

“FOR GOOD WORK DO THEY WISH TO KILL HIM?”:  
NARRATIVE CRITIQUE OF THE ACTS OF PILATE

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## Section 1: Introduction to Topic and Thesis

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Generations of scholars have commented on the development of polemics against Jews in early Christian literature. For example, the Gospel of John does not differentiate between various factions among the Jewish assembly, as evident in the first century Gospel of Matthew's use of titles like scribes and Pharisees, but unifies those opposed to the Christian movement as "Jews." The trend of vilifying the Jews parallels the growth of second and third century literature exonerating Pontius Pilate and the Roman administration for the death of Jesus and destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Again in John, Pilate declares his innocence in Jesus' death three times and then turns him over to the Jewish assembly to be crucified, not Roman soldiers as witnessed in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In subsequent literature the more Pilate was absolved for Jesus' crucifixion, the more the Jews were held accountable.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Acts of Pilate (Acts Pil), an early Christian composition preserved today in two early Greek versions has long been considered a product of this literary tradition. This perspective is evident in G.W.H. Lampe's commentary on the Acts of Pilate: "Its argument, too, though concentrated on the themes of Christ's divinity and resurrection, is developed in a way which suggests that it is directed against Jewish rather than pagan opposition."<sup>3</sup> This sentiment is also expressed in Willis Barnstone's critique of the text: "In keeping with other works from this period, the Gospel is virulently anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 20. Ehrman

<sup>3</sup> G.W.H. Lampe, "The Trial of Jesus in the Acts of Pilate" from *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (ed. Ernst Bammel and C.F.D. Moule; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 177.

Jewish. It attempts editorially to dissociate Jesus as well as early biblical figures from Jewish identity.”<sup>4</sup>

This thesis demonstrates that the Acts of Pilate’s anti-Jewish polemic is more complex and more nuanced than these scholars have admitted. Although this text is suggestive of a literary trend popular among Christian writers slandering Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, it is distinctive in this tradition because this narrative offers the high priests, the antagonist held accountable for the death of Jesus in other literary sources, as the narrative’s main characters. Furthermore, the narrative’s plot is to convince this protagonist of the miracles and ascension of Jesus, and the narrative’s conflict is the high priests’ resistance and inability to refute these testimonials. Furthermore, this evidence is offered by characters of indisputable integrity, who are also Jewish. Through actors such as Nicodemus, three teachers from the Galilee, a council member named Levi, and even the miracle of Joseph’s disappearance from his imprisonment, the narrative’s protagonists remain unmoved regardless of the seemingly undeniable evidence. Furthermore, the choice of these figures as the narrative’s obstinate protagonist in light of testimonials from Jewish characters suggests a possible social situation related to the composition of this form of the text.

Of the two versions, Greek version A, is considered the oldest and was circulated in Latin, Coptic, Syriac Armenian, and Old Slavonic translations.<sup>5</sup> Greek version B is a

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<sup>4</sup> Willis Barnstone, *The Other Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 326.

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* (vol. 1 of *Gospels and Related Writings*; trans. R. McL. Wilson; Cambridge: Westminster/John Know Press, 1991), 503.

later composition and longer than version A.<sup>6</sup> The following investigation will focus solely on version A and will hereafter refer to this text as the Acts of Pilate.<sup>7</sup> This narrative, and the similar narrative the Gospel of Nicodemus, which is comprised of the Acts of Pilate and the Descent into Hell, was one of the most influential non-canonical texts among Medieval literature.<sup>8</sup> As illustrated in Zbigniew Izydorczyk's monumental *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus* (1997), many scholars have commented on the use of this text by Christian communities. However, inquiries into the inspiration and composition have diminished since the publication of J.C. Thilo's *Codex Apocryphus* (1832), Constantine Tischendorf's *Evangelia Apocrypha* (1853), and R. A. Lipsius' *Die Pilatus-Acten kritisch untersucht* (1871). As a result, interest in this text has been relegated to brief introductions similar to the one found in Ron Cameron's *The Other Gospels* (2001); the overview offered by Felix Scheidweiler in Wilhelm Schneemelcher's *New Testament Apocrypha* (1991); and most recently Clayton N. Jefford's "Acts of Pilate" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992). Furthermore, G. C. O'Ceallaigh's "Dating

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 503. Schneemelcher argues that version B may predate the Council of Ephesus (431 BCE) because the narrative elaborates the role of Mary six times and uses the title Θεοτοκός and thus the Acts of Pilate's version A may be a third century composition. The Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius, the Bishop of Constantinople, and the theology expressed in the title Θεοτοκός, because he advocated that Jesus was not a single person, as had been concluded at the Council at Nicaea (325 BCE), but was two distinct persons, one human and one divine. Schneemelcher

<sup>7</sup> My use of this title should not be confused with other text from late antiquity with similar titles such as Gregory of Tours' use of this title *Gesta Pilati* in his *History of the Franks* in reference to a legendary letter written by Pilate to the Emperor Tiberius (Book 1:20;23). Furthermore, the use of this title should not be confused with other modern scholars who use this term in reference to various texts in circulation also during the late second and third century. For example see Wolfgang Speyer's "Neue Pilatus Apokryphen," *Vigiliae Christianae* (1978): 53-59; Jean-Pierre Lémonon's "Ponce Pilate: Documents Profanes," *Nouveau Testament et Traditions Ecclésiastiques* (1992): 741-778; and Xavier Leveils' "La Polémique Anti-Chrétienne Des Actes de Pilate," *RHPR* (1999): 291-314.

<sup>8</sup> G. C. O'Ceallaigh. "Dating the Commentaries of Nicodemus," in *HTHR* 56 (1963): 21.

the Commentaries of Nicodemus” (1968) and Malcolm Lowe’s “*Ioudaioi* of the Apocrypha: A Fresh Approach to the Gospels of James, Pseudo-Thomas, Peter and Nicodemus,” are among the few noteworthy works in recent years scrutinizing the inspiration and possible date for this text.<sup>9</sup> Much work is still needed to understand the Acts of Pilate as part of a literary trend vilifying Jews for the trial and death of Jesus.

### History of the Text

A date of origin for the text is difficult to pin down. Many modern scholars have weighed in on this subject. Unfortunately, this has often only perpetuated the confusion. O’Ceallaigh offers this overview of these varying opinions:

Previous efforts at dating this, the earliest of the Pilate Apocrypha, have ranged all the way from the early *first* century (Darley, Lavagnino), to the early *second* century (Conybeare), to the second half of the *second* century (Tischendorf, Hoffmann, Revillout, Mueller-Bardorff, Michaelis) to the end of the *third* century (Westcott, Harnack, Bardenhewer, van den Oudenrijn), or late *fourth* century (Lipsius, Bauer, James, Daniels-Rops, Bozzone), to the first quarter of the *fifth* century (Maury, Renan, Hennecke), to the years 439/441 (Rossi, Cowper).<sup>10</sup>

O’Ceallaigh also adds a compelling argument which favors a date no earlier than the sixth century to this list. He reached this conclusion through two assumptions: the Prologue to the text is consistently found in all early versions of the text and thus must be part of the original autograph, and the language used in the Prologue is too dependent on writings of John Lydus, who coined many of these terms and thus the text could not have

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say there has not been some interested in themes found in the Acts of Pilate. For example, see Rími Gounelle’s “Thematic Bibliography of the “Acts of Pilate”: Addenda et Corrigenda,” *Apocrypha* (2000): 259-292; and Jean-Daniel Dubois “L’affaire des Étendards de Pilate dans le Premier Chapitre des Actes de Pilate,” *Studia Patristica* (1989): 351-358.

<sup>10</sup> O’Caellaigh, “Dating the Commentaries,” 25. Italics are the author’s and were not added here.

been written earlier than the sixth century.<sup>11</sup> As will be demonstrated below, a sixth century argument is too late for this text.

The variety of conflicting dates assigned to the Acts of Pilate stems from the numerous ancient witnesses who make references to a text by the same title. However, none of these descriptions align with the Acts of Pilate under consideration here. In his *Apology*, Justin Martyr writes, “And after He [Jesus] was crucified they cast lots upon His vesture, and they that crucified Him parted it among them. And that these things did happen, you can ascertain from the Acts of Pontius Pilate” (35). And, in a later chapter, he notes: “There are the words: ‘At His coming the lame shall leap as a hart, and the tongue of the stammerer shall be clear speaking: the blind shall see, and the lepers shall be cleansed; and the dead shall rise, and walk about.’ And He did those things, you can learn from the Acts of Pontius Pilate” (48). Chapters 6, 7, and 8 of the Acts of Pilate also contains a similar account as that mentioned by Justin Martyr, and the story of the guards dividing the garments is also found in chapter 10 of this text. Furthermore, in chapter 34 of his *Apology*, the Justin offers Quirinus’s census as proof of his convictions; but Felix Scheildweiler concludes that there was no census and Justin’s appeal to an “Acts of Pilate” rests solely on his assumption that such an official court document had been preserved.<sup>12</sup>

Another possible source for our Acts of Pilate could be an alleged letter written by Pilate to the emperor Tiberius reporting the injustice done to Jesus. In chapters 5, 21, and 24 of Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*, the author refers to this report. He states that Pilate “sent

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55. O’Caellaigh

<sup>12</sup> Felix Scheilder, “The Gospel of Nicodemus Acts of Pilate and Christ’s Descent into Hell,” in *New Testament Apocrypha* (Rev. and ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher. Translated. R. McL. Wilson. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 501.



word of Him [Jesus] to the reigning Caesar who was at the time Tiberius” (21), and furthermore, he offers an insight into the content of this letter, stating “himself [Tiberius] having received intelligence from Palestine of events which had clearly shown the truth of Christ’s divinity” (5). This letter’s existence and content is not currently assured. Some scholars conclude that Pilate’s report is the product of second century Christian legends, in which new accounts were fabricated to further exonerate the Roman administration for the death of Jesus and destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars have argued that the Acts of Pilate is a later narrative inspired from these same rumors.<sup>14</sup> Although the content of this letter mentioned by Tertullian cannot be determined, the subject matter and the conversion of Pilate does not align with our Acts of Pilate. We may conclude that it is not the same text.

Other scholars have suggested a date for the Acts of Pilate’s origin earlier than the composition of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*. In this fourth century work, the author mentions a document endorsed by Maximian, who served as joint Emperor with Diocletian between 286 and 305 BCE. In this account he writes: “Having therefore forged Acts of Pilate and our Savior full of every kind of blasphemy against Christ, they sent them with the emperor's approval to the whole of the empire subject to him, with written commands that they should be openly posted to the view of all in every place, both in country and city, and that the schoolmasters should give them to their scholars, instead of their customary lessons, to be studied and learned by heart” (Hist. eccl. 9.5.1). According to Eusebius, this text sought to promote a return to Roman religions, which is not a subject addressed in our Acts of Pilate. Furthermore, in regards to Justin Martyr and

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<sup>13</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Lampe, “The trial of Jesus,” 175.

Tertullian's reference to an Acts of Pilate, we can surmise that there were a number of texts—either reports from Pilate to the emperor or pagan propaganda—circulating sometime after the second century, which could be described as “Acts of Pilate.”

Previous investigations have depended on historical sources which make mention of a text similar to the one under investigation here or have sought to disseminate traditions imbedded in the text in the hopes of offering a definitive date for the Acts of Pilate's composition. However, from the diversity of dates, this text, like many other texts from Christianity's formative years, must at present remain a debated topic among subsequent generations of scholars. There are two clues, which might for the time being offer a relative date to situate this text. Written sometime over the course of his life (*ca* 310 to 403 CE), Epiphanius records a heretical group he calls Quartodecimans, who uses an Acts of Pilate to determine the exact date of Christ's ascension on the eighth day before the Kalends of April (Haer. 50.1). The specific reference to an Acts of Pilate and date, which parallels the Prologue of our text, seems to suggest that some form of this text as we have it today was in circulation around the fourth century.

There is another clue that for now may offer a relative date for this text. The Prologue claims to be a Greek translation from a Hebrew source. The author of the Acts of Pilate records a date for this translation by an Ananias who describes himself as “an officer of the guard, being learned in the law” and “in the eighteenth year of the reign of our Emperor Flavius Theodosius and in the fifth year of the ‘Nobility’ of Flavius Valentinianus, in the ninth indiction.” There was no Valentinian in power between 392, when Valentinian II died, and 425, when Valentinian III ascended, which leaves only two possible ninth indictions: 425 and 440. The former date is too early because

Valentinian would have just come to power and thus we must consider the later date of 440 or even 441 as the possible date to which the Prologue's author referred.<sup>15</sup> As will be shown later, this date is important in light of the cultural context of the earlier fourth century, which may ultimately provide insight into the motivation behind the composition of this text.

With these two clues recognized, we must turn to another avenue to better understand the Acts of Pilate. The following investigation will consider the unity of the narrative as a whole and the text as an end in itself.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the following chapters will consider the Acts of Pilate's larger narrative, choice of protagonist, development of the plot and conflict, other characters in the narrative, and finally the influence these characters have on the protagonist and even the influence these characters, and their testimonials, may have had on this text's audience.

### **Dependence and Independence of Text**

In composing this later narrative, the author uses key elements from the canonical gospels, or at least similar traditions, around which to construct the new narrative. In doing so, the Acts of Pilate's author demonstrates an interest in consolidating the various accounts surrounding the life of Jesus into one seemingly authoritative narrative. For example, the author has combined passages, similar to those found in Luke and John, to offer a synthesized version of the crucifixion of Jesus:

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<sup>15</sup> O'Ceallaigh, "Dating the Commentaries," 50. O'Caellaigh

<sup>16</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 7.

### **Acts of Pilate 10**

<sup>1</sup>And Jesus went out from the praetorium, and the two malefactors with him. <sup>2</sup>And when they came to the appointed place, they stripped him and girded him with a linen cloth and put a crown of thorns on his head. <sup>3</sup>Likewise they hung up also the two malefactors.

<sup>4</sup>But Jesus said: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." <sup>5</sup>And the soldiers parted his garments among them. <sup>6</sup>And the people stood looking at him. <sup>7</sup>And the chief priest and the rulers with them scoffed at him, saying:

"He saved others, let him save himself. If he is the Son of God, let him come down from the cross." <sup>8</sup>And the soldiers also mocked him, coming and offering him vinegar with gall, and they said: "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself."

<sup>9</sup>And after the sentence Pilate commanded the crime brought against him to be written as a title in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, according to the accusation of the Jews that he claimed to be king of the Jews.

<sup>10</sup>One of the malefactors who were crucified said to him: "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us."

<sup>11</sup>But Dysmas rebuked him:

"Do you not at all fear God, since you are in the same condemnation? And justly so. For we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong."

<sup>12</sup>And he said to Jesus: "Lord, remember me in your kingdom." And Jesus said to him: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

### **Gospel of Luke 23:34-38**

And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, on one the right and one on the left.

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying,

"He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

### **Gospel of John 19:19**

Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

### **Gospel of Luke 23:39-43**

One of the criminals who were hanging there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The example above suggests that the Acts of Pilate's author knew the canonical accounts, or at least similar traditions, and wove the various narratives together to offer a seemingly authoritative voice.

Similarly, the author used key elements from the canonical gospels but has included a previously unknown speech from Pilate against the Jews for bringing charges against Jesus. The effect is to remind the reader of the allegations against Jesus and offer a further judgment against Jews:

#### **Acts of Pilate 9**

But some of the Jews answered: "You are not Caesar's friend if you release this man, for he called himself the Son of God and a king. You wish him therefore to be king and not Caesar."

And Pilate was angry and said to the Jews: "Your nation is always seditious and in rebellion against your benefactors." The Jews asked: "What benefactors?" Pilate answered: "As I have heard, your God brought you out of Egypt out of hard slavery, and led you safe through the sea as if it had been dry land, and in the wilderness nourished you and gave you manna and quails, and gave you water to drink from a rock, and gave you the law. And despite all this you provoked the anger of your God: you wanted a molten calf and angered your God, and he wished to destroy you; and Moses made supplications for you, and you were not put to death. And now you accuse me of hating the emperor."

And he rose up from the judgment seat and sought to go out. And the Jews cried out: "We recognize as king Caesar alone and not Jesus."

For indeed the wise men brought him gifts from the east, as if he were a king. And when Herod heard from the wise men that a king was born, he sought to slay him. But when his father Joseph knew that, he took him and his mother, and they fled into Egypt. And when Herod heard it, he destroyed the children of the Hebrews who were born in Bethlehem."

When Pilate heard these words, he was afraid. And he silenced the multitudes, because they were crying out, and said to them: "So this is he whom Herod sought?" The Jews replied: "Yes, this is he."

#### **Gospel of John 19:12**

From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

(Although this passage does not have an exact parallel to Matthew, it is clearly influenced by the passage of the three wise men found only in Matt 2:7-16.<sup>17</sup>)

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<sup>17</sup> H.C. Kim, *The Gospel of Nicodemus: Gesta Salvatoris* (Canada: Hunter Rose Company, 1973), 3. Kim claims that this passage in Acts of Pilate is different from the account found in Matthew (2:13-15) and may suggest a possible other source.

**Gospel of Matt 27:24-25**

And Pilate took water and washed his hands before the sun and said: "I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man. You see to it."

Again the Jews cried out: "His blood be on us and on our children."

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."

Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

These unattested speeches by Pilate, which have been amended to the canonical traditions, suggests that the author of the Acts of Pilate had access to the canonical accounts, or similar traditions, and utilized these sources in composing a new narrative in response to a social situation.

G.W.H. Lampe argues that the Acts of Pilate was written to exonerate Pilate of Jesus' death.<sup>18</sup> Pilate's depiction, Lampe suggests, is that of an official in the Christian empire and points out that the narrative itself refers to Pilate as one "circumcised in heart" (περιτεμνόμενος τῇ καρδίᾳ, 12), who has in some way become a follower of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> There is evidence in the text to support Lampe's claim. In the narrative when Jesus is first brought before the governor, Pilate asks the assembly, "Tell me! How can I, a governor, examine a king?" (1). Furthermore, Pilate's character is critical of the Jews for the allegations against Jesus, "For good work do they wish to kill him?" (3). And finally in chapter 10, after Jesus has been crucified, a centurion reports the events following Jesus' death, namely that the sun darkened and that the curtain in the temple was torn into, Pilate and his wife "were greatly grieved, and they neither ate nor drank on that day" (11).

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<sup>18</sup> Lampe, "The trial of Jesus," 178.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 178. [Lampe](#)

Yet when the Jews present their case against Jesus, Pilate proposes that Jesus' power to heal may come from Asclepius (1). This suggests the author saw Pilate as a pagan, who attributes the power to heal to a Roman God and is fearful of omens. Furthermore, in the scene above Pilate shows reverence to the sun, also a Roman God. Lampe's observations may suggest that the text before us was written at a time when Christianity was experience a time of change, growth, and reflection, specifically how the emerging Christian empire saw itself in light of Rome's pagan past.

G. C. O'Ceallaigh, on the other hand, suggests that the larger narrative, chapters 1 through 13, was unimportant to the author and merely an expansion of the Passion narrative.<sup>20</sup> He argues that the sole motivation behind the composition of this text is found in chapter 14, when the three pilgrims arrive from the Galilee to offer an eyewitness account of Jesus' ascension. O'Ceallaigh states:

He [the author] wrote for one reason: to create a document that would command belief, on a par with the Gospels, supplementing them at their weakest point, the Resurrection; and adding to them what they entirely lacked: an authoritative witness to the Ascension. The three Rabbis were created by our author to fill a sorely felt demand. Without them, this writing were a purposeless and pallid replica of what had already been canonized.<sup>21</sup>

In the Acts of Pilate, it is a Roman centurion who offers an eyewitness account of Jesus' empty tomb (13). In the canonical accounts, disciples discover the empty tomb, but testimony to the ascension is offered in the Gospel of Mark's longer ending: "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God" (16:19). And further testimony is offered in the Gospel of Luke: "Then he lead them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands be blessed them. While

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<sup>20</sup> O'Caellaigh, "Dating the Commentaries," 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 45. O'Caellaigh

he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven” (24:44-53). If this is the only reason to write a new narrative, as suggested by O’Caellaigh, why does the author include other accounts not found in the canonical versions? Why is there a new speech from Pilate? Why do the disciples suggest that the assembled crowd should decide the fate of Jesus? What about the new scenes with Nicodemus? Or, why has the author included a previously unknown story of Joseph’s imprisonment and rescue? In other words, O’Caellaigh and Lampe’s theories rest on isolated scenes and both scholars have failed to consider the larger narrative and its unique protagonist.

This thesis provides a broader view of the larger narrative in order to better understand the social situation behind this text’s composition. Section 2 offers an overview of early Christian writers and church fathers seeking to vilify ethnic Jews for the trial and death of Jesus, and contains an examination of the narrative’s plot and key events. Section 3 considers the characters in this narrative with particular attention to the protagonist acceptance or dismissal of the various testimonials offered from other characters. The final Section 4 concludes with a summary of the previous sections and consideration of the social circumstances behind the Acts of Pilate’s inspiration and suggests a relative date for the composition of this text.



## Section 2: Anti-Semitism and the Acts of Pilate

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The Christian emperor Theodosius, who ruled from 408 until his death in 450 C.E., issued a number of laws to limit the legal rights of ethnic Jews and to penalize Christians who associated with them.<sup>22</sup> These laws reflect centuries of a growing animosity toward Jews expressed in Christian literature and by theologians. The following section offers an overview of this tradition and the Acts of Pilate as part of this literary trend.

### Anti-Semitism in Early Christian Literature

Generations of scholars have debated about the point in history when Christianity and Judaism became two discernable religions, independent of one another and often in conflict with each other.<sup>23</sup> Some scholars have looked to the popularity of vilifying Jews for the trial and death of Jesus, beginning sometime in the late first or early second century literature. They argue that these polemics can be traced back to the letters of Paul, the Gospel of Matthew, and the Gospel of Luke.<sup>24</sup> Others have singled out the Gospel of John as the primary source of early Christian anti-Semitism, because the author of this text no longer distinguished between the various factions among the Jewish assembly (such as the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees in the synoptic accounts), but

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<sup>22</sup> See Theodosian Codes 16.9.1, 3.7.2, 16.8.7.

<sup>23</sup> This is related to the general discussion of Christianity and Judaism's 'parting of the ways.' Recently, Judith Lieu argues that the notion of a complete separation between Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism is rooted in a theological bias and fails to offer an accurate historical model. Instead she argues that we see the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as a "criss-crossing of muddy tracks" between the two religions. See Judith Lieu. *Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (New York: T&T Clark Ltd, 2002), 11-29.

<sup>24</sup> Wayne Meeks, "Break Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation from the Jewish Communities," Pages 89-113 in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation* (ed. Jeremy Cohen; New York: New York University Press, 1991), 107.

unifies those who oppose Jesus under the title: “Jews.”<sup>25</sup> Michael White argues that the “I am” sermons found in the Gospel of John (6:35-42; 649-57) are “symbolically very powerful, because they are paired with liturgical and confessional elements and thus make John’s polemic some of the most inflammatory anti-Jewish rhetoric in the early Christian tradition.”<sup>26</sup>

This trend of vilifying Jews is similarly exemplified in the Gospel of Peter, a text written sometime in the second century.<sup>27</sup> Bart Ehrman argues that this recovered Gospel “is far more virulently anti-Jewish than any of those that made it into the New Testament.”<sup>28</sup> He cites the text’s opening passage, “. . . but none of the Jews washed his hands, nor did Herod or any of his judges. Since they did not wish to wash, Pilate stood up. The King Herod ordered the Lord to be taken away and said to them, ‘Do everything that I ordered you to do to him’” (Gos. Pet. 1:1-2), as a redirecting of the earlier canonical traditions to indicate the governor and administration’s innocence in the death of Jesus, to further place this blame exclusively on the Jews.<sup>29</sup> An example of this trend is similarly found in the depiction of the Judeans in the narrative’s post-crucifixion scenes:

Then the Judeans and the elders and the priests perceived what evil they had done to themselves, and began to beat their breasts and cry out, “Our sins have brought woes upon us! The judgment and the end of Jerusalem are at hand!” . . . When the scholars and the Pharisees and the priests had gathered together, and when they heard that all the people were moaning and beating their breast, and saying, “If his death has produced these

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<sup>25</sup> Alan F. Segal. *Rebecca’s Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 157.

<sup>26</sup> L. Michael White, *From Jesus to Christianity: How Four Generations of Visionaries & Story Tellers Created the New Testament and Christian Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 314.

<sup>27</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14-15.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 18. Ehrman

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 18. Ehrman

overwhelming signs, he must have been entirely innocent!” They became frightened and went to Pilate and begged him, “Give us soldiers so that <we> may guard his tomb for three [days], in case his disciples come and steal his body and the people assume that he is risen from the dead and do us harm.” (Gos. Pet. 7:1; 8:1-3)

John Dominic Crossan contends that this passage expresses a Christian apologetic with hopes of Roman accommodation, and the desire to accuse Jewish authorities of concealing their guilt for fear of public retaliation.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, this trend is exemplified in early patristic authors. Some scholars have proposed that the depiction of Jews among early Christian authors represents a “straw figure” for Christian apology.<sup>31</sup> Rosemary Ruether sums up this perspective: “The nature of the Jews is fixed as one of monstrous evil and rejection of God, logically culminating in the murder of God’s Son and justifying God’s final rejection of them. God’s efforts on their behalf have always been futile. In his forbearance he sends prophets, whom they reject and murder. With the death of Christ the final ‘evidence is in’ that the Jews are not suitable to be God’s people.”<sup>32</sup>

Miriam Taylor argues that the core of Christian polemics against Jews springs from patristic preoccupation with Judaism on a symbolic level, and more specifically, with unresolved theological questions concerning the nature of Jesus and the role of

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<sup>30</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 202.

<sup>31</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The *Adversus Judaeos* Tradition in the Church Fathers: The Exegesis of Christian Anti-Judaism,” Pages 174-189 in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation* (ed. Jeremy Cohen; New York: New York University Press, 1991), 175; and Miriam S. Taylor. *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity: A Critique of Scholarly Consensus* (New York; E. J. Brill, 1995), 4; 133.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 178. Rosemary Radford Ruether

Torah after his death.<sup>33</sup> Resolutions to these disputes were offered in numerous councils between the third and fourth centuries. The resulting creeds provided artillery for the emerging Church to refute heresies and stimulate animosity against Christianity's Jewish heritage.

This trend is similarly found in the exegesis of Hebrew scripture by theologians between the second and fifth century, seeking to refute the Jewish claim of being God's chosen people.<sup>34</sup> In Tertullian's charge against Jews in his *Adversus Iudaeos*, he alleged: "For on account of those faults of yours, Ezekiel announced your future destruction, and not only in that age which has already occurred but also in the day of retribution that will follow. No one will be exempt from this destruction except the one who will have been sealed with the suffering of the Christ whom you rejected" (11.1). Similarly, Augustine argued in the fourth century:

In fact the Israelites received from the one true God all the blessings for which the Romans thought it necessary to pray to all the hosts of false gods, and they received them in far happier manner. And if they had not sinned against God by turning aside to the worship of strange gods and of idols, seduced by impious superstitions as if by magic arts, if they had not finally sinned by putting Christ to death, they would have continued in possession of the same realm, a realm exceeding others in happiness, if not extent. If today they are dispersed over almost all the world, amongst almost all the nations, this is part of the province of the one true God . . . (Civ. 4.34)

Another example is offered in the sermons of John Chrysostom who argued that any association between Jews and Christians undermines the "Fathers at Nicaea," when he confronted members of his congregation who continued to associate with Jews:

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<sup>33</sup> Miriam S. Taylor. *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity: A Critique of Scholarly Consensus* (New York; E. J. Brill, 1995), 4; 133.

<sup>34</sup> Marcel Simon, "Christian Anti-Semitism," Pages 131-173 in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation* (ed. Jeremy Cohen; New York: New York University Press, 1991), 145.

Do you realize that those who are fasting have dealings with those who shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”; and with those who said, “his blood be on us and on our children”? If a band of would-be revolutionaries were apprehended and then condemned, would you dare to go to them and talk with them? I certainly don’t think so! Is it not absurd to be zealous about avoiding someone who had sinned against mankind, but to have dealings with those who affronted God? Is it not folly for those who worshiped the crucified to celebrate festivals with those who crucified him? This is not only stupid – it is sheer madness. (*Adv. Jud.* 1.5)

This trend of vilifying the Jews also parallels a growing trend among early sources exonerating Pontius Pilate for the death of Jesus. Bart Ehrman notes that it “is an illuminating exercise to trace the treatment of Pilate through our surviving Gospels. The more he is excused, the more the Jews are blamed.”<sup>35</sup> For example in the Gospel of Mark, Pilate is depicted as a strong representative of imperial interest and plays a vital part in the chain of events leading to the crucifixion and thus shares in this guilt.<sup>36</sup> However in the later Gospel of Luke, Pilate is an official witness to Jesus’s innocence and functions in the narrative to place the blame for the crucifixion first on the chief priests and then on the representatives of the whole Jewish nation.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Acts of Pilate**

The Acts of Pilate exhibits a similar trend of vilifying Jews. The narrative repeats the Gospel of Matthew’s pronouncement of self-condemnation from the Jewish crowd: “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt 27:25) three times (4; 9; 13). Furthermore, there is the new speech by Pilate against the “seditious” history of the Jews (9). The text also includes the passage from Matthew wherein the Jews, seeking to stifle

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<sup>35</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, reprinted 1999), 117.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 159. [Helen K. Bond](#)

rumors of Jesus' ascension, bribe a guard to tell no one of the empty tomb (Matt 28:12-14//Acts Pil. 13). Finally, the narrative contains a statement not found in other Gospels: "For this purpose has the whole multitude of us come, that he should die" (4). These points along with the narrative's plot and conclusion, suggest that this text was written in line with the popular trend of the second, third, and fourth century polemics.

The narrative begins with an assembly of Jews having come together in Pilate's praetorium to bring charges against Jesus for healing on the Sabbath and other offences. Pilate summons Jesus, but upon interrogation and testimony from various witnesses, the governor can find no fault with him and declares him to be innocent of the allegations. However, the assembly of Jews gathered outside the governor's praetorium continue calls for Jesus' death. Pilate eventually concedes. Jesus, along with two criminals, is led away to be crucified. After Jesus' death, the high priests imprison Joseph of Arimathaea for his aid in the burial of Jesus. However, on the following day Joseph has miraculously disappeared from his confinement. News follows that Jesus has also disappeared from his tomb. Three pilgrims arrive from the Galilee claiming to have seen Jesus teaching on Mt. Mamilch and his subsequent ascension into heaven. Perplexed by these events, the high priests appoint messengers to search for Jesus. Although he is not found, the missing Joseph is discovered in Arimathaea. The assembly appoints messengers to summon him to Jerusalem for questioning. His miraculous account baffles the high priests, and they summon the three pilgrims from the Galilee to reconsider their previous testimony. Although stunned by the Joseph's account, the three pilgrims, and even an account offered by a Levite from among the assembly, the story ends with the high priest still unsure of Jesus' miracles and the events following his death.

## Kernels, Satellites, and Plot

Mark Powell argues that a narrative's events can be classified as kernels, those events by which the logic of the narrative depends, and satellites, those events, which could be deleted from the master narrative and not change the basic plot.<sup>38</sup> For example, in the Acts of Pilate's first chapter, we find examples of both kernels and satellites. The high priests and scribes have come before Pilate to issue their complaints against Jesus. This is a narrative kernel because it establishes the high priest's motivation, it sets up that story's main conflict, and the scene is needed to establish the logic of the crucifixion. However, Jesus's entrance into Pilate's praetorium is a satellite:

Now when Jesus entered, and the standard-bearers were holding the standards, the images of the emperor on the standards bowed and did reverence to Jesus. And when the Jews saw the behavior of the standards, how they bowed down and did reverence to Jesus, they cried out loudly against the standard-bearers. But Pilate said to them: "Do you not marvel how the images bowed and did reverence to Jesus?" The Jews said to Pilate: "We saw how the standard-bearers lowered them and revered him." (Acts Pil. 1)

Although this scene offers the reader support against the high priest's allegations, it is not needed to move the story forward and only offers the narrative an elaboration on an event.

By lining up the kernels we can see that the narrative's key scenes are character testimonials:<sup>39</sup> The high priests offer two different sets of charges against Jesus (1, 2). The witnesses who testify on Jesus' behalf suggest that the crowd should decide his fate and the crowd subsequently condemn Jesus to death (9). Jesus dies on the cross and Joseph of Arimathaea buries his body (11). The high priests seek out all who were

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<sup>38</sup> Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* 36.

<sup>39</sup> For a complete overview of the narrative see Appendix A.

witnesses during the trial (12). Joseph is imprisoned but disappears on the following day (12). A priest, a teacher, and a Levite come to Jerusalem from Galilee and claim to have seen the risen Jesus teaching at Mamilch and then ascend into heaven (14). Nicodemus supports the authority of these three men and the high priests are persuaded to search the country for Jesus (15). Joseph is discovered in Arimathaea and is subsequently summoned to return to Jerusalem (15). The assembly hears Joseph's account (16). A member of the assembly also offers an account of Rabbi Symeon's blessing of Jesus and Mary. The legitimacy of Levi's account is established when the high priests question his father (16). The high priests then are persuaded to summon the three rabbis from the Galilee and reconsider their testimonials along with Joseph's account, and Levi's story (16). Although persuaded by the various accounts, the high priests continue to hold fast to their convictions offered in the first two chapters. In establishing these kernels, we define the narrative's plot: to persuade the main characters, both the high priests and the collective people, that Jesus neither "pollutes the Sabbath," does not wish to "destroy the law of our fathers," was not "born of fornication," and is not "a sorcerer," as had been alleged in the story's beginning.

Northrop Frye argues that there are two common plot patterns in Biblical narratives: comedy and tragedy.<sup>40</sup> A comedy, or U-shaped plot, is a story that moves from equilibrium to a state of disorder and then returns to equilibrium by the narrative's conclusion; and a tragedy, or inverted U-shaped plot, is a story that moves from a state of disorder, or conflict between the characters, to an equilibrium and then returns again to a

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<sup>40</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 169-71.



state of conflict.<sup>41</sup> Plots can be further explained as one in which the protagonist recognizes something of great importance that was previously unrecognized, or, as in the case of a tragedy, fails to grasp or acknowledge a key piece of information.<sup>42</sup>

The Acts of Pilate's first chapter exhibits the initial conflict of a tragedy. In Matthew 26:57-68, Mark 14:53-65, Luke 22:54-71, and John 18:13-24, Jesus is brought first before the Sanhedrin for questioning and is then taken by the high priests to Pilate's praetorium. However in the Acts of Pilate, Jesus is not in custody and has not been sentenced by the Sanhedrin. He is free and must be summoned to Pilate's court by a messenger. G. W. H. Lampe argues that this variant from the canonical accounts allows Pilate to be Jesus' sole judge.<sup>43</sup> However, in light of the narrative's conclusion it seems that by eliminating the prior scenes of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the narrator draws attention to an immediate conflict between Jesus and the high priests in this first chapter and foreshadows a return to this conflict with the same body of Jews unconvinced of his innocence, leaving this initial clash unresolved.

The high point of the U-shaped tragedy occurs when the corporate character of the high priests comes the closest to resolving the narrative's central conflict. It is at this point in the story that the protagonist is forced to reconsider something of great importance.<sup>44</sup> Failure to grasp this information signals a downward turn and return to the

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<sup>41</sup> James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Michigan: Baker Academics, 2005), 205-206.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 205. Resseguie

<sup>43</sup> G.W.H. Lampe, "The Trial of Jesus in the Acts of Pilate," Pages 173-182 from *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (ed. Ernst Bammel and C.F.D. Moule; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 176-7.

<sup>44</sup> Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 205.

narrative's original disorder.<sup>45</sup> This occurs in the Acts of Pilate's chapter 9. Pilate, fearing a riot, asks the twelve witnesses who said Jesus was not born of fornication and Nicodemus for advice about the fate of Jesus. Their response leaves Jesus in the hands of the very assembly that first brought the charges against Jesus: "We do not know. Let them see to it." The protagonists have failed to grasp the testimonials offered in Pilate's praetorium from Nicodemus, a respected member of the local Jewish assembly, and various disciples. The high point of the U-shaped plot occurs when Jesus' fate rests solely in their ability to realize their mistake and pardon Jesus, yet the protagonists adhere to the original charges found in the first two chapters. Jesus is lead away to die.

With the protagonists' failure to resolve the narrative's conflict and the subsequent death of Jesus, the story begins its return to disorder. The high priests seek out Joseph, the twelve witnesses, Nicodemus, and many others who testified for Jesus during the trial:

But they all hid themselves, and only Nicodemus was seen by them, because he was a ruler of the Jews. And Nicodemus said to them: "How did you enter the synagogue?" The Jews answered him: "How did you enter the synagogue? You are an accomplice of his, and his portion shall be with you in the world to come." Nicodemus said: "Amen, Amen." Likewise also Joseph came forth from his concealment and said to them: "Why are you angry with me because I asked for the body of Jesus? See I have placed it in my new tomb, having wrapped it in clean linen, and I rolled a stone before the door of the cave."

The dialogue between Nicodemus, Joseph, and the Jews is a satellite in the narrative because it offers nothing to the narrative's plot and only serves as example of the character's continued convictions after the crucifixion. However, a narrative kernel follows this scene. The Jews seize Joseph and order that he be imprisoned until after the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 205. [Resseguie](#)

Sabbath. This action leads to further confusion for the protagonist because on the following day, Joseph has miraculously disappeared from his confinement.

To add to the characters' distress following the tragedy's high point, in chapter 14 another kernel is offered in the narrative. Three Rabbis arrive from the Galilee claiming to have seen Jesus teaching at Mt. Mamalich and his subsequent ascension into heaven.

The confusion of the characters is expressed in the scene's subsequent dialogue:

[T]he chief priests and the rulers of the synagogue and the elders assembled in the synagogue and the elders assembled in the synagogue, and shut the gate, and raised a great lamentation, saying: "Why has this sign happened in Israel?" But Annas and Caiaphas said: "Why are you troubled? Why do you weep? Do you not know the disciples gave much money to the guards of the tomb, took away his body, and taught them to say that an angel descended from Heaven and rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb?" But the priests and the elders replied: Let it be that his disciples stole the body. But how did the soul enter again into the body so that Jesus now waits in Galilee?"

In chapter 15, the narrative begins a decline to disorder through Josephus's account of his rescue:

On the day of preparation about the tenth hour you shut me in, and I remained the whole Sabbath. And at midnight as I stood and prayed, the house where you shut me in was raised up by the four corners, and I saw as it were a lightning flash in my eyes. Full of fear, I fell to the ground. And someone took me by the hand and raised me up from the place where I had fallen, and something moist like water flowed from my head to my feet, and the smell of fragrant oil reached my nostrils. And he wiped my face and kissed me and said to me: "Do not fear, Joseph. Open your eyes and see who it is who speaks to you. . . . I am Jesus, whose body you asked for from Pilate, whom you clothed in clean linen, on whose face you placed a cloth, and whom you placed in your new cave, and rolled a great stone to the door of the cave." And I asked him who spoke to me, "Show me the place where I laid you." And he took me and showed me the place where I laid him. . . . And he took me by the hand and placed me in the middle of my house, with the doors shut, and led me to my bed and said to me, "Peace be with you!" Then he kissed me and said to me, "Do not go out of your house for forty days. For see, I go to my brethren in the Galilee."

Presumably Joseph's testimony has an effect on the high priests because the narrative claims they "became as dead men and fell to the ground and fasted until the ninth hour. And Nicodemus and Joseph comforted Annas and Caiaphas and the priests and Levites, saying: 'Get up and stand on your feet, and taste bread and strengthen your souls. For tomorrow is the Sabbath of the Lord.' And they rose up and prayed to God, and ate and drank, and went each to his own house." It is in this chapter that the protagonists are the closest to realizing their mistake, the high point of the U-shaped plot, yet this miraculous testimonial does not change the convictions of the protagonists or the narrative's course. Instead the assembly continues to investigate these recent events and leaves the conflict unresolved.

In the following chapter, the Jews must reconcile Joseph's testimonial, the reports from the three Rabbis, and even an account of Rabbi Symeon's blessing of Jesus offered by a fellow council member. As had been foretold by Nicodemus and the twelve witnesses in chapter 9, when they suggested the assembled Jews should decide the fate of Jesus, the narrative's conclusion returns to the disorder of the high priests who fail to recognize Jesus' innocence of the allegations first brought against him in Pilate's praetorium:

And all the teachers said to all the people of the Lord: "If this is from the Lord, and it is marvelous in your eyes, you shall surely know, O house of Jacob, that it is written: Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. And another passage of scripture teaches: The gods who did not make the Heaven and the earth shall perish." And the priest and the Levites said to one another: "If Jesus is remembered after fifty five years, he will reign forever and create for himself a new people." Then the rulers of the synagogue and the priests and the Levites admonished all Israel: "Cursed is the man who shall worship the work of man's hand, and cursed is the man who shall worship created things alongside the creator." And the people answered: "Amen, amen."

As noted earlier, when we line up the narrative's kernels we see that the Acts of Pilate's central plot is to offer persuasive testimonials to main characters. In this closing scene, the high priests remain unconvinced by the narrative's events and the story ends in a tragedy with the central conflict unresolved.

### **Summary**

Generations of scholars have commented on a trend in early Christian literature seeking to vilify Jews for the trial and death of Jesus. The popularity of this subject even affords the historical figure Pontius Pilate to be exonerated for his role in the crucifixion further to hold the Jews accountable. Jews became the straw figure of Christian rhetoric for vilification and dispute in second, third, and fourth century polemics. The Acts of Pilate is part of this trend. The text perpetuates scenes from the early traditions, three times repeating the condemning passage from the Gospel of Matthew "his blood be on us and our children" and similar scene with the high priests bribing a Roman guard to tell no one of Jesus empty tomb (Matt 28:12-14), and the narrative ends in a tragedy with the main characters unconvinced by the overwhelming testimonials offered from the various characters.

### Section 3: Characters and Evaluative Point of View

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Scholars agree that the canonical accounts are late first and early second century embellishments of oral traditions, which were circulated and expanded among various groups during Christianity's formative years. Averil Cameron argues that readers of these written accounts in the late second, third, fourth, and fifth centuries deeply desired to connect these traditions with a contemporary world.<sup>46</sup> These desires spurred new embellishments often attributed to figures immortalized in those canonical accounts. He offers this on the surge of new texts in late antiquity:

An exotic growth of story steadily came to overlay the historical record. Unsatisfactory gaps in the Gospels were filled in by an abundant mass of apocryphal detail: the infancy of the virgin and her Dormition and Assumption into heaven, Christ's descent into Hades, the journeying of the apostles and their contests with pagan disputes like Simon Magus, or the exploits of Thecla, the virgin follower of St. Paul—as a vivid and real a model as any real-life person for late antique Christian women like Macrine, the sister of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. . . . The past was open to the poetic and the religious imagination.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, the Acts of Pilate is suggestive of this trend in its elaboration of figures from early traditions, such as Nicodemus, Joseph, Pilate, Annas, Caiaphas, and the Jewish assembly, and is also suggestive of a story written to “overlay the historical record” and fill in “gaps in the Gospels.” The following section will consider how characters in the narrative have been elaborated in the Acts of Pilate and the influence of these reworked characters on story's central conflict.

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<sup>46</sup> Averil Cameron, “Remaking the Past,” Pages 1-20 in *Interpreting Late Antiquity: Essays on the Postclassical World* (edited by G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown & Oleg Graber; Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7. [Averil Cameron](#)

## **Annas, Caiaphas, and the Jews**

As suggested in the previous section, the narrative's plot is to convince the protagonist of Jesus' innocence of the charges brought against him. The high priests in the canonical accounts are traditionally depicted as the antagonist to the protagonist Jesus; however, in the Acts of Pilate, the assembly of Jews, which in chapter 1 is comprised of "Annas, Caiaphas, Semes, Dathaes and Gamaliel, Judas, Levi, and Nephthalim, Alexander and Jairus, and the rest of the Jews" are the narrative's corporate protagonist. As a collective group, they gather together to bring charges against Jesus, they condemn him to death, they hear the testimonials of various witnesses after his death, and this collective ultimately fails to recognize their mistake by the narrative's conclusion. Sometimes the collective speaks through one or two characters, as is exemplified in chapter 2 with the response from Annas and Caiaphas to Pilate's questions, "we, the whole multitude, cry out that he was born of fornication and is a sorcerer, and claims to be the son of God and a king," and sometimes this collective responds as a unified group, as exemplified in chapter 4 when the crowd outside the praetorium responds to Pilate: "For this purpose has the whole multitude of us come, that he should die."<sup>48</sup>

The protagonist's evaluative point of view refers to the norms, values, and general worldview that govern the way a character views the world and offers, for the reader, a

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<sup>48</sup> Malcolm Lowe has suggested that the Acts of Pilate contains two ways of referring to the assembly of Jews. He notes that the term Ἰουδαῖοι occurs over eight times in the first part of the narrative but is not used at all in the second half of the text. While such formulas as "the elders and chief priests and Levites" and ἱεραρχία is the preferred means of referring to the high priests in the second half of the narrative. Lowe further argues that this distinction may indicate that this text was written at two different times by two different authors. See Malcolm Lowe, "Ioudaioi of the Apocrypha: A Fresh Approach to the Gospel of James, Pseudo-Thomas, Peter, and Nicodemus," in *NT 23* (1981), 56-90.

commentary on the events in the narrative.<sup>49</sup> This perspective establishes the character's orientation toward truth and untruth.<sup>50</sup> For example in chapter 2, the high priests' evaluative point of view is demonstrated when they first dismiss the testimonials of the twelve devout men, because they believe that these men are not ethnic Jews but are "children of Greeks" and thus not credible witnesses. The twelve men respond, "We are not proselytes, but are children of Jews." The stated ethnicity of these men causes the main characters to reevaluate their opposition against these witnesses: "These twelve men who say that he was not born of fornication are believed." However, the fact that these men are Jews does not persuade the main characters to change their original complaint and further offers the protagonist a chance to reaffirm their position that the majority of ethnic Jews still stand behind the original charges that "we, the whole multitude, cry out that he was born of fornication and is a sorcerer, and claims to be the son of God and a king, and we are not believed" (2). The other characters in the narrative will be evaluated on the credibility of their testimonials as each figure seeks to persuade the high priests and change the tragedy's course.

### **Nicodemus: Figure and Jewish Authority**

Nicodemus in the narrative is a reworking of the Nicodemus mentioned in the Gospel of John, who now in the Acts of Pilate represents Jewish authority willing to

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 53. Although "evaluative point of view" is the preferred term here, other scholars have argued similar perspectives under the titles: "Subjective," "Ideological," and "Conceptual" point of view, or "Standards of Judgment." See James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 169.

<sup>50</sup> Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 54. [Mark Allan Powell](#)



publicly defend his discipleship. In the Gospel of John, a Pharisee named Nicodemus is found in three scenes: he comes to Jesus at night and acknowledges that Jesus must be sent as a teacher from God (Jn 3:2), later he defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Jn 7:50-52), and finally, with Joseph of Arimathaea, he prepares the body of Jesus for burial (Jn 19:39). In his first appearance, Nicodemus questions Jesus about his teachings of rebirth. Jesus responds, “You must be born from above” (Jn 3:7). Nicodemus misunderstands this answer and seeks further explanation. Jesus responds a second time with a criticism of the character, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (Jn 3:10). By verse 11, Nicodemus seems to disappear from the discourse and the narrative turns to sermon. The author of John now speaks through Jesus to clarify the identity of Jesus:

Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from the heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (Jn 3:11-14)

Opinions on the Nicodemus in the Gospel of John are diverse. Some have argued that this character represents an antagonistic group outside the Johannine community while others have argued that the figure is suggestive of the diverse opinions within the immediate community. Craig Keener makes the case that Nicodemus may represent a Jewish community, either as a Pharisee or even a Jewish follower of Jesus, who is important enough as a historical figure or symbolic character to mention by name.<sup>51</sup> He argues that Jesus first addresses Nicodemus as “teacher of Israel” (Jn 3:10) and then in

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<sup>51</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. (2 vols.; Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003), 1:536.

the next verse as one who does “not receive our testimony” (Jn 3:11) may be the author’s rebuke of Jews who scrutinize the teachings of Jesus.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Jerome Neyrey suggests that the “affinities between the prologue and chapter iii suggest that our dialogue reflects a period in the life of the community before the total hostility set in between synagogue and church. High level Christology is already the *martyria* of this group, but it is unintelligible to some and unacceptable to others.”<sup>53</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, scholars have argued that Nicodemus represents an internal group struggle. For example, Wayne A. Meeks makes the case that Nicodemus offers the gospel’s reader a personification of Jews who have come to the light (3:19-21), but do not perceive the light clearly and thus are unable to make the decisive step from darkness.<sup>54</sup> He suggests that this narrative seeks to make sense of the Johannine group’s historical development, and incorporates symbols of light and dark to explain and influence the reaction of community members.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Winsome Munro sees a similarity between the characterization of Nicodemus and the characterization of the Samaritan woman in the following scene, and argues that both characters are symbolic representations of diverse opinions within the Johannine community.<sup>56</sup>

Given the polarity of these arguments and the vagueness of this character’s role in the narrative, Jouette M. Bassler’s argument seems the most convincing and may offer insight into the Nicodemus found in the Acts of Pilate. She makes the case that the gospel

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1:558-9. Keener

<sup>53</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, “John III,” *NT* 23 (1981): 126. Neyrey

<sup>54</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 54.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 49-50. Meeks

<sup>56</sup> Winsome Munro, “The Pharisee and the Samaritan in John: Polar or Parallel?” *CBQ* 57 (1995): 711.

never offers a definitive scene between Jesus and Nicodemus and thus the figure is ambiguous to the reader.<sup>57</sup> She proposes that he remains forever a character that has broken with the Jews in the fourth gospel yet is not depicted on par with the disciples. Bassler suggests that, “there is in fact no final word on this figure in this Gospel. This unsettling conclusion has been largely avoided by the interpreters of the Gospel, who tend to force Nicodemus into either the positive mold of true faith or the negative one of sign faith.”<sup>58</sup> She argues that Nicodemus is a “marginal” character, one that is neither an outsider to the Jesus group nor a publicly confessing insider.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, she notes that the figure of Nicodemus and his function in the narrative creates a cognitive gap, which leaves the reader to wonder if the leader of the Jews, who came during the night, ever truly understood the teachings of Jesus and thus became a disciple.

In the Acts of Pilate, the reworked Nicodemus consistently demonstrates his convictions as a follower of Jesus both during the trial and after the crucifixion as mediator between Joseph, the three Rabbis from the Galilee, and the protagonists. The character is described as a leader of the Jews and first appears in the Acts of Pilate’s chapter 5 to offer an account of a prior meeting with the Jewish council in which he had pleaded that the charges against Jesus be dropped. In that meeting, Nicodemus offered the first of two Biblical testimonies comparing Jesus to prophets from Hebrew traditions. In this first testimony, he compares Jesus to Moses: “For Moses also . . . did many signs which God commanded him to do.” His testimony causes an angry reaction from the Jews, who accuse him of being a disciple of Jesus and subsequently threaten that he will

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<sup>57</sup> Jouette M. Bassler, “Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 108 (1989): 643.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 644. Bassler

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 646. Bassler

“receive his truth and his portion.” Nicodemus demonstrates this convictions to the reader in his response, “Amen, may it be as you have said.”

In chapter 12 he appears again after the crucifixion as the Jews seek out all who testified on Jesus’ behalf during the trial. He escapes imprisonment, presumably because he is a leader of the Jews as stated above, and offers the second comparison, this time between Jesus and Elijah: “Just as the holy Scriptures tell us that Elijah also was taken up into Heaven.” Both statements by Nicodemus use Hebrew scripture to compare the nature of Jesus to that of other prophets and serves as a proof text against the high priests for their actions.<sup>60</sup> Although unpersuasive in chapter 5, in the beginning of chapter 15 he manages to convince the Jewish assembly to search for Jesus after hearing accounts of the three men from the Galilee, and by the chapter’s conclusion the figure serves as a mediator between the Jewish assembly and Joseph (15).

### **Pilate: Outsider and Commentator**

As noted in the previous section, scholars have commented on the literary trend exonerating Pilate to further vilify Jews for the death of Jesus beginning in early passion accounts. This trend is also evident in the Acts of Pilate. In the narrative, the governor disassociates himself from the death of Jesus: “I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man; see to it yourselves . . . .Do not act thus; for nothing of which you have

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<sup>60</sup> It is my suspicion that the Acts of Pilate suggests a low Christology: Nicodemus likens Jesus to Moses and Elijah, the testimony of the twelve devout men who claim that Jesus was not born out of fornication but the betrothal of Joseph and Mary, and finally although the high priests allege that Jesus claims to be the Son of God, in this text Jesus never makes this claim nor do those who are disciples, or become disciples. For example, consider the phrase ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος δίκαιος ἦν as suggested in the testimony of the centurion in chapter 11 and again by Joseph in his accusation against the Jews οὐ καλῶς ἐπράξατε κατὰ τοῦ δικαίου in chapter 12.

accused him deserves death” (9) and after the crucifixion, “the governor and his wife heard, they were greatly grieved, and they neither ate nor drank that day” (11).

As a Roman governor, he must decide between keeping the peace and appeasing the demands of the high priests. G. W. H. Lampe argues that the depiction of Pilate in the Acts of Pilate exemplifies that of a Roman official in a contemporary Christian empire.<sup>61</sup> He is described in chapter 12 as one who is “both uncircumcised in the flesh” (ὁ ἀκρόβυστος τῇ σαρκί) and “circumcised in the heart” (περιτεμνόμενος τῇ καρδίᾳ), however the actions of the character remind the reader that Pilate is still a foreigner, worships foreign gods, and is seemingly an outsider to Jewish affairs. In the first chapter, the Jews charge that Jesus does evil deeds when he heals on the Sabbath. Pilate suggests this is not by evil deeds but rather the miracles of “the god Asclepius,” he offers his innocence of the crucifixion twice to the sun (3, 9), and he suggests that Jesus’ actions are an issue of religious blasphemy and should be judged in the synagogue and not by a Roman court. The character goes on to condemn the actions of the assembly:

Your nation is always seditious and in rebellion against your benefactors . . . As I have heard, your God brought you out of Egypt out of hard slavery, and led you safe through the sea as if it had been dry land, and in the wilderness nourished you and gave you manna and quails, and gave you water to drink from a rock, and gave you the law. And despite all this you provoke the anger of your God: you wanted a molten calf and angered your God, and he wished to destroy you; and Moses made supplication for you, and you were not put to death. (Acts Pil. 9)

Furthermore, three times he pleads with the assembly of Jews outside his praetorian to resend the charges against Jesus but each time the crowd remains obstinate in their demands. Either as a predecessor to a later Christian empire, as suggested by Lampe, or as a foreign ruler, Pilate’s apprehension in sentencing Jesus to death and his repeated

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<sup>61</sup> Lampe, “The Trial of Jesus,” 178. [Lampe](#)

appeals are unheeded by the protagonist. He reluctantly sentences Jesus to death and subsequently disappears from the narrative.

### **Joseph of Arimathaea: Insider and Commentator**

Just as Pilate's character serves as an outsider's critique of the Jews, Joseph of Arimathaea's character has been greatly expanded from the canonical accounts and now offers an insider Jewish commentary against the actions of the council. He is a flat character, because his actions are consistent and predictable with those of a disciple of Jesus, and he is described in the narrative as "a member of the council, from the town of Arimathaea, who also was waiting for the kingdom of God" (11).<sup>62</sup>

Similar to Pilate's criticism of the Jews, Joseph also functions in the narrative as a commentator. In chapter 12, the assembly of Jews seizes him for his aid in the burial of Jesus. The high priests threaten: "Know that the hour forbids us to do anything against you, because the Sabbath dawns. But know also that you will not even be counted worthy of burial, but we shall give your flesh to the birds of the heaven" (12). Joseph compares the high priests' speech to that of the Philistines who opposed David: "This word is like that of the boastful Goliath who insulted the living God and the holy David." Similar to Pilate's comparison of the Jewish council's actions and the Exodus account, Joseph's speech in chapter 12 offers a parallel for the reader between those who have opposed God's will in the past and those who continue to persecute the disciples in the present narrative.

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<sup>62</sup> Edward Morgan Foster, *Aspects of a Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1927), 103-18.

Although this character is unpersuasive when the assembly first confronted him, the protagonists reconsiders the validity of this character when he is summoned to Jerusalem in chapter 15 and questioned about his disappearance:

And Joseph saddled his she-ass and went with the men, and they came to the holy city Jerusalem. And all the people met Joseph and cried: "Peace be to your entering in!" And he said to all the people: "Peace be with you!" And all kissed him, and prayed with Joseph, and were beside themselves with joy at seeing him.

Although at Nicodemus's house Joseph sits between Annas and Caiaphas, "no one dared to speak to him." Finally they adjure Joseph: "Give glory to the God of Israel and make confession to him." Although dismissive of Joseph's testimony in chapter 12, after hearing the account of his miraculous rescue and safe return to Arimathaea, the protagonists "became as dead men and fell to the ground" suggesting this character's testimony is believed in light of his miraculous disappearance in chapter 12. Yet the crowd's response at seeing Joseph's return to Jerusalem and his subsequent testimony is not enough to persuade the main character who remains unmoved in their opposition against Jesus.

## **Jesus**

Although the theological implications of his death and resurrection are implied in this passion narrative, the role of Jesus is a lessened character from that found in the canonical accounts. The character first appears in chapter 1 as he is summoned to Pilate's praetorium to defend himself against the following allegations: that he is a sorcerer, he pollutes on the Sabbath, and makes false claims of being the Son of God. During the trial, Jesus offers little in his defense except to suggest to Pilate that the prophets and Moses

have foretold his death in chapter 4, and in chapter 10 he offers up a prayer for those who have brought about his death. The nature of the character is illuminated in two post-crucifixion scenes. In chapter 13, a Roman guard tells the Jews that he has witnessed an angel descend from heaven and roll the stone away before Jesus' tomb. The Jews ask him at what hours this occurred. The guard responds that the miracle happened at midnight. Later when the high priests question Joseph of Arimathea about his disappearance, he tells the high priests that he remained in confinement the whole Sabbath and at midnight Jesus appeared to him. Fearing this was a phantom, Joseph "said the ten commandments. And he [Jesus] said them with me" because "a phantom immediately flees if it meets anyone and hears the commandments" (15). Jesus' miracles function in the narrative to refute the allegation of the high priests in chapter 1 of performing miracles on the Sabbath because he appeared to Joseph after sunset and thus after the Sabbath. Furthermore, as suggested in the testimony of Joseph, Jesus is neither a nefarious sorcerer nor a phantom because the Ten Commandments did not repel him. Joseph's testimony depicts Jesus as a pious Jew who does not perform miracles on the Sabbath and is versed in Torah.

### **Twelve Devout Men**

Other figures in the Acts of Pilate include the twelve witnesses who are stock characters, or characters that seemingly demonstrate a single trait and offer a perfunctory role in the story.<sup>63</sup> Although their individual names are offered in chapter 2, these characters function in the narrative as a corporate character by speaking with one voice to

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<sup>63</sup> Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1981), 185.



refute the high priests' charges against Jesus, remind readers of the disciples' Jewish ethnicity, and to establish the narrative's primary conflict. The first charge offered by the Jewish council is that Jesus was born from fornication (ἐκ πορνείας). The narrative dismisses this allegation when devout men from among the Jews (εὐλαβεῖς ἐκ τῶν λουδαίων) come forward and declare, "We deny that he came of fornication, for we know that Joseph was betrothed to Mary, and he was not born of fornication" (2). Even Pilate, the foreign commentator, repeats this testimony to the Jewish assembly, "Your statement is not true; for there was a betrothal, as your fellow countrymen say" (2).<sup>64</sup>

In response to the disciple's testimony, the high priests accuse the twelve witnesses of being "proselytes" (προσήλυτοι). Pilate asked what this term means and the Jews respond: "They were born children of Greeks, and now have become Jews," (2). Shaye J. D. Cohen notes that the word προσήλυτοι is often used among ancient sources in reference to gentiles who have converted to Judaism, or practice some aspects of

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<sup>64</sup> This dispute over the tradition of Jesus' birth is not unique to the Acts of Pilate, and was a point of contention among early Christian communities. The low Christology of late second and early third century writer Theodotus advocated the view that Jesus was the product of a natural union between Joseph and Mary. Epiphanius also documents a Christian sect active in the fourth century, whom he calls the Nazoreans. He notes, "But these sectarians whom I am now sketching disregarded the name of Jesus and did not call themselves Jessaeans, keep the name of Jews, or term themselves Christians[] but 'Nazoreans', from the place name, 'Nazareth', if you please! However they are simply complete Jews" (Pan. 7.1). He further notes a peculiarity about their traditions concerning the life and death of Jesus, "They have the Gospel according to Matthew in its entirety in Hebrew. For it is clear that they still preserve this, in the Hebrew alphabet, as it was originally written. But I do not know if they have removed just the genealogies and Abraham to Christ" (Pan. 9.4). Finally a manuscript discovered in the library of St. Catherine's monastery is a fifth century version of the Gospel of Matthew, also attributes the birth of Jesus to the "betrothal" of Joseph to Mary (see Bart D. Ehrman's *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effects of Early Christology Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, 1993). These early testimonials attest to the diversity of Christian traditions, as late as the fifth century, and are suggestive of a community whose Christology would mirror that found in the Acts of Pilate.

Jewish ritual.<sup>65</sup> The narrative dismisses this allegation against these characters through the following testimony, “We are not proselytes, but are children of Jews (τέκνα Ἰουδαίων ἐσμὲν) and speak the truth; for we were present at the betrothal of Joseph and Mary” (2). The ethnic identity of these twelve men affords the right to testify before the assembly but does not make these witnesses trustworthy characters to the protagonists.

In the witnesses’ final scene, they establish the narrative’s central conflict and the high point of the inverted U-shaped tragedy. In chapter 9, Pilate asks the twelve men and Nicodemus what should be the fate of Jesus, “What shall I do? The people are becoming rebellious.’ They answered him, ‘We do not know. Let them see to it.’ The twelve devout men who defended Jesus against the allegation of the Jewish council now leave it to that same assembly to decide his fate.

### **Phinees, Adas, and Angaeus**

In chapter 14, three pilgrims from the Galilee are introduced into the narrative. They offer an account of having seen Jesus teaching as Mount Mamilch on their way to Jerusalem. G. C. O’Cealligh argues that this scene is absolutely essential for the writer’s purpose.<sup>66</sup> He makes the case that the Acts of Pilate’s author sought to create a document on par with the Gospel accounts while supplementing earlier resurrection accounts with an authoritative witness to the ascension.<sup>67</sup> Felix Scheiweiler, however, reaches a different conclusion from this scene and argues that it was created by the author to remove any danger of the assembly further persecuting Jesus’ disciples:

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<sup>65</sup> Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HThR* 82:1 (1982): 13-54.

<sup>66</sup> O’Cealligh, “Dating the Commentaries,” 45.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*: 45. O’Cealligh

At the end of the fifteenth chapter Jesus advises Joseph of Arimathaea, whom he has delivered from the prison into which the Jews had thrown him to remain for forty days in hiding in his house in Arimathaea. . . . Joseph is naturally to remain in hiding until the danger is past. Here there is no thought of the possibility that the Jews might seek him in his house in Arimathaea. Thus he is in danger only if he shows himself in Jerusalem, and this danger is removed at the moment when the three Galileans bring to the city the news of the ascension; for the news makes the Jews so despondent that they dare no longer proceed against the adherents of Jesus.<sup>68</sup>

Yet these characters are granted a greater authority in the narrative than Scheiweiler allows. In light of the narrative's plot, the author has included these three characters as further proof of authoritative Jews who can testify to the validity of previous claims about Jesus. However, as was witnessed with protagonist's reaction to Joseph's testimony, the high protagonists are quick to dismiss their report. It is only after Nicodemus testifies on their behalf that they "fear God and are men of substance . . . hate covetousness and are men of peace" and in light of Joseph's account (15), that the high priest are persuaded to reconsider their testimonials. In chapter 16, the high priests separate the men and compare their stories. When their accounts are reviewed, the members of the council conclude: "At the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every matter be established."<sup>69</sup> However, by the narrative's conclusion the protagonists remain inflexible in their prior convictions.

### **Other Witnesses**

A number of other stock characters appear in the narrative to fill a similar function as that of the twelve devout men. These characters offer further testimony of

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<sup>68</sup> F. Scheiweiler, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 520.

<sup>69</sup> Author is presumably citing the Book of Deuteronomy 19:15

Jesus' miracles and ascension. During the trial, a number of "Jews hasten forward" (6) and they, along with a woman named Bernice (7), all offer testimonials of the miracles performed by Jesus. The protagonists do not comment on the truthfulness of these testimonials as they had with the twelve witnesses in chapter 2, but do dismiss Bernice's testimony because of a law "not to permit a woman to give testimony" (7). Nothing more is offered about these characters, which merely seem to offer further testimonials.

### **Levi**

In chapter 15, Levi who was listed in chapter 1 among the original group present in Pilate's praetorium, offers that he knows the parents of Jesus and that they fear God, do not withhold their prayers, and pay tithes three times a year. He goes on to include a story of his teacher, Rabbi Symeon, who blessed the infant Jesus.<sup>70</sup> The council request that Levi's father come to the assembly to be questioned about his son's statements.

And when they questioned him, he said to them: "Why did you not believe my son? The blessed and righteous Symeon taught him the law." The council said: "Rabbi Levi, is the word true which you have spoken?" He answered: "It is true."

However in the narrative's final chapter, again Annas and Caiaphas become the mouthpiece for the assembly and review all the testimonials they have heard:

Our honorable father Joseph asked for his body; and he says, he rose again. And the three teachers declare: We saw him taken up into Heaven. And Rabbi Levi spoke and testified to the words of Rabbi Symeon: Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against.

Yet by the narrative's conclusion the narrative's protagonists remain unpersuaded. Having considered the various testimonials, the high priests gather together and mock Jesus and his disciples: "If Jesus is remembered after fifty years, he will reign forever and

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<sup>70</sup> This is presumably the same account offered in Luke 2:28-35.

create for himself a new people . . . Cursed is the man who shall worship the work of man's hand, and cursed is the man who shall worship created things alongside the creator." This final judgment from these unwavering protagonists seals the narrative's tragic conclusion.

## **Summary**

The Acts of Pilate's author has crafted this new story around figures from other Christian traditions. These characters function in the narrative to offer multiple testimonials seeking to persuade the protagonist. Nicodemus expresses Jewish authority that is sympathetic to the disciples, who offers Biblical testimonies comparing Jesus to the prophets. Pilate, the Roman governor and an outsider to Jewish affairs, sees the crucifixion of Jesus as an example of Israel's tradition of rebelling against God's will. Joseph of Arimathaea compares the Jewish council to the Philistines who challenged David, offers the testimony of someone who has witnessed a miracle, and offers evidence to refute the allegations of the high priest. Three teachers from the Galilee offer three testimonials of having seen Jesus resurrected and ascended into heaven. Even Levi, a member of the very council seeking Jesus' death, and his father confirm the story of Rabbi Symeon's blessing of Jesus and Mary. Yet by the narrative's conclusion, the protagonists' evaluative point of view rejects these testimonials. The high priests are cast in this adaptation of earlier traditions as expressions of an Israel "seditious and in rebellion" against its benefactor in the past and insulting "the living God" in the present narrative. By the narrative's conclusion, the author has confronted the protagonist with very strong evidence that they cannot refute but also cannot accept.

#### Section 4: Conclusion

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As noted in the introduction, an exact date of composition for the Acts of Pilate is difficult to determine. Although numerous ancient witnesses refer to a text by a similar title between the second and early fourth century, none of these align with the Acts of Pilate under consideration here. Similarly, modern scholars have perpetuated the confusion surrounding this text by seeking to date the Acts of Pilate from these very vague references. However, within the Acts of Pilate there are clues to support a relative late fourth or early fifth century date. In the narrative's Prologue, the author suggests that this text was translated sometime during Flavius Valentinian's ninth indiction (440 to 441). Also, while numerous ancient witnesses refer to a text by the title Acts of Pilate as early as the second century, it is Epiphanius's attack on a heretical group, written sometime during the course of his life between 310 and 403 CE, in which we get a brief description of a text being used by the Quartodecimans matching our Acts of Pilate. These clues suggest that some form of this text was in circulation as early as the late fourth century.

Another clue to support this date comes from the social climate of the fourth century. Jacob Neusner notes that prior to the fourth century, Jewish literature such as the *Mishnah* does not seem interested in the same issues prevalent among Christian circles, such as creeds and monasticism. He argues that a lack of overlapping issues indicates that the two groups were not engaging the same theological questions and thus had limited if any direct interaction.<sup>71</sup> Instead, Neusner argues that it is the political revolution of Constantine's conversion and eventually Christianity becoming the official religion, that

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<sup>71</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine* (Chicago; University Press, 1987), 13.

orthodox Christianity began to differentiate itself from the Jews.<sup>72</sup> Thus, Neusner concludes that it is the fourth century in which Christian theologians and Judaic sages began sparring on issues of doctrine, theology, and the symbolism of Israel on a political stage.<sup>73</sup> This then might explain the impetus behind a new narrative seeking to condemn Jews. This incident, Neusner adds, is the divide between Christianity and Judaism that culminates in the Jewish government losing state authority in 429 CE, expulsion of the Jews from Palestine in the seventh century, and a complete separation between Jews and Christians.

Neusner's observation further supports a relative date for the Acts of Pilate. As stated before, this narrative is a reworking of earlier sources, such as the synoptic traditions and the Gospel of John. Yet the text, in its dependence on other traditions surrounding the life and death of Jesus, is unique among other known texts seeking to slander Jews because it offers the high priests, those held accountable for the crucifixion of Jesus, as the story's protagonist. The author of the Acts of Pilate places the narrative's resolution in the hands of those who have the ability to realize their mistakes and repent; however, this protagonist in unwavering conviction still sentences Jesus to death and subsequently seeks the same for his followers. Furthermore, the plot focuses on events and testimonials offered by Jewish characters of indisputable integrity seeking to convince this protagonist of Jesus' miracles and ascension, and to reverse the narrative's tragic path. Yet these reliable characters are not enough to resolve the narrative's conflict. By the story's conclusion, the protagonists cannot dispute these testimonials, yet they remain unmoved in their convictions.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 1. Neusner

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 2. Neusner

In Malcolm Lowe's article "*Ioudaioi* of the Apocrypha: A Fresh Approach to the Gospels of James, Pseudo-Thomas, Peter, and Nicodemus," the author argues that most apocrypha can be dated by differentiating between the text's use of terms like Ἰσραήλ and Ἰουδαῖοι for ethnic Jews.<sup>74</sup> Ἰσραήλ, Lowe argues, is the preferred term used by inhabitants of Palestine and is common among the earliest strands of Christian legends.<sup>75</sup> However, as some of the apocrypha spread and were recopied, Lowe argues that the term Ἰουδαῖοι became popular as a means of increasing Christian animosity against ethnic Jews.<sup>76</sup> In his examination of the Acts of Pilate, Lowe notes that the text uses both Ἰσραήλ and Ἰουδαῖοι, and argues that this text is the product of two compositional phases. He concludes:

Now, in the first part not only are Jesus' accusers οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, but also his numerous defenders are called Ἰουδαῖοι (AP ii.4; ii.5; v.1; vi.1-2). The term Ἰουδαῖος occurs over eighty times, but Ἰσραήλ not at all. In the second part, on the other hand, the accusers are referred to not only by such formulas as "the elders and chief priests and Levites" (as in the Synoptics); the term Ἰουδαῖος occurs not at all, but Ἰσραήλ nearly twenty times.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, Lowe argues that the first thirteen chapters are the product of a later generation and were written to offer a harmonized version of the synoptic accounts while the last third of the narrative, the older of the two sections, was composed to show "that even the leaders of the Jewish people (and not just a minority of Ἰουδαῖοι) were ultimately able to realize their error and repent."<sup>78</sup> Yet Lowe's argument neglects the significance of the author's choice in protagonist and the narrative's plot. In light of the

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<sup>74</sup> Lowe, "*Ioudaioi* of the Apocrypha," 56-58.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 58. [Malcolm Lowe](#)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 59. [Malcolm Lowe](#)

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 87. [Malcolm Lowe](#)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 88. [Malcolm Lowe](#)



previous sections, we might conclude that the author of the Acts of Pilate was interested in further vilifying the Jews from the trial and death of Jesus, and hoped to offer a rhetorical tool to illustrate why these figures from the earlier traditions were wrong, especially in light of the indisputable testimonials, in not recognizing Jesus.

Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that beginning sometime in the second century Church fathers fabricated an artificial and fixed stereotype for the Jews as an obstinate people who were rejected by God and continuing to adhere to inferior Mosaic Laws.<sup>79</sup> The perpetuation of this stigma from the second century up to the time of Augustine necessitates the question: Was there an authoritative voice for all Christianity by the second century and were there no longer any ethnic Jews among the various and diverse Christian congregations at this time? This subject is directly linked to academic debates surrounding Christianity's departure from Jewish identity and praxis. A difficulty with this larger debate, is that it often assumes all Christianity was one harmonious body and that all who could claim to be "Christian" no longer identified with any aspect of Judaism and rejected Jewish forms of worship, or that Christian rhetoric against ethnic Jews was universal among all congregations.

We should not assume a unified religious observance among all Christians in the fourth century nor believe that all Christian congregations relinquished Jewish praxis. For example in his *Against the Jews*, John Chrysostom rebukes Christians among his congregation who still abide by Jewish law: "There was a time when the law was useful and necessary, but now it has ceased and is fruitless. If you take it on yourself to be

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<sup>79</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The *Adversus Judaeos* Tradition in the Church Fathers: The Exegesis of Christian Anti-Judaism," in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation* (ed. Jeremy Cohen; New York: New York University Press, 1991), 176

circumcised now, when the time is no longer right, it makes the gift of God useless” (2.1.6). He continues against Christians who also recognize the Jewish fast: “Do you fast with the Jews? Then take off your shoes with the Jews, and walk barefoot in the marketplace and share with them in their indecency and laughter . . . you are only half a Christian” (1.4.6). However, John Chrysostom’s sentiments do not reflect the practices of all contemporary Christians.

In the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, a distinctly different model of Christian praxis is followed. Also composed sometime between the third and fourth century, this text advocates Christians continue to abide by Jewish Law. In this narrative, the main character Peter states, “His friendship is secured by living well, and by obeying His will; which is the law of all that live” (1.26); and later in the text the protagonist rebukes Simon, “To those who do not read the law according to the tradition of Moses, my speech appears to be contrary to it; but I will show you how it is not contradictory” (3.30). In this narrative, Peter indicates that the only point of disagreement between the Christians and Jews is over the issue of Jesus being the Jewish messiah (1.50). This dialogue from the *Recognitions* and Chrysostom’s heated polemics against members of his congregation who continue to recognize Jewish festivals certainly suggest that Christianity was still very diverse with regards to Christian praxis.

Similarly, the Acts of Pilate vilifies its Jewish protagonist, who continually rejects the various indisputable testimonials, and the multitude of Jews outside Pilate’s praetorium, who condemn Jesus to death, yet the narrative also contains a large number of Jews who support Jesus. As noted in an earlier section, the character Nicodemus is recognized as a leader of the Jews and represents Jewish authority willing to publicly

defend his discipleship. Likewise the reworked Joseph of Arimathea is the voice of a Jewish follower who compares the assembly's persecution of Christians to that of the Philistines, who opposed the Israelites. Similarly, the narrative includes three Rabbis described as teachers who "fear God and are men of substance . . . hate covetousness and are men of peace" who also offer credible testimonials. And even Levi, a member of the same council seeking Jesus' death, by the narrative's conclusion reminds the protagonist that even Rabbi Symeon had bestowed a blessing upon Jesus. These characters are models of Jewish praxis, yet each one demonstrates that they are willing to publicly defend their discipleship.

In John Chrysostom's sermons, we find examples of a congregation divided over Jewish praxis. Similarly, in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* we find examples that there are Christians who continue to follow Torah. Likewise, the Acts of Pilate's plot and choice of protagonists suggest that this text may have been composed as a rhetorical tool to further vilify those who could not dispute the nature of Jesus, and subsequently did not repent for his death. At the same time, this narrative contains characters that are models of Jewish praxis and loyal followers of Jesus. In choosing a protagonist who remains obstinate in their charges against Jesus, this text demonstrates a trend popular in late first, second, third, and fourth century literature which sought to vilify Jews for the trial and death of Jesus. However, by including testimonials from reliable witnesses who are themselves Jews, the text places the blame on those responsible for the crucifixion in the past and against those who continue to reject Jesus in the present.

## **Summary**

The Acts of Pilate, preserved today in two Greek versions, Latin, Coptic, Armenian, and Old Slavic, is regarded as one of the most popular and widely circulated apocrypha from late antiquity and medieval literature. Yet interest in this text has waned in recent years. Although this text has been lumped with other passion narratives, which sought to vilify Jews for the trial and death of Jesus, this text is distinctive because it offers the very high priests as the narrative's protagonist, recasting this corporate character as the actor who has complete control over the life of Jesus. Furthermore, this text is distinctive because although it condemns Jews for the death of Jesus, it offers insight into an audience who may have been receptive to this narrative as a synthesis of earlier traditions or as a rhetorical tool. If the preceding investigation demonstrates anything it is that much research is still needed to offer a more precise date and inspiration behind this narrative's composition, and calls for a renewed dialogue among scholars to examine non-canonical texts like the Acts of Pilate in the hopes of better understanding the history of early Christianity.

## Appendix A: Satellites and Kernels

**K:** Narrative Kernels

**S:** Narrative Satellites

***Superscript:*** Actions or scenes that are repeated

### Chapter 1

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**K<sup>1</sup>:** Chief priest and scribes present charges against Jesus.

**S:** Standards with images on the emperor all bow to Jesus.

### Chapter 2

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**S:** Pilate's wife warns him to have nothing to do with this man.

**K<sup>1</sup>:** The elders offer more charges against Jesus.

**S<sup>1</sup>:** Twelve witnesses offer testimony on Jesus' behalf.

**S<sup>2</sup>:** Jews call the witnesses proselytes.

**S:** Pilate further questions the twelve witnesses.

### Chapter 3

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**S:** Pilate declares that he finds no fault with this man.

**S:** Pilate then questions Jesus again.

### Chapter 4

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**S:** Pilate again declares Jesus' innocence.

### Chapter 5

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**S<sup>1</sup>:** Nicodemus testifies.

**S<sup>2</sup>:** The Jews dismiss Nicodemus's testimony because he is a disciple of Jesus.

### Chapters 6,7,8

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**S<sup>1</sup>:** More witnesses testify.

### Chapter 9

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**K:** Witnesses suggests crowd decides Jesus' fate.

**K:** Crowd calls for Jesus' death and taunt Pilate.

**S:** Crowd chooses Barabbas.

**S:** Pilate reminds crowd of Jewish history

**S:** The Jews respond that Jesus was the cause of the deaths of children in Bethlehem.

**K:** Pilate condemns Jesus to death.

### Chapter 10

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**S:** Jesus is lead out with two malefactors to die

### Chapter 11

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**K:** Jesus dies on the Cross

**S:** Pilate and his wife repent for their hand in this event.  
**K:** Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus

## Chapter 12

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**K:** The elders and chief priest seek witnesses.  
**K:** Jews imprison Joseph  
**K:** On the first day of the week the Jews assemble to judge Joseph but he has disappeared from his imprisonment.

## Chapter 13

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**S:** Roman centurion informs the elders that Jesus too has disappeared from his tomb.  
**S:** They do not believe the guard but offer him money to not tell anyone of this incident.

## Chapter 14

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**K:** A priest, a teacher, and a Levite come to Jerusalem from Galilee and claim to have seen the risen Jesus teaching at Mammotha and then ascend into heaven.  
**S:** The elders feed the men and give them money and then ordered them to return to Galilee.

## Chapter 15

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**K:** Nicodemus testifies to the authority of the three men from the Galilee.  
**S:** The high priests appoint messenger to search the country for Jesus.  
**S:** Joseph is found in Arimathea.  
**S:** The elders summon Joseph.  
**K:** Joseph's triumphal return to Jerusalem.

## Chapter 16

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**K:** Elders hear of Joseph's rescue and became "as dead men and fell to the ground."  
**K:** A member of the assembly named Levi offers an account of Symeon's blessing of Jesus and Mary  
**S:** Levi's father is summoned to see if this account is true.  
**S:** the high priests summon the three teachers from the Galilee.  
**K:** the high priests consider the three teachers' testimonials, Joseph's account, and Levi's account of Symeon's blessing.  
**K:** Narrative closes with the key characters unconvinced by the various testimonials offered throughout the story.

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