate is far less conciliatory, and thus more consistent with what he held to be true of the historical Pilate. Matthew rewrites the scene to suggest that Joseph, as a disciple of Jesus, was *entitled* to this request.

In sum, Matthew eliminates narrative material that seems to conflict with what he and his community know of the historical Pilate. These alterations create a figure of Pilate that better conforms *to* and coheres *with* a level of historical verisimilitude.

Beyond this is Matthew's unique material which seems to sug-

Matthew's "Pilate"	Mark's Figure of Pilate	Matthew's "the governor"
	15:2: Pilate asks Jesus if he is "King of the Jews"	27:11: Jesus "stands before"; asked if he is "King of the Jews"
27:13: "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?"	15:4: Pilate "again asked him, 'Have you no answer to make?' See how many charges they bring against you"	
	15:5: "Wondered"	27:14: "Wondered greatly"
	15:6: Paschal release	27:15 Paschal release
27:17 "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas* or Jesus who is called Christ?"	15:9: "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"	
27:18: "Knew that it was out of envy that Jesus was delivered to him"	15:10: "Perceived that it was out of envy" that Jesus was delivered to him	
27:19: "His wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream'"		
		27:21: "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?"
27:22: "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"	15:12: "What shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?"	
27:23: "Why, what evil has he done?"	15:14: "Why, what evil has he done?"	
27:24: "So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood;† see to it yourselves.'"		
27:26: "Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified."	15:15: "Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified."	
27:58: Joseph "went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus."	15:42: Joseph "took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus."	
27:58: "Pilate ordered it to be given to him."	15:46: Pilate "granted the body to Joseph."	
27:62–66: Pilate agrees to provide the Judean leaders with guards.		

\*Bruce Metzger reports that "a majority of the [UBS] committee was of the opinion that the original text of Matthew had the double name in both verses"

and that the first name Jesus "was deliberately suppressed in most witnesses for reverential considerations" (56).

†Against accepting the reading of some witnesses which include 'this righteous (*tou dikaiou*) man's blood,' Metzger points out that the words occur in differing places in various manuscripts, and not in the best representatives of the Alexandrian and Western texts. He accordingly concludes that these words "appear to be an accretion intended to accentuate Pilate's protestation of Jesus' innocence" (Metzger: 56–57).

The chart above employs the last stated title given for the figure of Pilate if he is immediately referred to as "he" by Matthew.

gest a deliberate attempt to evoke historical recollections, and with these a preconceived dislike of the figure he is depicting. Matthew's unique material transgresses the boundaries of pure literary representation and engage with external perspectives of historical traditions. All of Matthew's unique material—Pilate's wife's attempted interference (27:19), Pilate's alliance with the Judean leaders (27:62–66) and the episode of 27:24 (which, as the climax that Matthew undoubtedly constructed it to be, will be examined in depth separately below)—not only reflects poorly on Pilate, but also corresponds in some way to the external context of historical memory of Matthew and his community.

The intercession of a Gentile wife on behalf of a Judean plaintiff would have been a notion that found resonance with Matthew's community. Brown suggests that Pilate's wife's interference would have evoked images of the wives of Roman nobility who were favorable to Judaism while their husbands were "virulently anti-Jewish" (806). The key element to emphasize is the anti-Judean bias of the husband. In evoking this *topos* Matthew is able to further remind his audience of the anti-Judean behaviour of the historical Pilate. That Matthew's Pilate does not acquiesce to his wife's request is in contrast to the Roman husbands who *did* respond to their wives, and renders Pilate all the worse. Brown cites Poppaea Sabina,

Nero's second wife, as one notable example of intercession by a Gentile woman (806). Josephus relates two incidents in which Poppaea successfully interceded on behalf of Judean plaintiffs (JEWISH ANTIQUITIES 20.195; Whiston: 655; THE LIFE OF FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS 16; Whiston: 18). Traditions of having allies within the imperial household would no doubt have circulated amongst Judeans of the empire, and Poppaea was of course even closer to Matthew's day than the events of the 30's. By casting Pilate's wife in the role of Poppaea, Matthew is by implication casting Pilate in the role of Nero. Nero's well-known persecution of those who professed a faith in Jesus would have undoubtedly promoted hostilities in Matthew's community, and as such further vilifies the Pilate he depicts.

A second insertion of Matthew's unique material that speaks the negative sentiments of his community is his portrayal of an alliance between Pilate and the Judean leaders of Jesus' time. Brown notes that unlike his predecessor, Pilate never deposed a high priest during his 10 years as prefect. Caiaphas, however, was removed from the position shortly after Pilate's own transfer (694). This suggests that there was something of a robust working relationship between the historical Pilate and the Judean leaders of the period. Moreover, with regards to Josephus' reference to the execution of Jesus, Bond correctly asserts that "as earlier in the aqueduct incident, Pilate is shown working closely with the Judean hierarchy" (89). The historical probability of a close alliance surfaces on several occasions within Matthew's Gospel.

With regard to the aqueduct incident, Bond points out that Pilate would have had to have had some degree of compliance from the Temple priests in order to acquire the money from the treasury (86). Had Pilate removed the money through force or cunning, Josephus undoubtedly would have written a much harsher account of the incident (86). That Matthew inserts a superfluous reference to what is lawful with regard to the Temple treasury (27:6) is a deliberate attempt to evoke in the minds of his audience another episode in history in which this alliance had sacrilegious effects. As a Judean group Matthew's community would no doubt have been aware of scripture's mandates regarding what was and was not lawful in respect to the treasury, and the presence here of this explanation is incongruent with Matthew's tendency to omit explanations of Judean practice that he finds in Mark. Matthew's primary objective is to connect the blood money with the purchase of the field (27:9) and this purpose does not require his explanation in 27:6. Moreover, that the prohibition is vocalized by the priests (rather than embedded in the narrator's voice) indicates its significance to Matthew. Brown suggests that "in Matthew's acid portrayal, their propriety about the blood money is sheer legalism, for they show no concern about the greater crime of shedding the blood" (645). This has some merit, yet it is inconsistent with Matthew's typical pattern. In Matthew it is the *Pharisees* that

he depicts as being too concerned with fine legal detail, and all discussions with Jesus of what is lawful occur with them, not the priests. Rather, it is best to view this statement regarding what is lawful with regard to the treasury as Matthew's attempt to evoke memories of when the priests *did not* act with concern for what was a lawful use of the treasury. It is a deliberate attempt to prompt recollections of what Matthew's community already knew of the end results of this alliance. This functions as further apologetics for Jesus' crucifixion. Given this allusion to a precedent of the detrimental effects of this alliance, that Jesus should also fall victim to their machinations comes as little surprise. Both the priests and Pilate are further condemned.

Another instance when the historical relationship between Pilate and the priestly elite surfaces in Matthew's narrative is with regard to the guards placed at Jesus' tomb. Brown has argued persuasively that 27:65 should be read as an imperative ("take a guard of soldiers") rather than indicative ("you have [your own] guard of soldiers"), and this is indeed the more logical reading (1296–99). As such, Pilate is depicted as cooperating with and aiding the Judean leaders. But this raises the question of why Matthew would have involved imperial authorities at all unless he wanted to underscore a relationship. Presumably Temple guards would have served Matthew's narrative and polemical purposes towards the Judean leaders just as well, if not better. For this episode sets the stage for its sequel, Matthew 28:11–15, where Matthew combats the accusation that Jesus' body was stolen, not resurrected, the story that originated from *Judean* circles and "is still told *among the Judeans* to this day" (28:15). In terms of practicality, Matthew's story would have been more credible had it accused only one group of lying, rather than a whole network of people who purportedly knew the truth at some point and have been concealing it ever since. That he instead constructs a conspiracy theory in which *Pilate* (rather than "the governor") lent his aid implies that the depiction of this alliance has significance for Matthew. The relationship is further underscored both by the confidence the Judean leaders have of being able to "satisfy" Pilate (28:14), as well as in their address of him as *kyrie*, "Lord" (27:63). Although some translations read the alternative meaning, "Sir," Matthew's most likely intended meaning is "Lord," in keeping with its constant connotation throughout his Gospel. Throughout his Gospel Matthew constructs a pattern of those who apply *kyrie* to Jesus and those who do not: believers and disciples address Jesus as "Lord" whereas his opponents refer to him as "Rabbi," "Teacher," or "Master." Matthew employs this pattern as a form of demarcation—it clearly marks those who are aligned with Jesus. That here he has the Judean leaders employ this term denoting reverence and discipleship to Pilate amounts to a damning indictment. In depicting an alliance between these two repugnant parties, Matthew is able to harness preconceived

hatreds that originated with traditions concerning the historical figures. These flesh out not only his vehemently negative depiction of Pilate, but also that of the Judean leaders.

### Matthew's Treatment of Pilate That Is Solely Literary Creation

Matthew makes numerous changes to Mark which belong to *internal* aspects of his Gospel and his interests in characterization. He qualifies Mark's introduction of Pilate with the addition of "the governor" (27:2). As Davies and Allison argue, "the governor" is an ironic title. For Matthew Pilate is "the governor [who] leaves the governing to others" (Davies & Allison: 583).

Matthew retains from Mark both Pilate's question to Jesus, "Are you the King of the Judeans?" as well as Jesus' response, *su legeis*, "You have said so" (27:11). In Matthew's Gospel, however, Jesus makes the same response to Caiaphas during his trial and to Judas' question, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" (26:63; 26:25). For Matthew *su legeis* indicates that those who are *opposed* to Jesus have unwittingly spoken the truth. Matthew balances Jesus' refusal to answer the Judean leaders in this scene ("But when he was accused by the chief priests and elder he made no answer," 27:12) with a similar refusal to answer Pilate ("But he gave him no answer," 27:14, different in Mark). Unlike Mark's account, where Jesus appears to play favorites by cooperating with Pilate and giving the Judean leaders silence, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus will no longer respond to either party.

Matthew rewrites the two questions of Pilate in Mark transforming them into one: "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" (27:13, cf. "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you?" [Mark 15:4]). This is not an example of editing extraneous material he finds in Mark, for Matthew's alteration produces a question completely different in tone and meaning. Whereas Mark's Pilate appears conciliatory, asking Jesus whether he has an answer to make, and points out that there are numerous accusations being applied to him, Matthew's Pilate appears antagonistic and sarcastic. Clearly Jesus heard the accusations, since he was able to respond to Pilate's first question! Moreover, the use of rhetorical questions is frequently employed by Matthew's Jesus as the beginning of an argument with his opponents which is followed by an elaboration and justification of his position (12:3; 12:5; 21:16; 21:42). That Pilate asks the question but does not follow through with the pattern Matthew's audience had come to expect (even though this pattern is provided for Matthew in Mark) renders it all the more harsh sounding. It underscores Pilate's apathy towards the situation in not following the pattern and offering an argument to persuade—in this case, to persuade Jesus to speak.

That Matthew increases the degree to which Pilate "wondered" by inserting "greatly" is more of a reflection on Jesus' remarkable behavior rather than information about Pilate. Matthew employs *thaumazein* ("to wonder") with Jesus as its object frequently throughout his Gospel. There are five other instances when a variety of people wonder at Jesus: disciples (8:27; 21:20), crowds (9:33; 15:31) as well as Herodians and *disciples of the Pharisees* (22:22). As such, the term is primarily employed to convey the impressive nature of Jesus, rather than to suggest something positive about those witnessing it.

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That Matthew includes the qualifier "so-called" indicates that it has significance for him, and is part of his depiction of Pilate.

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The fact that in Matthew Pilate takes the initiative regarding the release of a prisoner (omitting Mark 15:8), offering the choice of Jesus the Christ or Jesus Barabbas is, in Gundry's view, Pilate's attempt to release Jesus and "Matthew's first move to Christianize Pilate" (561). Against this is Matthew's interest in highlighting the issue of the choice of the Judean people, which in Mark is somewhat obscured in having the crowd first establish that Pilate will release a prisoner for them. Rather than a Christianization of Pilate, this alteration much more strongly suggests a further condemnation of the Judean people, one that has no impact on his depiction of Pilate.

Gundry holds that Matthew's alteration of Mark's "King of the Judeans" (15:9) to "Jesus who is called the Christ" (27:17) is, in fact, Pilate "confess[ing] Jesus as the Christ" (562). But *ton legomenon* ("the so-called Christ" or "who is called the Christ") hardly indicates that this is Pilate's own assessment of Jesus. Indeed, *Iesoun ton Christon* set beside *Iesoun ton Barabban*, would have been a much more symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing term for Matthew's Pilate to employ, and one which would have further highlighted the choice of the Judean people. But the symmetry is lost with the inclusion of the qualifier *legomenon*. That Matthew includes this indicates that "so-called" has significance for him, and is part of his depiction of Pilate.

That Matthew retains from Mark Pilate's awareness of the envy of the priests does not indicate, as Hagner suggests, that Pilate "was therefore willing, and even perhaps inclined, to release Jesus" (823). Rather, Matthew retains and even strengthens this statement not only because it is, in his view, an accurate assessment of the Judean leaders, but also because it worsens the depiction of Pilate as well. Matthew's Pilate "knows" (*edei* 27:18) rather than the more fallible "perceives" (*eginosken* Mark 15:10) that envy provoked Jesus' arrest. In handing Jesus over to be cru-

cified despite this knowledge, Matthew emphasizes that Pilate *knowingly* condemns an innocent man to death, and thus offers a harsher rendering of Pilate.

Matthew also retains Mark's citation of Pilate's question, "Why, what evil has he done?" (27:23; 15:14), most likely because the absence of a proper answer underscores the culpability of the Judean leaders and people, and in turn Pilate for having Jesus executed despite this. Hagner similarly concludes that the "lack of an easy answer . . . points indirectly to the innocence of Jesus" (824).

Matthew's insertion of Pilate's wife's dream (27:19) does not, as Gundry contends, "prepare for Pilate's following her advice . . . [where] in a preview of wholesale conversion among all the nations, Pilate's wife and Pilate himself become Gentile disciples of Jesus" (592). For Pilate *does not* follow his wife's recommendation; he *does* hand Jesus over to be crucified, as 27:26 stipulates. Davies and Allison correctly assert that this dream has divine origins (587). The implication is that Pilate fails to follow *God's* instructions. Moreover, in several instances Matthew depicts dreams as prompting their recipient to *save* Jesus from death (Matt 2:12; 2:13; 2:22), a fact that throws Pilate's ultimate condemnation of Jesus into sharp relief. Had Matthew wished to employ the dream as a means of vindicating Pilate, he could have given the dream to Pilate himself. Indeed, this would have been more in keeping with the patterns of scripture (which Matthew frequently seeks to emulate) where, as Davies and Allison point out, Gentile *rulers* frequently receive dreams from God and then seek interpretation of them (587). This dissimilarity to an additional pattern that Matthew's audience would have expected only serves to highlight the fact that, as Davies and Allison conclude, "Pilate is not even worthy of receiving a dream that needs interpretation" (587). The likelihood that the dream of Pilate's wife was probably inherited by Matthew from oral tradition and as such came in a fixed form that Pilate's wife received the dream does not sufficiently negate the possibility of Matthew altering it so that *Pilate* receives it. Elsewhere in his Gospel Matthew alters his source to interchange the characters (and subsequently their actions and words) involved. Moreover, this would not necessarily have also eliminated Pilate's wife's intercession. Indeed, having prior knowledge of Jesus' righteousness would only further vindicate both her and Jesus, tendencies Matthew has already displayed.

At the close of this scene Pilate "deliver[s] (*paredoken*) [Jesus] to be crucified" (27:26). As Powell suggests, the parallel of the wording here to 26:24 ("woe to the one who delivers (*paradosei*) [the Son of Man] up" may indicate that the curse Jesus invokes on Judas applies also to Pilate (610, n. 21). Given Matthew's depiction of Pilate this seems entirely probable.

All of these changes are not only condemning in and of themselves, but they also serve as a context for the climax of 27:24,

which should be viewed in light of these modifications.

### Matthew 27:24

Matthew's unique material of 27:24, and in particular that Pilate "took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves'" is particularly negative towards Pilate. Here Matthew creates the anomaly of a notoriously anti-Judean Roman prefect engaging in the motions of a Judean purity practice prescribed in Deuteronomy 21:1–9. Brown's suggestion that Matthew's community would have been so thoroughly "saturated with an OT outlook" that this anomaly would have gone unnoticed can only be deemed erroneous (837). Matthew and his community were well aware of the distinctions between Judeans and Gentiles, and indeed had an interest in demarcating the two, as references in 5:47, 6:7, and 18:17 demonstrate. Rather, this depiction of Pilate's words and actions are a deliberate and carefully crafted attempt by Matthew to express and highlight his view of the historical Pilate's offensive character, and it would have found resonance with his audience as such.

Gundry asserts that "by obeying the OT law of hand washing and, probably, by calling Jesus 'this righteous one' [a reference to his reading of the text critical problem in this verse, addressed above], he joins his wife in the vanguard of the many Gentiles who have flocked into the church by the time Matthew writes" (564). This assessment, however, neglects to account for the numerous inconsistencies it creates: with the actual Judean ritual, with other aspects of Matthew's Gospel, and with the historical figure of Pilate that Matthew and his community were familiar with.

Seen in their proper context of the Torah, the actions of Matthew's Pilate violate the principle behind the ritual prescribed by Deuteronomy 21:1–9. The ritual, prescribed for situations where the murderer of an innocent person was not known, was a means of ensuring that bloodguilt would not be inflicted upon the village and its land nearest the scene of the murder. That is, the participants in the ritual were *actually innocent* and *condemned* the violent act. Washing is a means of demonstrating this, and the killing of the heifer served as a means to avoid the consequences of bloodguilt for the land; it was not an expiation for the individual actually responsible for the murder. In contrast, Matthew depicts Pilate as employing the actions of this ritual as a means of *acknowledging and accepting* that Jesus will be executed. In the text it functions as Pilate's authorization for the execution. In other words, Matthew's Pilate is completely at odds with the principle behind the ritual. Moreover, Matthew makes it plain that the ritual was not efficacious: the land in question here can only be Jerusalem which, by the time Matthew wrote, was in complete ruins.

According to Deuteronomy 21:6, the words to be spoken are "our hands did not shed this blood, nor were we witness to it" which

are quite at odds with Matthew's presentation of Pilate. Matthew chose to retain Mark's phrasing of 15:15 which indicates that Pilate himself had Jesus scourged before handing him over (27:26).

For Gundry's interpretation to be correct, Matthew would have had to have no qualms about either drastically reinterpreting the ritual of Deut 21:19 or espousing an extremely loose interpretation of it. At odds with this is the fact that the instances in his Gospel where Matthew *does* depict an amendment to the Torah are all effected through the authority of Jesus. Any changes must be sanctioned—indeed, *commanded*—by Jesus, as is clearly not the case here. Moreover, these changes serve in Matthew's view to underscore the true interpretation of the Torah. It has already been noted how Matthew's Pilate is in violation of this.

Matthew thus depicts Pilate as devoid of respect for the Mosaic Law. The literary figure of Pilate "tramples underfoot" the Mosaic Law much as the historical Pilate was perceived to have done. Matthew's depiction of Pilate's engagement in the motions of it would not have been seen as anything but a flagrant disregard of and contempt for Judean law and practices. These are motives which also describe what can be inferred from the historical Pilate's act of introducing iconic ensigns in Jerusalem—that he acted at night is a strong indication that he knowingly acted in contempt of the law. Matthew evokes an echo of the historical Pilate's infamous reputation at the very moment when his character Pilate authorizes Jesus' crucifixion.

Viewing Pilate's action in Matt 27:24 as positive or exculpatory as Gundry does is also inconsistent within the context of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew elsewhere is intent on exposing the disharmony between an external show of righteousness and an internal deficiency, most notably in 23:28: "So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." Pilate's status as both a Gentile and one who acted in violation of the law underscores the disharmony. Gundry argues that Matthew's Pilate's washing his hands "before the crowd" serves to demarcate him from the Judean people, who are opposed to Jesus, and that

this demarcation provides another indication of Pilate's discipleship. He not only keeps the law in accord with Jesus' teaching in Matthew, he also stands on Jesus' side opposite those who are clamouring for the crucifixion [564].

This assessment too is problematic. That Pilate is in fact in violation of Jesus' teaching regarding the Torah has already been addressed above. Moreover, here Matthew's "before the crowd" corresponds to Jesus' teaching of what *not* to do: "beware of practicing your piety *before others* in order to be seen by them" (Matt 6:1). Similarly, by declaring himself to "be innocent of this man's blood" when he clearly is not, Pilate is proclaiming little more

than an "empty phrase"—which Jesus forbids of his disciples and condemns in Gentiles in 6:7. Here then, Pilate functions as just the sort of person whom Jesus was instructing his followers *not* to be like. Rather than being the disciple of Jesus that Gundry claims, for Matthew Pilate is quite clearly the antithesis.

Similarly, Pilate's words here are the inverse of Judas' in the uniquely Matthean scene inserted a few verses previously. Judas, who Matthew stipulates has repented (27:3), and who confesses "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (27:4) stands in sharp contrast to Pilate's blatant refusal to acknowledge his own role: "I am innocent of this man's blood" (27:24). Not only does Matthew abstain from ascribing to Pilate the same admission of participation and feelings of remorse as his depiction of Judas conveys, but his Pilate also fails to openly acknowledge Jesus' innocence (on the text critical problem, see above). The view that a cultic practice could be undertaken in lieu of true attempts to resolve one's errors is condemned in 5:23–24, where Jesus instructs people to first rectify their transgressions before engaging in cultic practices. That Pilate does not repent of his actions is further underscored by his compliance with the Judean leaders' request for guards.

The scene of 27:3–10 has another parallel in 27:24: Pilate's command for the leaders of the people to "see to it yourselves" (*hymeis opsesthe*) is nearly verbatim what the chief priests and elders instruct Judas to do (*su opse*). As Davies and Allison assert, "Pilate's 'see to it yourselves' no more excuses him than 'see to it yourselves' excuses the chief priests and elders" (590). Had Matthew's intent been to vindicate Pilate, he would not have depicted him as uttering the same words verbatim as the undisputed villains of the piece.

Gundry claims that "this declaration of innocence looks remarkably similar to Susanna 46 [Daniel 13:46]" (585). While he is correct in suggesting that Matthew is making a connection between the two, Gundry fails to note that this allusion is, like Matthew's employment of the term "Pilate the governor," ironic. In Susanna 46 (Daniel 13:46) Daniel's declaration "I want no part in shedding this woman's blood" is immediately followed by a rebuke of the Judean leaders who have unjustly sentenced Susanna to death, and by a *just* examination of the case by Daniel who ultimately exonerates her. Daniel chastises one of the elders who instigated the proceedings against Susanna for "condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty, though the Lord said 'you shall not put an innocent and righteous person to death'" (Susanna 53 [Daniel 13:53]). Daniel clearly opposes such an unjust death. Matthew's Pilate clearly does not. With his release of Barabbas and condemnation of Jesus, despite being told of his righteousness by his wife, Pilate proceeds to do precisely what Daniel—his counterpoint—explicitly condemns. Matthew's Pilate and Daniel are both external parties who have the opportunity to correct erroneous and unlawful judgment mandated by the Judean council.

Pilate's "see to it yourselves" is the polar opposite of Daniel's rolling up his sleeves approach. Because of Daniel "innocent blood was spared that day" (Susanna 62 [Daniel 13:62]). Because of Pilate it was not. By alluding to Susanna Matthew throws into sharp relief precisely what Pilate neglects to do, and as such highlights both his culpability and his repellent character.

Gundry's assessment that Matthew's depiction of Pilate is favorable is also at odds with the context in which Matthew was writing. As shown above, Matthew's audience would have approached this narrative with an already hostile view towards the figure of Pilate. Any attempt at depicting him favorably would require Matthew to employ profuse and unambiguous apologetics, which he clearly did not. Additionally, it is unjustifiable to conclude that Matthew's audience would accept as favorable a depiction of Pilate misappropriating their law and ritual while simultaneously condemning their Messiah to death.

### How a Decidedly Negative Depiction of Pilate Contributes to Several Overarching Aims in Matthew's Gospel

In addition to a clearly negative depiction of Pilate being the only one that he or his community would likely tolerate, Matthew's negative portrait enriches and strengthens several overarching aims of his Gospel.

First, a reinforcement of the image of Pilate as villainous functions apologetically and enables Matthew to further exonerate Jesus. It removes some, if not all, of the residual stigma of his crucifixion. A negative portrayal of Pilate counterbalances Matthew's necessary concession that Jesus was executed by an authority of Rome with the implicit assertion that it was an authority who was already commonly held in infamy. By capitalizing on the prevailing prejudices of his community, Matthew was able to remind them and reinforce his contention that Jesus' execution—in the temporal realm at least—was the product of corrupt leadership.

Second, and against Gundry, who states that Pilate functions as a "foil to the Judean leaders whose guilt stands out all the more" (462), Matthew's primary targets—the Judean leaders—are rendered *worse* because Pilate is depicted negatively. Their character is further blackened in the narrative by their collaboration *with* Pilate, asking favors of him and addressing him as *kyrie*. That they do nothing when Matthew's Pilate makes a mockery of their law (27:24) and later address him as "Lord" coheres well with Matthew's depiction of their persuasion of the Judean people to demand Jesus' death: they have reverence for a blasphemer and cry for the execution of the Messiah. There was no need for Matthew to choose between vilifying one or the other when quite clearly he was able to malign them both, and in so doing mutually reinforce the baseness of their characters.

Third, and most importantly, by depicting a figure of Pilate who echoed the historical Pilate of memory, Matthew is able to re-inforce his view of a causal relationship between verses 27:24–25 and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Matthew views this exchange as being a turning point in the history of salvation—that which set the wheels in motion for the cataclysm of 70 CE. That this exchange takes place between the people and Pilate (and not "the governor")—a figure known to Matthew's community as the first of a series of imperial authority figures who would debase Judean law and tradition, culminating in the Judean revolt and destruction of the Temple—can only reinforce this idea. In depicting this figure as overseeing this exchange immediately following a debasement of the Mosaic Law, Matthew is able to strengthen his contention of a connection between this exchange and the destructive events of 70 CE.

### Responses to Potential Objections

That Matthew's portrayal of Pilate is emphatically negative is vulnerable to some objections. First, the objection that Matthew can stretch history only so far—that he exonerates Pilate as much as he can within the context of general awareness that Jesus was executed under Pilate, and that Pilate's hand washing is the climax of this. Matthew, however, could have chosen to depict the exoneration of Pilate in any number of ways that would not have been so incredible precisely because it was so *starkly inconsistent* with what else was known about the historical Pilate: his contempt for Judean law and practices. Had Matthew wanted Pilate's washing to be viewed as exculpating there would be more apologetics present, an explanation of why what *looks* like a violation of the law is actually a valid interpretation. Moreover, Matthew could have altered elements over which he had creative control. He could have given Pilate the dream; he could have had Pilate declare *Jesus'* innocence rather than his own; and he would not have made his words echo the dialogue between the chief priests and Judas.

A second objection is that Matthew changes Mark's "crucify him" to the passive "let him be crucified" (Mark 15:13–14; Matt 27:22–23). This gives the impression—which Gundry makes use of (563–64)—of denying Pilate's active role in the execution of Jesus. However, as Donald Senior correctly notes, Matthew predominantly employs a passive or impersonal form of the verb *staurerein* ("crucify") (26:2, 27:22, 27:23, 27:26, 27:31, 27:38 vs. the exceptions in the active in 23:34, 27:35) (251). Senior concludes that "thus the simple force of habit may be an adequate explanation here" (251). Moreover, Matthew frequently has Jesus employ the passive voice when he is performing healing miracles—this is surely not done in an attempt to disguise Jesus' active role. It is inconsistent to suppose that Matthew's use of the passive here denotes an attempt to downplay the active role of Pilate.

## Conclusions

Gundry's assessment of a favorable depiction of Pilate is at odds with both internal and external elements that factored into the composition of Matthew's Gospel. Had Matthew sought to exculpate Pilate he would have done so in unambiguous terms and refrained from including all of the negative elements pertaining to Pilate discussed above. Rather, it is the condemnation of Pilate, as a representative of imperial authority, which required ambiguity, especially given a post-revolt composition by a marginal Judean community.

Viewing Matthew's depiction of Pilate as exonerating, even "Christianizing," is inconsistent with Matthew's view of the Torah, other internal aspects of his Gospel, and his awareness of the political and social climates which he lived in as well as depicted in his Gospel. Portraying Pilate negatively, however, offered significant gains for Matthew. It enabled a further exoneration of Jesus, heightened the polemic against the Judean leaders, and strengthened his contention that the exchange of 27:24–25 was the decisive moment that led to the destruction of the Temple and desolation of Jerusalem. Moreover, in cohering with what he and his community held to be true about the historical Pilate Matthew was able to lend an additional element of authenticity to his account.

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