

Searching the Real Pontius Pilate

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most famous characters of the Gospels and the one who less we know something about is Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea who presided at the trial of Jesus. The picture that we can grasp of Pilate today according to the available sources goes from a weak, indecisive, cynical and superstitious leader (the Gospels); to a cruel, heavy-handed and murderous ruler (the secular sources of Philo and Josephus); and ends in the legend about his conversion and his sanctification in the second and fourth century's Christianity respectively.

All of these different perspectives on the figure of Pilate make this topic an ideal material for a deeper study. Who was the real Pontius Pilate then? That is the subject of this research.

Historical Antecedents of Pontius Pilate

The origins of Pontius Pilate are uncertain. His *praenomen* (first name) is unknown, but we know his *nomen* (family name) Pontius, and his *cognomen* "Pilatus". According to Sherwin-White, it is known that the family name of Pontius was a common name in every social level in central and northern Italy.¹ Easton (1897) says that the name "Pilate" comes "from the Latin pileatus, i.e., 'wearing the pileus', which was the 'cap or badge of a manumitted slave', as indicating that he was a 'freedman', or the descendent of one".² But Arthur S. Barnes (1911) thinks that this is not enough evidence

¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, 1988 ed., s. v. "Pilate, Pontius", by A. N. Sherwin-White [electronic edition] (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2000).

² *Easton's Bible dictionary*, 1996 ed., s. v. "Pilate, Pontius", by M. G. Easton [electronic edition] (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996, c1897).

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for arguing that Pilate was a freed slave, because “it is unlikely that a freedman would attain to a post of such importance”.³ Another possibility is that because the cognomen Pilatus means “armed with a javelin” or “bald”, maybe it was used because of some military forbears.⁴

About his marriage, Everett Falconer Harrison says:

If Pilate’s life is somewhat obscure, his character is not. Of adventurous spirit, he spent his early days in frontier fighting, then took as his wife Claudia, daughter of Julia, the profligate daughter of Augustus. His father-in-law Tiberius made him procurator of Judaea, whether from recognition of his administrative talents or as a marriage gift, or both.⁵

As we can see, it is believed then that Pilate had some kind of family ties with the Emperor Tiberius (42 B.C. – A.D. 37). According to Sherwin-White, Philo records that Pilate had some kind of political connection with Sejanus, commander of the praetorian guard, even to the point of being his protégé by A.D. 17. Before being named procurator of Judaea, he was an equestrian (upper middle-class) official, and he probably served as military tribune or staff officer in several Roman legions. The equestrian order was formed by free born people, with horses and with economical possibilities. They formed the financial aristocracy in Roman society.

For many centuries, the only sources of information about Pilate were the writings of Josephus and Philo (see next section). But in 1961, excavators at Caesarea uncovered a limestone block inscribed in Latin that mentions the name of Tiberius and the name of Pontius Pilate, naming also his charge: Prefect of Judaea. A very similar title as the one

³ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1911 ed., s. v. “Pontius Pilate”, by Arthur S. Barnes, [on-line edition] (Robert Appleton Company, 1911; K. Knight, 2003, accessed 8 December 2005); available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12083c.htm>; Internet.

⁴ *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed., s. v. “Pilate”, by D. H. Wheaton [electronic edition] (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

⁵ Everett Falconer Harrison, “The Son of God among the Sons of Men”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105, no. 419 (1948): 308-319.

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used in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 3.1). This dedicatory inscription was part of a building erected by Pilate in honor of Tiberius, but it was partly destroyed and reused as a step in a Byzantine fortress. There are also several coins founded that bear his name also⁶. The original message that the inscription has is: “Pontius Pilate, the Prefect of Judaea, has dedicated to the people of Caesarea a temple in honor of Tiberius”⁷.

Information Sources about Pilate

There are three main historical sources about Pilate’s life: the Gospels, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo Judaeus (c. 20 B.C. – A.D. 45), and the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37 – A.D. 100). There is one more reference about Pilate in the works of the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (c. A.D. 55-120) in his *Annals* (15.44), but adds nothing new to the Gospel story. We will be reviewing these three sources during this research.

According to Francisco O. García-Treto, the problem with these sources is their apparent divergences:⁸

1. The Gospels accounts present in each of them a slightly different view of Pilate, according to the author’s intention and showing also a growing tendency to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus and exonerate the Romans. Almost all the

⁶ Steven Feldman and Nancy E. Roth, “The Short List: The New Testament Figures Known to History”, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov/Dec 2002 [magazine on-line]; available from <http://www.basarchive.org/bswbBrowse.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=28&Issue=6&ArticleID=2&UserID=0.html>; Internet; accessed 22 November 2005.

⁷ Robert J. Bull, “Caesarea Maritima: The Search for Herod’s City”, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 1982 [magazine on-line]; available from <http://www.basarchive.org/bswbBrowse.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=8&Issue=38&ArticleID=2&UserID=0.html>; Internet; accessed 22 November 2005.

⁸ *Harper's Bible dictionary*, 1985, s. v. “Pilate, Pontius”, by Francisco O. García-Treto [electronic edition] (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature: 1985; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.).

information in the Gospels about Pilate is centered in the trial and execution of Jesus.

2. The Jewish sources present a very negatively view of Pilate. He is presented as a very insensitive ruler to the Jewish religious life and always ready to use the force to repress any opposition. Both Philo and Josephus records violent incidents where Pilate showed a total lack of respect and consideration for the Jewish traditions and even killed several Jews who were protesting against some of his political actions.
3. The pagan source (Tacitus) only mentioned Pilate in connection with the crucifixion of Jesus, but nothing different from what the Gospels have already registered.

There are other information sources about Pilate, but are considered not historically reliable:

1. *The Apocryphal Acts of Pilate*: a two parts document, the first describing an eyewitness account of the Jesus' trial and the second describes the Resurrection. Depending heavily on the Gospels accounts, expands the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, and adds a group of miraculous signs during the Jesus' trial. It seems that it was inspired in the *Memoirs of Pilate and Our Savior*, a document that was circulating in the fourth century church.
2. *The Letter of Pontius Pilate, The Report of Pilate the Procurator, the Giving Up of Pontius Pilate; The Death of Pilate, Who Condemned Jesus*: a group of apocryphal documents of the New Testament that includes the alleged Pilate's conversion to Christianity and his death by suicide.

Pilate's Role in the Roman Administration

Pilate was appointed prefect for Judaea and Samaria by Sejanus, in A.D. 26 and ruled until A.D. 36⁹. The Roman administration of the conquered territories was organized in senatorial provinces (peaceful places) and imperial provinces (places difficult to govern, with military presence). And the imperial provinces were divided also in those of higher importance (under the jurisdiction of a *legatus*) and those of lesser importance (under the jurisdiction of a *praefectus* or *procurator*).

After the fall of Archelaus, who was the former king of Judaea, Samaria and Idumea; and one of the sons of Herod the Great, these three territories formed one province, administered independently. G. M. M. Pelsler cites Schürer to affirm that initially the Judaea's governor title was prefect, but later changed to procurator (in the last part of Claudius' reign)¹⁰.

Pilate was the fifth procurator since the removal of Archelaus. He had his headquarters in Cesarea, but made frequent trips to Jerusalem. His official residence there was the *praetorium* (the palace of Herod), in the western part of the city, with enough space to accommodate his personal guard. His was under the direct authority of Vitellius, the Roman *legatus* of Syria.

He, as governor, was the commander-in-chief of the local troops, known as *auxilia* (auxiliaries), to distinguish them from the regular Roman legions. The *auxilia* were formed by recruited locals in each province, and the legionaries were formed by Roman citizens. Because the Jews were exempted from military service, the *auxilia*'s

⁹ Richard L. Niswonger, *New Testament History*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 139.

¹⁰ AB du toit ed., *The New Testament Milieu* [electronic edition] (Halfway House: Orion Publishers, 1998; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.).

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soldiers were then non-Jewish people. In Judea were stationed five infantry cohorts (five hundred to a thousand men) and one cavalry division. One cohort was permanently stationed in Fort Antonia, in the Temple area.

Another responsibility that Pilate had was being the highest judicial authority. But the Roman tendency was to delegate the legal matters to the natives of the conquered nations and their local traditions. In the case of Judea, the Jewish Sanhedrin was in control of the judicial and legal affairs, except in the case of death sentences, which were reserved only to the Roman governor.

Also Pilate was in charge of the financial administration of the province. He organized the tax collection in his province and reported directly to the Emperor in these matters. In Judea, to avoid any Jew revolt, the Romans used Jews' tax collectors. They were two types of taxation: direct (charged to the manual working section of the population) and indirect (tolls, taxes on goods). The first type were collected by the Jewish Council, and the second one by the tax collectors (publicans).

Pilate's Government in Palestine

Pilate assumes his office at Judaea in A.D. 26/27, arriving directly from the army. Tiberius' policy was to keep successful officials in the same post for many years, even when the usual period was just three or four years. According to Sherwin-White, "He must have been satisfied with Pilate's management of a difficult province because he kept Pilate, like his predecessor as prefect, in charge for ten years"¹¹. Brian C. McGing, citing Horsley and J. Jeremias, says:

Such relative calm implies strongly an accommodation between Pilate and the Jewish authorities. And there are clearer signs of this. The High Priest Caiaphas, appointed by Gratus in about A.D. 17, remained in office throughout Pilate's

¹¹ *ISBE*, s. v. "Pilate, Pontius", by A. N. Sherwin-White.

governorship and was only deposed by Vitellius in 37; there must have been a reasonably satisfactory relationship between him and Pilate.¹²

From the historical sources mentioned before we can know something about four or five serious incidents in the course of the Pilate's government in Palestine during those ten years. The last one took him out from his charge as procurator of Judaea. We'll review each one of them.

The first account is found in Josephus (*War* 2.9.2; *Antiquities* 18.3.1; cf Eusebius' *Histories* 2.6). Pilate sent a military unit to Jerusalem at the beginning of his government, but his soldiers entered the city carrying standards with images of the Emperor, offending with then the Jewish law (Lev 26.1). Previous governors were a careful in not to introduce to Jerusalem military standards, but according to McGing, "Pilate appears to have known perfectly well how unpopular his action might prove".¹³ The Jews reacted with a large gathering of Jews in Caesarea in protest. They fasted for five days, but when Pilate sent his troops to confront them, the Jews offered their necks to the sword before tolerating that crime against their beliefs. Pilate relented after he saw that determination on their part, and he ordered to pull out the standards from the city.

The second is founded in Josephus again (*War* 2.9.4; *Antiquities* 18.3.2.). In an attempt to placate the Jewish hostility, he organized the building of an aqueduct to bring water to Jerusalem. The problem was that he used temple funds to do it. That act offended the Jews because he was interfering with the administration of the sacred fund when its main purpose was to finance the daily sacrifices. Again, a major protest took place, but this time Pilate sent disguised soldiers of civilians between the crowd, and at

¹² Brian C. McGing, "Pontius Pilate and the Sources", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (July 1991): 416-438.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 429.

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his command they attacked the offenders with clubs, killing many Jews that day. It seems that Pilate wanted to use the force but without killing anyone, but their troops went beyond his orders. According to McGing, “it is clear that there must have been cooperation on the project between Pilate and the temple authorities. Pilate cannot have laid hands on the money himself”.¹⁴

The third is also from Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.4.1f [85-89]). In Pilate’s tenth year at office (A.D. 36), a Samaritan false prophet pretending to be the Samaritan Messiah (*Taheb*), led a considerable group of armed fanatics to Mt. Gerizim promising them to show some sacred vessels hidden by Moses. Pilate sent immediately a heavily contingent of Roman soldiers to suppress the apparent rebellion. Many were slaughtered and the survivors were executed. The city council of Samaria presented an official complaint to Vitellius, the governor of Syria, who asked Pilate to present himself to the Emperor and removed him from his charge. Later, Rome sent another prefect, Marcellus, to replace Pilate.

The fourth is from Philo (*De legatione ad Gaium* 299-305). Pilate erected golden shields in Herod’s former palace in Jerusalem that bore an inscription with the name of the emperor. This act provoked again the anger of the Jews, who sent a mission to protest to the Emperor Tiberius, who finally ordered to remove the shields from Jerusalem and install them in the temple of Augustus in Caesarea. According to Philo, Pilate was the instrument of Sejanus in his evil anti-Semitic plans for destroying the Jews, but after Sejanus’ fall from the Roman administration, Pilate was worried about his connection with him and tried by every means for pleasing the Emperor. But some scholars think that the whole theory of Sejanus’ anti-Semitism and his influence on Pilate is doubtful

¹⁴ Ibid.

because the whole Philo's account is influenced by his own negative view of Pilate that prevents him to be objective in his judgments.¹⁵

According to the historical sources, it seems that Pilate's government on Judaea ends in A.D. 36, when governor Vitellius sent him to Rome to respond to the Emperor for his violent behavior. The last account of Pilate's government in Judaea is the one about crucifixion, but we will analyze it in the next section.

Pilate's Role in the Judgment and Execution of Jesus

According to J. W. Drane, "The gospels appear to report two different trials of Jesus. One was before the religious authorities, when of course he was charged with a religious offence. The other was before the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate".¹⁶ We will focus then on the trial before Pilate, organizing the key events that involved Pilate in the Jesus' trial in Table 1:

Table 1. Pilate's Role in the Jesus' Trial

No.	Event	Reference
1	After the trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus is taken to Pilate.	Mt 27.2, Mk 15.1.
2	The Jews launched three initial accusations before Pilate: a) Jesus was perverting the nation, b) Jesus had forbidden to	Lk 23.2-3.

¹⁵ Ibid, 427.

¹⁶ J. W. Drane, *Introducing the New Testament (Completely rev. and updated)* [electronic edition] (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 1999, c1986; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc, 2003), 78.

	pay taxes, c) Jesus claimed that he was “king”.	
3	Pilate interviewed Jesus, trying to find the reason of the accusations against him and showing a degree of cynicism.	Jn 18.28-38.
4	Pilate found Jesus innocent of the charges.	Lk 23.4.
5	Pilate sent Jesus to Herod because Jesus was from Galilee.	Lk 23.6-7.
6	Jesus returned to Pilate. Pilate gathered again the Jews to announce that he will only punish Jesus and let him free.	Lk 23.13.
7	Pilate offered the liberation of one prisoner: Barabbas or Jesus. His wife (Claudia Prócula, according to tradition) warns him about Jesus. The Jews chose Barabbas.	Mt 27.15-21.
8	Pilate ordered to scourge Jesus. Then he presents Jesus again as a innocent man, but the crowd insisted in his death.	Jn 19.1-6.
9	Pilate suddenly had a superstitious fear. He interviewed again Jesus. He tries to free Jesus since that moment.	Jn 19.7-12.
10	Pilate succumbs when he sees his political position in danger. After washing his hands as a symbol of innocence, he turned Jesus for crucifixion.	Mt 27.24-26, Jn 19.12-16.

Pilate’s Personality

There are different reports on the personality of Pilate, according to each source. We will summarize them in the Table 2. We will leave the Johannine view for the next section.

Table 2. Reports on Pilate's Personality.

No.	Report	Source
1	An astute man (Mt 27.18). A conflict-avoider, he preferred to turn in Jesus for avoiding a major riot (Mt 27.24) instead of doing the right thing. Tried to calm his conscience.	Gospel of Matthew
2	Similar to Matthew, but here is clear the Pilate's desire to please the crowd (Mrc 15.15). A coward man guided by his own personal interests more than a genuine desire of justice.	Gospel of Mark
3	Cruel and coward: Jews' assassin (Lk 13.1), and ordered physical punishment to Jesus even when he aware of his innocence, just to please the crowd again (Lk 23.13, 24).	The Gospel of Luke.
4	A mixture of a provocative, indecisive, selfish and stubborn on the one hand, and a weak and willing to back down in the other.	Josephus
5	Inflexible, cruel, stubborn, violent, thief, assassin, angry.	Philo

How can we reconcile these sources? We need to understand that the Gospels show a specific moment in time in the life of Pilate, and Josephus describes several events in Pilate's government. Maybe we can take the Josephus accounts more as a pattern in the personality of Pilate, and the Gospels account more as a reaction to the Jesus' trial, but not a different aspect from what Josephus has already described. The only

problem that some scholars found here is in the account of Philo, because his extreme negative and highly rhetorical accusations against any Roman authority.¹⁷

Johannine View of Pilate and Comparison with Other Sources

There are several aspects that made the Fourth Gospel special in its view of Pilate. We will analyze each one:

1. In John 18.3 it says: “Judas then, having received the Roman cohort, and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came together with lanterns and torches and weapons” [NASB]. We find here a mention about a Roman cohort taking part in Jesus’ arrest (that is not found in the Sinoptics), together with the police from the chief priests. It seems to support the theory that Pilate and the Jewish authorities had some kind of agreement, as it is believed by some scholars in the case of the Jerusalem’s aqueduct. It also shows some kind of interest from the Romans in Jesus since the beginning.
2. In John 18.28-38, Pilate and Jesus had a brief dialogue. It shows a Pilate that is trying to be fair in the case of Jesus, even when Jesus accepts that he is a king (v. 37). In verse 38, Pilate recognizes that Jesus is innocent: “I find no guilt on him” [NASB]. This picture of Pilate is different from the one that Philo suggests in his writings, when he says that Pilate was inflexible. If that was truth completely, then Pilate would have take advantage on the opportunity to hurt and kill one more Jew without any attempt to be fair.
3. Through John 18.39-19.6 we find how easily Pilate’s cynicism and irony toward the Jews emerges, when he asks “do you wish then that I release for you the King of the Jews?” [NASB]; in verse 19.3 we find the same behavior in Pilate’s soldiers with

¹⁷ Brian C. McGing, “Pontius Pilate and the Sources”, 433.

their false worship “Hail, King of the Jews!” [NASB]; also the presentation of Jesus with his crown of thorns and the purple robe in verse 5, and the moment when Pilate asks the Jews to crucify Jesus by themselves even when he knew that they couldn’t execute anybody, only the Romans could. According to David Rensberger, “He is undeniably hostile to ‘the Jews’, but that does not make him friendly to Jesus, for whose innocence he is not really concerned. Rather, his aim is to humiliate ‘the Jews’ and to ridicule their national hopes by means of Jesus”¹⁸. This is coherent with the testimony of Josephus, when he pictures Pilate as a provocative ruler against the Jews’ values in any time he could.

4. In John 19.7-12 Pilate suddenly changes of behavior after he hears the main accusation of the Jews: Jesus made himself the Son of God (verse 7). John records in verse 8 that Pilate was “more afraid” [NASB] and he enters to interrogate Jesus in a frenetic tone trying to find out who he was in reality. Even in verse 12 John states that “As a result of this, Pilate made efforts to release Him” [NASB]. Pilate was a superstitious man (as many Pagans were in that time), and even his cruelty and stubbornness were surpassed by his religious fears at least in a moment. His desire to free Jesus was not based on a desire for justice, but on superstitious fears.
5. Finally, Pilate changes again of behavior radically when he heard the famous Jews’ warning to him in John 19.12: “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar” [NASB]. And hiding himself in some words of cynicism again, he succumbs to his own cowardly and selfishness, and he delivered Jesus to be crucified. At the end, the most important thing for Pilate was his own political security and his good

¹⁸ David Rensberger, “The Politics of John: The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 3 (September 1984): 402.

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relationship with the Emperor, not even his hostility against the Jews or his own responsibility of administers justice. This is coherent with the picture of the Synoptic Gospels and a little with the picture that Josephus records in his writings.

Conclusion

Who was the real Pilate then? It seems that he was not the ultra-violent, inflexible, assassin and always angry ruler that Philo depicts. But also he was not the indecisive and weak leader that Josephus pictures. In my personal opinion and after this research, I believe that Pilate was a man that knew exactly what he was doing since the first moment (humiliate the Jews through Jesus), but later when he realized that Jesus was something else beyond his own understanding, he found himself confused on how to react and at the end he was consumed by his own sins of cowardice, selfishness and hate. It seems that he wanted to do the right thing for a moment at least, but then all the weight of his sins fell on him like a rock and dominated him completely. He lost the great opportunity that any world ruler can have ever to make justice: be fair with Jesus. His good intentions that he may have in some instant were not enough to defeat his sinful nature. Like Jesus said in John 8.34: “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” [NASB].

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