ABR 66 (2018) 31–42

"THE KING OF THE JEWS:" JESUS BEFORE PILATE (JOHN 18:28–19:22)

Norman H. Young

Avondale College of Higher Education

ABSTRACT

Many believe that the characterisation of Pilate in the Fourth Gospel's Trial Narrative is in conflict with the depiction of him in Philo and Josephus. However, this may be due to a misunderstanding of the Fourth Gospel's purpose in having Pilate interrogating Jesus inside the praetorium while disputing with his accusers outside of it. It is the contention of this essay that the evangelist does not do this to emphasise the vacillating character of Pilate, but to dramatise the regal entrance of Jesus late in the trial as, despite appearances, a true king.

I INTRODUCTION: THE DEBATE OVER THE CHARACTER OF PILATE

PONTIUS PILATE CAME TO JUDEA AS THE ROMAN REPRESENTATIVE IN AD 26. What kind of man was he? The answer is not straightforward, as scholars read the sources differently and thus give diverse portrayals of the man. One group believes that whereas Philo and, to a lesser degree, Josephus describe Pilate as ruthless and hostile towards the Jews, the Fourth Gospel (FG) depicts him as weak and vacillating.[1] James Jeffers believes that of the four Gospels "Luke and John are the most positive toward Pilate," who depict him as more conciliatory than callous.[2] In contrast, other scholars see no essential difference in the portrayal of Pilate in the sources. The two views may be listed as those who see the sources as inconsistent and those who interpret them as consistent. Each of these alternate views has two sub-interpretations. The following table outlines the four main interpretations of the texts concerning Pilate.

---

1 Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999) 145.

2 James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999) 131. Jeffers' statement seems to fly in the face of the action of Pilate described in Luke 13:1.

The sources give a consistent picture of Pilate:

A. Philo, Josephus and the FG do not depict Pilate as exceptionally brutal.

B. Philo, Josephus and the Gospels portray Pilate as consistently hostile to the Jews. Some scholars further ease the gap by suggesting that Philo exaggerates his portrayal of Pilate's brutality for rhetorical purposes.[3]

I. The sources give an inconsistent picture of Pilate:

A. Philo and Josephus show a Pilate who is exceptionally ruthless, whereas the Gospels play down his brutality. The explanation for this is that the Gospels are an attempt to curry favour with Rome and are not therefore historically reliable.

B. Philo and Josephus describe Pilate as ruthless, but the FG portrays a more conciliatory governor. This transition by Pilate is due to a change in historical circumstances with the execution of L. Aelius Sejanus, the anti-Semitic commander of the crack Praetorian Guard.[4]

If there is no essential difference in the sources, and Pilate is no better or any worse than the other Roman Prefects of Judea, it is hard to understand why Philo would give such considerable attention to Pilate.[5] Helen Bond suggests that Pilate simply manifested gross insensitivity to Jewish scruples in attempting to bring Judea into alignment with the other Roman provinces.[6] If the latter were his objective, it may well produce disdain for Jews and a ruthless use of his military powers. Even allowing for "Philo's political rhetoric" and Josephus' "theological and rhetorical aims" the data demonstrates a governor who was quite harsh in his treatment of the Jews.[7]

---

3 Tom Thatcher, "Philo on Pilate: Rhetoric or Reality," *ResQ* 37 (1995) 215–18.

4 Barnett, *Rise* 146–47.

5 B. McGing, "Pontius Pilate and the Sources," *CBQ* 53 (1991) 416–38.

6 Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (SNTSMS 100; Cambridge: CUP, 1998) xii–xv. Warren Carter defends a similar view (*Pontius Pilate: Portrait of a Roman Governor* [Collegeville, Minn.: Michael Glazier, 2003] 54. See also Cornelis Bennema, "The Character of Pilate in the Gospel of John," in *Character and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (ed. Christopher W. Skinner; LNTS 461: London: T & T Clark, 2013) 430–53; D. Francois Tolmie, "Pontius Pilate: Failing in More Ways Than One," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie and Reuben Zimmerman; WUNT 2/314; Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 578–97.

7 Bond, *Pilate* 47, 49. Carter believes that Philo's stereotypical rhetoric "casts doubts on the historical accuracy of Philo's presentation of Pilate" (*Pilate* 16). However,

At the beginning of Pilate's administration, Sejanus had total executive power in the Empire, as Tiberius had retired in A.D. 27 to the island of Capri and become a virtual recluse. Since, according to Philo, Sejanus opposed Jewish religious exclusivism, some scholars suggest that in the first half of his governorship, Pilate reflected his superior's intolerant attitude towards the Jews.[8] However, by AD 31, Sejanus had fallen from power and Tiberius had reasserted his control of the Empire. On this view, the more conciliatory policies of Tiberius forced Pilate to change his style and to act more circumspectly towards the Jews.[9] According to this interpretation, it is this more tolerant Pilate that the Gospel accounts of the trial of Jesus reflect. The historical veracity of this once popular means of harmonising the sources is widely challenged today. Extreme scepticism aside, the sources do seem to provide us with a certain number of facts about Pilate.

Pilate's task as governor was "primarily military."[10] The inscription unearthed in 1961 at Caesarea Maritima tells us that he was the "Prefect of Judea," that is, he was the commander of the auxiliary troops.[11] He was therefore an army man and not simply a tax official. The title ἐπίτροπος or *procurator* (as used by Philo, Josephus and Tacitus), which properly designates a financial official, came to designate an equivalent role to the *praefectus* (ἔπαρχος) in imperial provinces. "By whatever title the bearer was known, his office combined military, financial and judicial powers."[12] As was usual for such appointees, he belonged to the upper middle class equestrian rank. He had therefore army forces at his disposal, and contemporary sources indicate he was prepared to use them ruthlessly.

For example, on his arrival in Judea he sent the Augustan cohort into the holy city carrying their banners emblazoned with the emperor's bust.[13] He could hardly have been ignorant of the Jewish attitude towards images for all of his predecessors had avoided bringing such military banners into Jerusalem.[14] His action was, therefore, intentional and provocative.[15] Hence, it is

---

colourful prose concerning a leader's brutality does not mean there was no brutality. Philo is quite selective in the leaders he chooses to condemn as hostile to Jews.

8 *In Flacc*. 1.1; *Legat.* 160.

9 Paul Barnett, "'Under Tiberius All Was Quiet,'" *NTS* 21 (1975) 564–71.

10 Bond, *Pilate* 11–12.

11 The auxiliary troops were drawn from local non-Romans (Emil Schürer *et al*., *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* [Revised and edited by Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar; 4 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973) I.362–64.

12 Schürer, *History* I.359. The biblical writers use the term ἡγεμών (that is, *praeses*. Matt 27:2, 15, 21, 27; Luke 3:1). After Claudius time (AD 41–54), with the exception of Egypt, writers began to use the title *procurator* for governors in the imperial provinces (Schürer, *History* I.358; Bond, *Pilate* 11–12).

13 *Ant.* 18.55; *War* 2.169–70.

14 *Ant*. 18.56.

clear that the governor of Judea was a man who had command of considerable troops, who despised his subjects, and who had "a furious temper."[16] This was not a good mix. The way in which he dealt with the banner crisis mentioned above reveals the truth of this.

When protesters against the army's bringing banners into the holy city assembled before Pilate's palace in Caesarea, he had his troops three deep surround them. On his signal, they unsheathed their swords and he threatened to cut them to pieces unless they accepted Caesar's image. When they bared their necks, preferring death at the hands of the soldiers to breaking the law, Pilate relented and removed the offensive banners. He learned little from this initial brush with Jewish religious intensity for he next confiscated funds from the sacred treasury (*Corbonas*) to build an aqueduct to bring water to Jerusalem from the Pool of Solomon near Bethlehem.[17] This enraged the people and thousands assembled to vent their rage during a visit of the Prefect to Jerusalem. Pilate had his soldiers put Jewish cloaks over their armour and mingle among the crowd of protestors. On his signal, they drew out concealed clubs and beat many to death while others died in the resultant crush.[18]

Similar to his provocative act regarding the military standards, Pilate placed gilded shields in the former palace of Herod in Jerusalem.[19] He did this "not so much to honour Tiberius as to annoy the multitude."[20] Although these were without images, they bore an inscription of the Emperor's name, and this was enough to upset the religious sensitivities of the Jews. On learning of it, Tiberius angrily ordered Pilate to remove them from Jerusalem to Caesarea.[21] He duly relocated the shields to the temple of Augustus in Caesarea. This choice of venue would indicate that the Jews were correct in seeing them as cult objects. In AD 36, a Samaritan false prophet led a group to Mt Gerizim with the promise of recovering the sacred vessels which tradition said were hidden there. According to Josephus, they were not rebels but refugees from Pilate's

---

[15] His minting of coins in AD 29 and 30–31 bearing the symbols of a Roman libation bowl (*patera*) and a pagan priest's staff (*lituus*) seem also to have been offensive. See Paul L Maier, *Pontius Pilate* (New York: Doubleday, 1968) 350–51. However, Bond attributes the act to insensitivity rather than to malice (*Pilate* 21).

[16] *Legat.* 303.

[17] Schürer, *History* I.385, fn 136. Carter points out that the route for the aqueduct passed through a cemetery, which would have "violated Jewish purity concerns" (*Pilate* 3).

[18] *Ant.* 18.60–62; *War* 2.175–77.

[19] Although the episode with the shields may have occurred after the incident with the banners, this is not certain as Philo records only the former and Josephus the latter (see Schürer, *History* I.386, fn 139).

[20] *Legat*. 299 (Eng. transl. Loeb). Bond affirms what Philo denies, namely, that Pilate's motive was to honour Caesar (*Pilate* 47–8). In opposition to Bond see P. S. Davis, "The Meaning of Philo's Text about the Gilded Shields," *JTS* ns 37 (1986) 109–14.

[21] *Legat* 303–5.

wanton violence (ἀλλ' ἐπὶ διαφυγῇ τῆς Πιλάτου ὕβρεως).[22] Some of the group had arms, so Pilate set a detachment of his cavalry upon them. Many were killed, some were imprisoned, and others fled. Pilate had the leaders rounded up and executed.[23] The reaction to this episode led to Pilate's expulsion from office.

All these incidents confirm the descriptions given by Philo. Philo quotes a letter of Herod Agrippa I to Emperor Gaius that Pilate was "naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness" (ἦν γὰρ τὴν φύσιν ἀκαμπὴς καὶ μετὰ τοῦ αὐθάδους ἀμείλικτος).[24] In describing Pilate's administration, Philo referred to "the briberies, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial constantly repeated, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty."[25] He was, he writes, vindictive and with a furious temper.[26] The picture of Pilate we gain from Philo and Josephus is a one of a ruthless administrator with little understanding of and no regard for the subjects under his charge.

Many conclude that the Fourth Gospel (FG) opposes this picture of a military commander who was prepared to use his arms ruthlessly against a populace that he despised. The FG, it is said, portrays a weak governor who flits in and out of his palace trying to convince the Jews of Jesus' innocence. In the FG, many believe, we find a weak, vacillating individual manipulated by the Jews into doing their will.[27] A more careful reading, however, reveals a Pilate who manipulates the Jews as much as the reverse, and who displays a mocking disdain towards the Jewish leaders. For him, Jesus is simply the vehicle by which he insults the political aspirations of the Jews. Pilate's clever toying with the Jewish leadership reveals a figure more in line with Philo and Josephus' descriptions than one who is "rather weak, easily swayed."[28]

The FG of course is not attempting to explain the causes of the Jewish revolt by documenting the rapacity of the Roman Governors of Judea. The Evangelist's purpose is to emphasise the Lordship of Christ and the inability of worldly authorities to grasp this. In Ronald Piper's opinion, claims that Pilate in the FG "is presented as strong or weak, or manipulative or indecisive,

---

22 *Ant.* 18.88.
23 *Ant.*18.85–89.
24 *Legat.* 301 (Eng. transl. Loeb).
25 *Legat*. 302 (Eng. transl. Loeb).
26 *Legat*. 303.
27 S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: University Press, 1967) 2–7, 256–64; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 73; Cambridge: CUP, 1992) 106–8.
28 Barnett, *Rise* 145.

largely miss the mark."[29] He suggests that "at various times in the trial he is all of these."[30] Part of the drama of the trial is the question of Jesus' identity. Jesus' claims may bemuse Pilate, but his reaction to them is to mock, and perhaps even to fear them. For the Evangelist, the trial before Pilate is an opportunity to emphasise that Jesus' spiritual power is greater than any earthly claim to authority.

II JESUS BEFORE PILATE IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL (18:28—19:16)

The FG makes the audience with Pilate into a major episode in the Passion narrative devoting some thirty-five verses to it compared with Mark's fifteen. The confrontation divides into seven scenes of mounting drama.

a. Scene One (outside): Pilate dialogues with the crowd (John 18:28–32)

"What's the charge against this man?" Pilate asks the group who brought Jesus to him from Caiaphas' residence. Since the FG has Roman troops involved at the arrest of Jesus (18:3, 12), it is unlikely that Pilate was unaware of Jesus' alleged crime. The people's reply is evasive: "If he were not doing wrong (now), we would not have delivered him to you." The unfulfilled condition instructs Pilate to trust their action, even if they simply assert that he is a wrongdoer without giving any explanation as to why. The imperfect periphrasis (ἦν … κακὸν ποιῶν v. 30) indicates a current political crime rather than a religious one. Pilate resists the bait and mocks them to judge Jesus by the precepts of their own law. In their mind, they have done that, and he deserves to die; but as they are forced to admit to Pilate, they lack the authority to enforce the death penalty.[31] The Evangelist explains that this was to fulfil the predicted form of Jesus' death (18:32), but it also demonstrates Pilate's authority over the Jews.

b. Scene Two (inside): Pilate interrogates Jesus (18:33–38a)

Inside his headquarters, Pilate summons Jesus and immediately confronts him with the question: "Are you the king of the Jews" (v. 33)? The FG does not use the noun βασιλεία very frequently compared with say Matthew (five times

---

[29] Ronald A. Piper, "The Characterisation of Pilate and the Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. G. van Belle; BETL 200; Leuven: Peeters, 2007) 159.

[30] Ibid.

[31] J. E. Allen's suggestion that the reference is to the Mosaic Law and the Jews' inability to condemn Jesus according to it, hence their recourse to Roman jurisprudence has too many assumptions to be convincing. Whatever the historical difficulties it is best to take the meaning at face value. "Why Pilate?," in *The Trial of Jesus: Studies in Honour of C. F. D. Moule* (ed. Ernst Bammel: London, SCM, 1970) 78.

compared with fifty-five times).[32] On the other hand the noun βασιλεύς occurs sixteen times in the FG (14 percent of NT usage), which compares with the twenty-two times in Matthew (19 percent of NT usage).[33] It is important to note that fifteen of the FG's combined usage of these two nouns (twenty-one times) occurs in chapters 18–19, that is, seventy-one percent of the FG's usage is found in these two chapters. Unlike the Synoptics, the FG does not emphasise the message about the Kingdom of God, but rather the kingship of the messenger; and it is in these two chapters especially that the Evangelist develops the significance of Jesus' royal status.

Jesus responds to Pilate's query whether he is the king of the Jews by asking him whether he asks this question out of his own interest or merely mouthing the accusation of the Jewish leadership. "I am not (μήτι) a Jew, am I (v. 35)?" Pilate contemptuously asks with the expectation of a negative reply.[34] The interrogative particle μήτι may indicate a hesitant question, though still with the expectation of a negative reply (see John 4:29 "is he perhaps the Christ?" and 8:22 "will he perhaps kill himself?"). If μήτι retains this hesitant tone in v. 35, it implies that Pilate said it with sarcasm, as Pilate is obviously not a Jew.[35] Whether Jesus is the king of the Jews is of importance, in Pilate's opinion, only for the Jews. For the Romans, such a claim is a joke. Indeed, not only is Jesus' claim not plausible to a Roman Prefect, it also appears not to have been very convincing to the Jewish leadership or populace, since they have delivered him to Pilate.

Jesus' response is to point out that his kingship does not belong to this world; if it did, then of course his followers would take up arms to deliver him from the Jews. Warfare is the code for human kingdoms. Jesus' kingship is not simply different in origin ("not from here," 18:36c); it is different in kind ("otherwise my servants would be fighting," v. 36b). Jesus' reference to his kingship being not of this world evokes Pilate's derisive question: "So you are a king then, aren't you?"[36] "King" is Pilate's term, but not for a moment does he believe that Jesus has any regal status. Although Jesus does not disown it,

---

[32] The FG accounts for 3 percent of NT usage and Matthew 34 percent. Mark uses βασιλεία twenty times (12 percent of NT usage) and Luke forty-six times (28 percent of NT usage). See Christopher M. Tuckett, "Pilate in John 18–19: A Narrative-Critical Approach," in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts* (ed. G. J. Brooke and J.-D. Kaestli; BETL 149; Leuven, University Press, 2000) 134, fn 16.

[33] Mark uses βασιλεύς twelve times (10 percent of NT usage) and Luke eleven times (10 percent of NT usage).

[34] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII–XXI* (AB; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971) 852.

[35] Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: A. and C. Black, 1906) 542–43 (paragraph 2702).

[36] The οὐκοῦν expects an affirmative reply (A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [3rd ed.; New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919] 917).

he intimates that Pilate's understanding of the title is far from the truth. It is to testify to the truth about God that Jesus came into the world, and his kingship belongs to that role. In Pilate's tough political realm of intrigues, bribery and hubris, truth is a stranger. Hence, he cynically dismisses Jesus' assertion with a reply that indicates he thought the pursuit of truth a vain folly.

c. Scene Three (outside): Pilate offers to release Jesus (18:38b–40)

There is no external evidence for a custom of releasing a prisoner during Passover. The Evangelist uses the episode in his own unique way and for his own purpose. Unlike Matthew (27:17), the FG does not give the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas.[37] The FG simply has Pilate refer to a custom of releasing someone (ἕνα) and asking, "Do you wish that I release to you the king of the Jews (18:39)?" The intention is full of disdain. Here is the king fit for the Jews: a harmless, useless visionary. "Take him and have him as your king" is Pilate's implied dismissive taunt. He knows that they will reject the offer.

In the FG, the crowd nominates Barabbas as the recipient of Pilate's Passover concession. The Evangelist, unlike the Synoptics, does not have Pilate accede to their suggestion. The real choice as far as the FG is concerned is not between Jesus and Barabbas, but between Christ and Caesar. The Evangelist ends the exchange between the crowd and Pilate with the terse comment, "and Barabbas was a terrorist" (λῃστής) (v. 40b). The FG surely intended the irony. The crowd and the chief priests charge the innocent Jesus with insurrection and then call for the release of a man who is truly guilty of the very crime for which they are urging Pilate to crucify the innocent Jesus.

d. Scene Four (inside): The flogging and mocking of Jesus (19:1–3)

Pilate then had Jesus flogged. Unlike the Synoptics, where it is an immediate preparation for the crucifixion, the FG has the flogging of Jesus and his mocking by the troops occur in the midst of Pilate's examination of Jesus. This relocation highlights the irony of the situation as the Evangelist develops it. The mock coronation with woven fronds and an army officer's purple cloak asserts for the FG the truth about Jesus. The derisive acclamation—"Hail, king of the Jews!" (19:3)—is for the Evangelist and the intended reader ironically appropriate. Therefore, no one can read the second part of the interrogation without having before his/her mind's eye the spectacle of a humiliated and beaten Christ standing before the all-powerful representative of Caesar.

[37] Bultmann's heading, "Jesus or Barrabas?" (*sic*) is therefore quite misleading (Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [Eng. Trans.; Oxford, Basil Blackwell,1971] 657). Piper makes the same mistake ("Characterisation" 22).

e. Scene Five (outside): The second hearing before Pilate (19:4–8)

That the Evangelist wants the reader to take the mock coronation seriously becomes immediately clear in the fifth scene. Jesus, still wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe over his lacerated back, comes out to the crowd.[38] For sixteen verses (18:28–19:5) Pilate has interrogated Jesus out of the sight of his accusers; finally he staggers out "to the people in an unforgettable parody of kingly epiphany."[39] "Behold the man (ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος)," Pilate contemptuously proclaims (19:5). Jewish ears would immediately recognise the words of God when he directed Samuel to Saul the first king of Israel (1 Sam 9:17).[40] Pilate, unbeknown to himself, points to the wretched figure before him and declares, "Behold the man [whom God has chosen to rule over his people]."[41] The reaction of the chief priests and their aids is explicable, then, given the OT association of Pilate's acclaim. They vent their rejection of any suggestion that this pitiable figure is their king by shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (19:6). The Evangelist notes that it is when the chief priests and their guards saw the wretched figure of Jesus (ὅτε οὖν εἶδον αὐτὸν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ ὑπηρέται ἐκραύγασαν, v. 6) that they shouted out for his crucifixion. Pilate is surely toying with them when he proposes that they crucify him themselves, since he knows they cannot do this without his authorisation.

For the first time, and only in the FG, the leaders reveal their true reason for wanting Jesus crucified, namely, that he made himself the Son of God. Why does this revelation make Pilate "more afraid" (μᾶλλον ἐφοβήθη v. 8)?[42] There was only one Caesar, but in the first-century, there were many kings. Pilate could tolerate a claim to being a king when even the Jewish leadership and people rejected him, but the claim to divinity lifted the stakes higher. "Son of God" was a title that many in the time of the FG were attributing to the emperors. "Son of God" (*Divi filius*) was frequently used in the East for Augustus in the expanding cult dedicated to him.[43] There was a temple to Augustus in Caesarea Maritima, Pilate's headquarters. The mention of this title by the chief

---

38 Not stripped and clothed in his own garments as in Mark 15:20.

39 Joel Marcus, "Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation," *JBL* 125 (2006) 74.

40 The LXX translates: καὶ Σαμουηλ εἶδεν τὸν Σαουλ καὶ κύριος ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος (הִנֵּה הָאִישׁ) ὃν εἶπά σοι οὗτος ἄρξει ἐν τῷ λαῷ μου. The allusion to 1 Sam 9:17 is more direct than Isa 52:13–14, the text which Schnelle suggests (Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* [THNT; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1998] 278).

41 Schnelle, *Johannes* 277.

42 Rensberger's suggestion that μᾶλλον means "instead" or "exceedingly" does not address the issue raised by the ingressive aorist—Pilate became more or exceedingly afraid, but why? (See David Rensberger, "The Politics of John: The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 103 [1984] 405).

43 LSJ s.v. υἱός.

priests may well have given Pilate some concern about the status that Jesus' followers were claiming for him.

f. Scene Six (inside): Pilate sits on the judgment seat (19:9–12)

Pilate again questions Jesus: "where are you from (πόθεν)" (v. 9). Of the twenty-nine times that πόθεν occurs in the NT, twenty-seven are in the Gospels, and forty-eight percent (thirteen times) of these are in the FG. The whence of knowing Nathanael (1:48); the whence of the wine (2:9); the whence of the wind/Spirit (3:8); the whence of the living water (4:11); and the whence of sufficient bread (6:5) all point to the ultimate query in the FG, that is, the whence of Jesus (7:27, 28; 8:14; 9:29, 30; 19:9). The FG wants to affirm that Jesus is from above, from the Father. In the Synoptic account of Jesus' trial he is taciturn but, in the FG's telling, he is prolix. However, at this point the FG follows Mark 15:5 and has Jesus lapse into silence. "When Pilate refuses to receive the witness (18:38), Jesus refrains from speaking the truth, remaining silent concerning his own identity (19:9)."[44] With mordant sarcasm Pilate asks Jesus, "You *are* speaking to me, aren't you?"[45] He then quickly adds the reminder that he has supreme authority and can either crucify or release him (v. 10). Jesus just as quickly reminds Pilate that he has authority only because God (ἄνωθεν) grants it. Ultimately, Pilate is answerable to God and not to Rome. Does Pilate attempt to release Jesus from a sense of justice or as a ploy to tease and frustrate the Jewish leaders?[46] They at least take it seriously and play their main card threatening that anyone who claims kingship, or anyone who affirms such a claimant, opposes the eminence of Caesar (v. 12).[47]

g. Scene Seven (outside): Pilate's inscription (19:13–16a, 16b–22)

It is improbable on historical grounds that ἐκάθισεν (v. 13) refers not to Pilate sitting (intransitive) on the judgment seat, but to Jesus being placed on it (transitive). It is not historically likely that a prefect, even in mockery, would place a Jew, especially one charged with treason, on the judgment seat.[48] The Evangelist could have added αὐτόν after the verb to avoid ambiguity. That he did not, indicates that he was comfortable with the ambiguity and unconcerned

---

[44] Bart D. Ehrman, "Jesus' Trial before Pilate: John 18:28–19:16," *BTB* 13 (1983) 128.

[45] The question with the particle οὐ expects the answer "yes" (Robertson, *Grammar*, 917).

[46] The inceptive imperfect (ἐζήτει) should be noted. However, I think the meaning is not so much "he began to" (Rensberger, "Politics" 405) as "he attempted to."

[47] "Rather than the Johannine Pilate having succeeded in manoeuvring 'the Jews,' 'the Jews' have succeeded in trapping Pilate … Pilate has been forced to act to declare his own loyalty to Caesar" (Piper, "Characterisation" 24–25).

[48] Barrett is sympathetic to taking ἐκάθισεν as transitive, but his hesitancy is warranted (C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* [2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978] 544).

about historical implausibility. However, whatever the nuance of the verb, the reader certainly gains the impression that Jesus and not Pilate is the true Judge.[49]

Pilate's contemptuous "Behold your king" (v. 14) is greeted with cries for Jesus to be crucified. Since the language and the response parallel the interaction recorded in vv. 5–6, we may assume that Pilate must have expected the reaction. This allows him scornfully to ask, "Shall I crucify your king?" The Jewish leaders respond with the startling assertion: "We have no king but Caesar" (v. 15). Pilate's taunts had achieved their goal. The chief priests had declared Caesar to be their sole king. The Evangelist has now reached a climax in his portrayal of the trial of Jesus. He presents two kingships in stark contrast, and the Jewish leadership had made their choice.

Jews were accustomed to having a king in their distant and immediate past. Whatever reluctance Caesar had in taking the title "king," his eastern subjects had no hesitation in addressing him as king, including the biblical writers.[50] The leaders' confession must mean that for them Caesar has the exclusive *role* of a king, even if he did not apply that *title* to himself. The leaders have now compromised their strict monotheism. Pilate is satisfied, so he immediately hands Jesus over to be crucified (v. 16). He had achieved what he wanted; he no longer needed Jesus as the foil with which to goad the Jews.

With their proclamation of Caesar's exclusive lordship, the leaders had fatally contradicted their rejection of the symbols of his power. The chief priests and their associates did not enter the contaminating headquarters of the gentile ruler; they are clean and are eligible to celebrate the Passover (18:28; 19:14).[51]

Crucifixion was the ultimate shame and humiliation in the eyes of both Jews and Gentiles. The superscription that Pilate placed on the cross of Jesus was intended to insult the Jews. The cross was near the city on a major access road (19:20).[52] The title was in the three languages of Hebrew (Aramaic), Latin and Greek. Pilate wanted as many Jews as possible to see what Rome thought of Jewish messianic hopes. The text read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (v. 19). The intended insult succeeded and stung the chief priests, who asked that the text be modified to read that he said he was king of the Jews.

---

[49] "Nicht Pilatus ist der Richter, sondern Jesus, und zwar dadurch, daß er nicht erkannt und anerkannt wird…Aber schweigend spricht er, indem er mit der Scheinkrone und dem Purpurmantel auf dem Richterstuhl sitzt" (Ernst Haenchen, *Johannes Evangelium: Ein Kommentar* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1980] 548.

[50] Notice the synonymous parallel of Καῖσαρ and βασιλεύς in Acts 17:7. In 1 Peter 2:13–14 βασιλεύς clearly refers to Caesar for only he could be described as supreme and as sending governors. Acts 25:11, 12; 26:32; 28:19 and 25:21, 25 parallel Καῖσαρ and Σεβαστός.

[51] Ehrman makes a contrast between what occurred on the Λιθόστρωτον here and the one in 2 Chr 7:3 ("Trial" 130).

[52] Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Eng. Trans.; London: SCM, 1977) 50, 87.

Pilate dismisses their request and says, "What I have written, I have written" (v. 22). In Pilate's opinion, the crucified wretch was a king fit for the Jews; they should get used to it and live with the shame. Indeed that is just what Christian Jews did (Mark 8:34; 1 Cor 1:17–18; Gal 5:11; 6:14; Heb 12:2).

III CONCLUSION

The FG parallels the basic details of Christ's interrogation before Pilate as found in the Markan tradition, but he reshapes it for his own theological purpose. Pilate takes the opportunity afforded by the priests' request to crucify Jesus to taunt the Jews. In their effort to have Jesus put to death, the Jews of necessity must parry with Pilate against his manipulative intentions. Both the Jews and Pilate conspired in their different ways not only against each other, but also against Jesus, the king of the Jews. If there is a winner in this tussle, it is Jesus. The FG's Pilate is not, therefore, so radically different from Josephus or Philo's representation.

It is plain that for the FG the pitiable, weak and lacerated Jew dressed in his burlesque royal vestments is the true king. It is equally plain that the mighty, imperial Caesar is not. The FG thus forces a decision upon the reader: they are to recognise as king either a helpless bleeding Jewish nobody or the all-powerful prestigious Caesar.[53] The FG cleverly develops the irony of the whole episode, and makes it clear which of the two is the true king. Rome crucified the king of the Jews, but this was not his humiliation but his exaltation—the essence of his kingship.

[53] Piper denies that believers are confronted with any such choice, but the scene if not the words seems to demand it ("Characterisation" 32).