Jesus before Pilate

Date: 1st CE  
Place: Rome  
Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Mark

Reference:  
15:1-15

Commentary:
Mark narrates here the trial of Jesus before Pilate, the Roman governor responsible for overseeing Judea. Jesus has been questioned during the night by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council), and found guilty of blasphemy (Mark 14:15-72). He is now brought by the Jewish elders to the Roman authorities, where ultimately his fate will be decided. The description given in this passage of Barrabas, the prisoner released in place of Jesus in accordance with the cries of the crowd (influenced by the Jewish elders), and the desire of Pilate to satisfy both parties, is the longest and arguably most central part of the episode (see Mark McVann, “The ‘Passion’ of John the Baptist,” p 155). While Mark and also Luke (23:18-19) devote space to Barrabas’s identity, Matthew merely mentions that Barrabas was a “notorious prisoner” whom the crowd choose to be released instead of Jesus; no further information is given about him (Matthew 27:11-26). Mark’s account, on the other hand tells us that Barrabas was a rebel insurgent, who committed murder. As Morna Hooker points out (The Gospel According to Saint Mark, p. 368), the practice of releasing a prisoner at the Passover is not referred to outside the Gospels, and is likely an invention intended to highlight the combined complicity of the Jewish people, the Roman government, and the Jewish leaders in the death of Jesus. Moreover, not only is it hard to imagine a Roman governor releasing a prisoner guilty of murder and insurgency against the state, but as Ched Myers points out, it is extremely unlikely that a Jewish crowd would shout for the blood of any Jew facing execution by the unpopular Roman authorities (Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man, p. 374). There is a theological point to the Barrabas episode also, however, as the name means “Son of the Father”. The fact that Barrabas is liberated due to the execution of Jesus instead makes an ironic point – Jesus is the true Son of God, and dies as a “ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45), even the sinful (Mark 2:14-17) (see Mark McVann, “The ‘Passion’ of John the Baptist,” p 155). Adela Yarbro Collins has even argued that the Barrabas incident parodies the gladiatorial games, in which the crowd decided the fate of a defeated gladiator by calling either for their death or the sparing of their life (Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark: A Commentary, p. 720; see also Andrew Simmonds, “Mark’s and Matthew’s Sub Rosa Message,” p. 745-746). It is also possible to interpret this episode in connection with the two goats utilised in the Jewish celebration of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) (see Leviticus 16:1-34), where the sins of Israel are atoned for and covered for the year. As part of the ceremony, the High Priest took two goats, one of which was sacrificed, and one of which, the “scapegoat,” was set free into the wilderness, with a scarlet piece of wool tied around its neck, symbolising the carrying away of Israel’s sin. In the story of Jesus’s trial, this ritual is mirrored, with Jesus playing the part of the sacrificial goat, and Barrabas that of the scapegoat, who is allowed to go free. Pilate’s handwashing in the Matthean version of the Pilate episode (Matthew 27:24) can be understood as reflecting the same action by the High Priest, after he performs the sacrifice. Barrabas walks free, carrying his sin (just like the scapegoat) away with him, while Jesus becomes the atoning sacrifice, ensuring the forgiveness of his followers not just for one year, but for all time.

Regardless, this contrast between the murderous rebel Barrabas and the innocent teacher Jesus, suggests that Mark is concerned with emphasising Jesus’s political innocence, aside of anything else. Jesus has not killed anyone, and has not himself made any claims of kingship – indeed, he asserts that the title “king of the Jews” is one given to him only by others (verse 2). Moreover, Mark (and also Matthew and Luke) have Pilate ask the crowd what it is exactly that he should execute Jesus for (verse 13). Several interpreters have suggested that Mark seeks to cast Pilate as having minimal input in the death of Jesus. Brian Incigneri, for instance, discusses the fear of Rome suffered by the first-century Roman Christians receiving Mark’s Gospel, and Ched Myers suggests that they would not have wanted to been seen as upholding the anti-Roman attitude that a Pilate heavily involved in Jesus’s
execution would imply (see Brian Incigneri, *The Gospel According to the Romans*, esp. chapter 5; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 369). Perhaps, then, the worry of implications on his earliest audience would therefore compel Mark to portray a Jesus completely innocent of political wrongdoing, and a Pilate who would rather not have had to kill him. Some have argued that Pilate is portrayed in the Gospels as decidedly apolitical, forced into his decision by the crowds which it was part of his job to control (see Helen Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*, p. 129-133).

Others, however, argue that Pilate’s decision was likely fully conscious, and extremely strategic (see, for example, Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor*, p. 1-54, 79-99). As governor, he had a responsibility to maintain order, both socially and administratively, and looked out for the interests of the ruling elites (for a discussion of Roman governors and their role, see Peter Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes*, p. 53-95, 163-87, and 215-54). As Josephus tells us, local elites such as the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem frequently made alliances with Roman governors, and were keen to maintain this beneficial relationship with the imperial rulers (see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XX.9) (see the discussion also on Matthew 2:1-23). This can be seen throughout the episode in this passage, from the chief priests and elders handing Jesus over, to their compelling of the crowds to request Barrabas. Mark can arguably be seen to make subtle challenges to or criticisms of Roman rule in various places (for example, the possible subversive borrowing of the Roman triumphal tradition in Jesus’s entry to Jerusalem and parading to his execution: Mark 11:1-11; 15:16-24), but as far as his portrayal of Jesus goes, he is very careful not to place any intentions of political subversion or rebellion on his lips.

Nonetheless, Pilate’s part in Jesus’s death is certainly not avoided by the Markan author. For Andrew Simmonds (“Mark’s and Matthew’s Sub Rosa Message,” p. 754) the anti-Roman sentiment of Mark’s account is certain, and Pilate effectively is cast in the role of Caesar presiding over the gladiatorial games, where he will ultimately look to the crowd for a decision about the fate of the defeated fighter. For Simmonds, Jewish complicity in this scene is merely a thinly veiled disguise for what is actually a deeply anti-Roman message. According to Mark McVann, his role is structurally similar to that of Salome, Herod’s wife (the widow of his brother, Herod Philip), who convinces her daughter, Herodias, to request the death of John the Baptist after the king vows at his birthday party to give her anything she wishes (Mark 6:14-29). Just as Salome’s and the guests’ witnessing of Herod’s oath provides him with an excuse (and arguably an obligation given the conventions of first-century honour culture), the crowd provide Pilate with an excuse also (see Mark McVann, “The ‘Passion’ of John,” p. 155-156). McVann discusses several parallels between the narratives of John the Baptist’s and Jesus’s imprisonment and execution. Notably, the recognition of both Herod and Pilate that John and Jesus are extraordinary characters (Mark 6:20; 15:5, 9:13), the fact that both John and Jesus shame the immoral conduct of Herod and the Jewish leaders respectively (Mark 6:17-18, 11:15-18), and that seemingly arbitrary characters – Herodias and Barrabas – essentially seal the fates of both men (Mark 6:25, 15:15). One of Mark’s key aims, according to this argument, is to emphasise to his audience that worldly rulers, represented here by Pilate (and also by Herod Antipas in Mark 6:14-29), are untrustworthy and ultimately purely concerned with their own power and selfish interests. The Markan author thereby reinforces the message of Mark 13:9, which claims that the followers of Jesus will suffer at the hands of “governors and kings.”

It is possible that the Gospel writer intends to emphasise both Jesus’s political innocence and the complicity of Pilate – it does not necessarily follow that only one is true. For Anselm Hagedorn and Jerome Neyrey (“It was out of Envy that they Handed Jesus Over”), Mark’s setting of the scene is ultimately to highlight Jesus’s honour, a pivotal value of the author’s first-century culture, by emphasising the envy that this caused the Jewish leaders to have of his status (verse 10). Their intent on shaming Jesus by subjecting him to such a fate only further proves the superior honour status that he possessed in the first place.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- Barrabas
- chief priests
- crucifixion
- Jesus
- Jewish council
- king of the Jews
- Passover
- Pilate
- prisoner
- revolt
- Roman governor
- sanhedrin
- scribes

Bibliographical references:  
Bond, Helen, Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)  
Brunt, Peter A., Roman Imperial Themes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990)  
Simmonds, Andrew, “Mark’s and Matthew’s Sub Rosa Message in the Scene of Pilate and the Crowd”, Journal of Biblical Literature 131.4 (2012) : 733-753  
Yarbro Collins, Adela, Mark: A Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007)  

Other sources connected with this document:  

Mark 10:42-45

Jesus contrasts the rule of the Gentiles with the Son of Man

- Read more about Mark 10:42-45

Text

Mark 2:14-17
Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners

- Read more about Mark 2:14-17

Text

Mark 6:14-29

Herod Antipas executes John the Baptist

- Read more about Mark 6:14-29

Text

Matthew 27:11-26

Jesus before Pilate

- Read more about Matthew 27:11-26

Text


Jesus before Pilate

- Read more about Luke 23:1-7

Text


Jesus is sent back to Pilate

- Read more about Luke 23:13-25

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