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The Trial of Pilate - A Touchstone to the Death of Jesus

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“The Trial of Pilate—A Touchstone to the Death of Jesus”

Following on the *Finding Jesus* CNN series two years ago, this new six-week series extends beyond the book by David Gibson and Michael McKinley[1] toward examining other historical artifacts and their relations to the portraits of Jesus we find in the Gospels. The first episode, “The Pilate Stone,” focuses on the historical impact of Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Jesus to death. Despite being largely unknown otherwise, Pilate’s importance is paramount in world history. According to the narrator, without the death (and resurrection) of Jesus, the Christian movement would not have been born, and according to Michael Peppard, without Pontius Pilate, Jesus would not have been killed on a Roman cross.

Archaeological Discoveries and Finding Jesus

Featuring the 1961 discovery of the Pilate Stone at the Roman palace on the Mediterranean shore, the series makes the point that here we have an externally verified detail regarding the most significant death in human history. This engraved stone, bearing the name “Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea” confirms the historic place of Pilate, which is further developed in the writings of Josephus and the canonical Gospels. As early Christian confessions assert about Jesus of Nazareth, he “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” and the discovery of the Pilate Stone documents Pilate’s existence historically.

Another archaeological clue regarding the trial and crucifixion of Jesus includes the possible site of the trial of Jesus in Jerusalem, which has been excavated by Amit Re’em of Jerusalem since 1999. While it cannot be claimed for certain that this was the very site of the trial of Jesus, this newly unearthed site coincides with biblical descriptions of the event. Missing from the presentation are the references to the stone pavement (*lithostroton*) associated with *Gabbatha* (meaning “the ridge of the house”) as referenced in John 19:13. Nonetheless, gospel presentations of Pilate’s praetorium where his judgment seat would have been set cohere with archaeological findings in Jerusalem, whether or not the “exact location” has been discovered. Whatever the case, the references to Jews not being allowed by purity laws to enter Pilate’s tribunal area (John 18:28) cohere with historic understandings of Jewish religion.

And, while Robert Cargill reminds us that the traditional sites of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus are not necessarily confirmed by external means of verification, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is indeed outside the first-century wall of the city. Thus, the displaying of the *titulus* on the cross, in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (John 19:20) so that passersby would have been reminded about what happens to pretending kings under Roman occupation. Early Christian memory does connect this site with the last events in the life of Jesus, and all of this speaks to the political realism of the biblical texts as a result.

Political Realism in the Narrative

While this first episode builds largely upon the text of the canonical Gospels in presenting the trial of Jesus before Pilate, the contributions of the scholars interviewed contribute greatly to the historical realism of the narrative. For instance, Pilate might not have seen Jesus as a significant figure, as he seemed to be disinterested politically (Nicola Denzey Lewis); Pilate probably saw Judea as a stepping stone to something greater (Mark Goodacre); Caiaphas would have been the intermediary between the Romans and the populace of Israel (Helen Bond); only two charges would have legitimated a Roman death sentence: sacrilege or sedition (Ben Witherington, III); Jesus threatened the high priests of Jerusalem, and this is what brought him to trial (Obery Hendricks); if Jesus were to create unrest among the masses, Caiaphas could lose his place of leadership (Rabbi Joshua Garroway); Pilate was rendered helpless by Jews willing to sacrifice their lives over his intent to erect Roman standards in Jerusalem (Candida Moss); and finally, Pilate's declaration, "Behold, the man!" (John 19:5) would have been levied as a commentary on the hopelessness of messianic upstarts (James Martin, S.J.).

As Robert Cargill points out, in dedicating his palace to Caesar Tiberius, Pilate's ambition is also exposed. Not only does he expand upon the magnificent palace built by Herod the Great half a century earlier, but he also endears himself to Caesar by paying tribute to him in dedicating the palace to his honor. Even back in the days of Herod that palace was referred to as a "kingdom." I can only imagine this posing a sharp contrast to the teachings of Jesus on the spiritual character of the Kingdom of God. Palpable within the CNN presentation is the highly political character of the trial of Jesus before Pilate, as well as the ensuing events. With no little degree of irony, Pilate seeks to ascertain whether Jesus is a political messianic figure—and thus a

threat—but Jesus asserts in John 18 that his kingdom is one of truth, not political power. On one hand, Pilate comes across as being interested in the truth; on the other hand, he declares either his cynicism regarding the truth or his incapacity to discern it. Either way, Pilate's question, "What is truth?" makes more of a statement about him than it does about Jesus (John 18:38).

An especially interesting detail regarding the end of Pilate's career in Judea is contributed by the Jewish historian, Josephus (Helen Bond). A few years after the death of Jesus, a different messianic uprising emerged following a man simply called "the Samaritan." This messianic leader claimed that the relics of Moses were hidden on Mount Gerizim (see John 4), and that he and his followers intended to lead a march up the mountain, seeking to be invincible militarily against the Romans if they recovered the Ark of the Covenant and other potent artifacts. Upon hearing of the plot, Pilate commissioned a counterattack, which disbanded the expedition and killed many of its members, including its leader. As a result, a Samaritan embassy was sent to Rome, complaining about Pilate's ruthless actions, and he was removed from his post and reassigned, never to be heard from again via historians or Christian commentary. The point of this narrative is that it shows the political sensitivity faced by Pilate, leading him to be extra cautious earlier in his handling Jesus and groups that were both for and against him. In the world of political realism faced by Pilate, either of these would have been problematic.

Dramatic Irony and Narrative

In addition to shedding helpful light on the historical backdrop of the last days of Jesus, the scholars interviewed also contribute helpful insights regarding the dramatic irony constructed by the Gospel writers as they told their particular stories of Jesus. Matthew, for instance, conveys the account of Pilate's wife having a dream after which she warns him to have nothing to do with this man (Matt 27:19). Ironically, a pagan woman is able to discern the truth about Jesus, whereas the Jerusalem religious leaders of the day were unable to (Helen Bond). Therefore, those who should have had the keenest of spiritual insights are presented as being blinded by political and religious issues, causing them to not only accuse Jesus of blasphemy, but to then commit the same themselves, declaring that they had no king but Caesar (John 19:15).

Another ironic feature of John's presentation of Jesus before Pilate involves the fact that while Pilate as the Roman prefect is charged with serving as the judge of the region, he himself falls under judgment, in that he fails to discern or accept the truth regarding Jesus as the Christ. Thus, what is sketched as the trial of Jesus before the Roman ruler in John 18-19 suffers a reversal; it actually becomes the trial of Pilate before Jesus. Jesus indeed is a king, but his kingdom is one of truth, which is why his disciples cannot fight (John 18:36-37). Truth can never be furthered by force, and those who resort to force can only do so at the expense of truth. Ironically, such is an entity to which Pilate claims to have no access. This makes Pilate less than a judge, as he himself comes under judgment by the truth.

In presenting Pilate as a reluctant regent, however, the scholars contribute a final insight that helps in our understanding some of the interests of biblical narrations. As the Gospel narratives were crafted for audiences living under Roman occupation, a diplomatic presentation of the Roman prefect would have made their receptions more palatable. Of course, the religious leaders played their part in handing Jesus over to the Romans and requesting a death sentence, but Roman leaders had few problems with putting down insurrectionists with expedience and ease—especially during the greatest among the Jewish festivals—Passover. Despite a sympathetic presentation of Pilate in the biblical stories, however, Pilate still comes across as judged by the truth. In that sense, the last days of Jesus reflect not only his trial before Pilate in Jerusalem; they feature the trial *of* Pilate, as Jesus's kingdom is one of truth.

If the other five episodes are as well written and produced as the first, we're off to a good start. And, in hearing some of the finest among New Testament scholars today comment meaningfully upon the meanings of texts in the light of the latest archaeological findings, the rest of the series will also be worthwhile.

[1] David Gibson and Michael McKinley, *Finding Jesus; Faith. Fact. Forgery. Six Holy Objects that Tell the Remarkable Story of the Gospels* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015).