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PORTRAITS OF PILATE ACCORDING TO CHRISTIAN CANONICAL WRITINGS AND JEWISH HISTORICAL WORKS

Part three: Pilate According to the Author of Mark's Gospel

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1. General introduction to the structure and theology of the Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark, as one of the Synoptic Gospels, naturally is analyzed from a comparative perspective, where its relation to two other Gospels is a critical issue, whether it is considered as one source for the other Gospels or as a writing influenced by the Gospel of Mathew¹. There are many theories offered on Mark's Gospel, however it is not the subject of this study, and because of that we will work with the consensus accepted by most scholars.

Concerning the dating of the Gospel, various dates between 60 AD and 75 AD are offered, however the period between 64 and 75 AD is deemed the most likely. According to tradition, Mark (identify with John Mark of Ac 12, 12) is recognized as the author, who as the follower of Peter, interpreted his kerygma². Among many locations where the Gospel could have been written, the most popular is Rome. Regarding the structure of the Gospel, there are two main parts, the first part Mk 1, 1-8, 26 concerns the period of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

¹ Here, we refer to discussions concerning problem as to whether the Gospel of Mark was written before the Gospel of Mathew or *vice versa*. See: C.R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, Nashville 2005, pp. 58-75.

² R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York 1997, pp. 126-127.

The second part concerns Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, with special attention given to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus (Mk 8, 27-16, 20). The narrative concerning Pilate is found in the second part of Mark's Gospel (Mk 8, 26-16, 20), which contains four topics: three passion predictions (Mk 8, 31; 9, 30-31; 10, 33-34); the ministry in Jerusalem, including the "Markan Apocalypse (Mk 11, 1-13, 37); Jesus' passion and resurrection (Mk 14, 1-16, 8); an additional ending (Mk 16, 9-20).

Mark pays attention to Pilate in his narrative of Jesus' passion, quite simply because he was involved in Jesus' trial (Mk 15, 1-15. 42-47). The main theological concern of Mark's Gospel is to convince readers that Jesus is "Son of God", an aim strongly emphasized by Mark through Jesus' teaching, miracles, healings, epiphany, and exorcisms. Surprisingly, according to Mark there are few who recognize the mystery of Jesus, the Roman soldier is one exception (Mk 15, 39), but the disciples are not among them³. Mark's focus is the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, a dignity denied by the Jewish authorities but recognized by the Roman prefect, Pilate (Mk 15, 9, 12)⁴. This specifically Markan approach, the theme of Jesus' rejection and affirmation, raises a question regarding the way the Gospel presents Pilate.

2. Introduction to passages regarding person of Pilate

There are only three rather short passages regarding Pilate in Mark's Gospel, and all of them come in the narrative of the last days of Jesus, where the main theme is the trial and death of Jesus (Mk 15, 1-5; Mk 15, 5-15) and his burial (Mk 15, 42-45). There is a total absence of any mention of Pilate, information

³ C.R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 122.

⁴ This particular approach takes Mark's Gospel to be kind of tragic drama, see Charles B. Puskas, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Peabody 1989, pp. 126-131.

concerning his office, his character and his relations with the subjects of his administration. It is necessary to be aware of this narrowness of Mark's approach, caused by his minimal interest in presenting Pilate the person, and his main focus on Jesus, the Son of God. However, despite this approach, Mark gives his own interpretation of Pilate, an account containing something more than a simple compilation of details from other sources. His interest in him considers only Pilate's attitude to the case of Jesus (at the legal and official level) and his burial (at the socio-religious level), with little, if at all, on the personal or emotional aspects of their relationship. Before we proceed to a detailed analysis of the meaning of the relevant passages, we will first offer an analysis of the structure of each of the passages. We hope that this exposition of the structures will indicate not only Mark's unique approach to the person of Pilate, but also show his particular aim in presenting the prefect.

2.1. The trial of Jesus before Pilate (Mk 15, 1-5)

Καὶ εὐθὺς πρωΐ συμβούλιον ποιήσαντες οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς μετὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων καὶ γραμματέων καὶ ὅλον τὸ συνέδριον, δῆσαντες τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἀπήνεγκαν καὶ παρέδωκαν Πιλάτῳ. ² Καὶ ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτὸν ὁ Πιλάτος· σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς αὐτῷ λέγει· σὺ λέγεις. ³ καὶ κατηγοροῦν αὐτοῦ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς πολλά. ⁴ ὁ δὲ Πιλάτος πάλιν ἐπηρώτα αὐτὸν λέγων· οὐκ ἀποκρίνη οὐδέν; ἴδε πόσα σου κατηγοροῦσιν. ⁵ ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς οὐκέτι οὐδὲν ἀπεκρίθη, ὥστε θαυμάζειν τὸν Πιλάτον. (Mk 15, 1-5)

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ² Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." ³ Then the chief

priests accused him of many things. ⁴ Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." ⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed. (Mk 15, 1-5)

The first time we encounter Pilate in Mark is in the context of Jesus' trial, following on from Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin (Mk 14, 53-65), where the sentence of death was pronounced by the Jewish authorities ⁵. This condemnation, however, had to be confirmed by the prefect of Judea who would then order the carrying out of the sentence. In the narrative of Jesus' trial before Pilate we can identify three agents: Jesus, Pilate and the Sanhedrin. The main focus is Jesus, and more precisely the attitude toward Him of Pilate and the Sanhedrin. These two different relationships with Jesus naturally create a double layer that is reflected in the structure of the pericope.

Verse 1 relates the Jews' attitude toward Jesus who hand him over to Roman officialdom. This relationship we mark as A. *Verse 2* regards the relationship between Jesus and Pilate, which takes the form of a direct interrogation regarding Jesus' crimes against Rome. This relationship we mark as B. *Verse 3* goes back to the relationship between Jesus and the Jews, where additional accusations against Jesus are mentioned, and for this reason we mark it as A¹. *Verses 4-5* are the last part of this pericope, where the reactions of Jesus and Pilate come into focus, with a particular emphasis on Pilate's reaction to Jesus' passive attitude. This reaction we mark as B¹.

⁵ France is of the opinion that Jesus was not on trial before the Sanhedrin, but only interrogated by them in order to find an accusation sufficient to justify handing him over to Pilate. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC, Carlisle 2002, pp. 624-625. However, Mk 14, 55 (*now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none*) strongly suggests that it was not only an interrogation but a formal trial under Jewish jurisdiction.

As a result of this analysis, we can present the structure of this subsection, which is: A-B-A¹-B¹. This kind of structure allows the author to put together two different layers, which in this case take on a comparative character. Due to this approach, the reader easily can detect differences in the two agents' attitude towards Jesus.

2.2. The sentence passed by the crowd (Mk 15, 6-15)

⁶ Κατὰ δὲ ἑορτὴν ἀπέλυεν αὐτοῖς ἓνα δέσμιον ὃν παρητοῦντο. ⁷ ἦν δὲ ὁ λεγόμενος Βαραββᾶς μετὰ τῶν στασιαστῶν δεδεμένος οἵτινες ἐν τῇ στάσει φόνον πεποιήκεισαν. ⁸ καὶ ἀναβᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἤρξατο αἰτεῖσθαι καθὼς ἐποίει αὐτοῖς. ⁹ ὁ δὲ Πιλάτος ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς λέγων· θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ¹⁰ ἐγίνωσκεν γὰρ ὅτι διὰ φθόνον παραδεδώκεισαν αὐτὸν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς. ¹¹ οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς ἀνέσεισαν τὸν ὄχλον ἵνα μᾶλλον τὸν Βαραββᾶν ἀπολύσῃ αὐτοῖς. ¹² ὁ δὲ Πιλάτος πάλιν ἀποκριθεὶς ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· τί οὖν [θέλετε] ποιήσω [ὃν λέγετε] τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ¹³ οἱ δὲ πάλιν ἔκραξαν· σταύρωσον αὐτόν. ¹⁴ ὁ δὲ Πιλάτος ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· τί γὰρ ἐποίησεν κακόν; οἱ δὲ περισσῶς ἔκραξαν· σταύρωσον αὐτόν. ¹⁵ Ὁ δὲ Πιλάτος βουλόμενος τῷ ὄχλῳ τὸ ἱκανὸν ποιῆσαι ἀπέλυσεν αὐτοῖς τὸν Βαραββᾶν, καὶ παρέδωκεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν φραγελλώσας ἵνα σταυρωθῇ. (Mk 15, 6-15)

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹ Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that

the chief priests had handed him over.¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.¹² Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?"¹³ They shouted back, "Crucify him!"¹⁴ Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!"¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (Mk 15, 6-15)

Within the structure of the second pericope (Mk 15, 6-15) there are two main agents, Pilate and the crowd⁶. The opening narrative (verses 6-8), explains the socio-historical background, where a local custom call upon the Roman official, the prefect, to showed clemency towards some prisoner, as a sign of good will towards the Jews and as a way to honouring the Jewish festival. This part is marked as A, and is partnered with verse 15 where a final conclusion (marked as A¹) of the periscope is presented. These two points create brackets within which a main theme of this pericope is presented.

The main theme is a dialogue between Pilate and the Jews, regarding a fate of Jesus. It starts with Pilate's proposal to free Jesus (verses 9-10), which is marked as B. To this proposal the Jewish crowd gives a negative answer (verse 11), which though not explicitly mentioned, can be correctly deduced from the following verse. Verse 11 is marked as C. The rejection of Pilate's offer does not end his attempt to save Jesus, as can be seen in verse 12, which is marked as B¹ because it is the second time Pilate speaks up for Jesus. Verse 13 narrates the open hostility of the crowd toward Jesus, when they ask demand the death penalty. This verse is marked as C¹. Pilate's "last stand" is related in verse 14a

⁶ Jesus is side-lined, treated here as the object of a dispute, a power struggle between these two agents.

where he is shown to be powerless even when pointing to a lack of evidence of Jesus' crimes. This part of verse 14 is marked as B². Pilate's reasoned response falls on deaf ears, unable to change a crowd emotionally committed to seeing Jesus condemned to death (verse 14b). Since the crowd is the main agent, this part of verse 14 is marked as C². This analysis allows us to lay out the structure of this pericope as follows: A-B-C-B¹-C¹-B²-C²-A¹. Structurally the focus of this pericope is the dispute between Pilate and the crowd regarding the fate of Jesus.

2.3. The body of Jesus (Mk 15, 43-45)

ἐλθὼν Ἰωσήφ [ὁ] ἀπὸ Ἀριμαθαίας εὐσχήμων βουλευτής, ὃς καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν προσδεχόμενος τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, τολμήσας εἰσηλθεὶν πρὸς τὸν Πιλάτον καὶ ἠτήσατο τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ. ⁴⁴ ὁ δὲ Πιλάτος ἐθαύμασεν εἰ ἤδη τέθνηκεν καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος τὸν κεντυρίωνα ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτὸν εἰ πάλαι ἀπέθανεν. ⁴⁵ καὶ γνοὺς ἀπὸ τοῦ κεντυρίωνος ἐδώρησατο τὸ πτώμα τῷ Ἰωσήφ. (Mk 15, 43-45)

Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. (Mk 15, 43-45)

The last time Pilate's name is mentioned by Mark, is in Joseph's request to the prefect, seeking the release of the body for a funeral (Mk 15, 43-45). Verse 43 contains Joseph's request as well as the reason for the request. This verse is marked as A. In verse 44, the main agent is Pilate, who rather surprisingly shows

some doubts concerning Jesus' death and for this reason requests its confirmation. This verse contains new information and for this reason is marked as B. The last verse in this short pericope (v. 45) concerns Pilate's answer to Joseph's request presented in verse 43, and for this reason it is marked as A¹. The analysis shows that the narrative of Joseph's request has following structure: A-B-A¹. It proves that the main aim of the narrative concerns not the request, but rather the doubt of Pilate regarding whether Jesus was already dead.

3. Analysis of the meaning of passages regarding Pilate

Our structural analysis has allowed us to determine the main topic in each pericope, the subject of special interest for the author. It also shows, how Mark approached each issue related to Pilate. Now, it is possible to move to an analysis of the meaning of each pericope, in the process showing how Mark understood, presented and evaluated the prefect's involvement in the case of Jesus.

3.1. Meaning of the Jesus' trial before Pilate (Mk 15, 1-5)

Verse 1 clearly indicates all who were involved in the Jewish trial of Jesus (Mk14, 53-65), namely the chief priests, the elders, scribes and the whole council⁷. It shows without any doubts that the most influential people in Jerusalem made their decision concerning Jesus death because they found Him guilty of strictly religious accusations, but then consciously made another step

⁷ The same groups are mentioned in Mk 14, 53.

and handed him over to Pilate, the Roman prefect⁸. Mark writes very clearly and specifically that the Jewish authorities after condemning Jesus (Mk 14, 64), “bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate”. Finding someone guilty of a crime concerning religious matters, especially religious teaching and practice, did not automatically include handing him over to non-Jewish authorities⁹. However, if the subject was found guilty of an offence that warranted the death sentence, then a trial before the Roman authorities was necessary in order the sentence may be executed¹⁰. Handing over a fellow country-man to the occupation forces, the Gentiles, would count as a rather unusual case among Jews. In this way Mark indicates that relations, between the first agent (the Jewish authorities) and Jesus, cannot be recognized as friendly.

With verse 2, Mark moves directly to the most important issue among the many accusations against Jesus, the one to which Pilate during the official trial will pay special attention¹¹. The question “are you the King of the Jews?” takes on a strict political character, which makes Jesus’ case one subject of Pilate’s jurisdiction. We can deduce that the Jews presented to Pilate the case of Jesus as a political one, whereas before the Sanhedrin the main accusation focused on Jesus’ Messianic claims (Mk 14, 61-62)¹². The Jewish authorities twisted Jesus

⁸ This morning meeting was not another trial or interrogation but rather a gathering that had to decide on an action plan for the trial before Pilate. E.P. Gould, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, ICC, New York 1896, p. 283.

⁹ An exception to this rule was a crime against the Temple, which was treated as offence against the Roman law, since the temples were protected by it. In Jesus’ case this crime was also mentioned (Mk 14, 58), however Mark indicates that this accusation was not the reason for Jesus’s condemnation (Mk 14, 59. 63-64).

¹⁰ M.L. Strauss, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Mark*, Michigan 2014, p. 672.

¹¹ The Markan account concerning Jesus’ trial must be taken as kind of summary of a much longer and more comprehensive legal process. B. Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids 2001, p. 309.

¹² Note the High Priest’s question was “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” with an implicit religious connotation referencing the “Messiah”. However in Mk 15, 2 this religious meaning is consciously omitted.

confession with its strictly religious connotations (Mk 14, 61-65), into a political claim that threatens the *Pax Romana*¹³. To this charge, Jesus answer in a totally different manner than He did during the trial before the Sanhedrin (Mk 14, 62), where before the Jews, who clearly and correctly understood His answer, Jesus gives them an affirmative reply. However, before Pilate, He gives an enigmatic answer, which is neither an affirmation nor a denial¹⁴. Although, Pilate asks a clear and simple question similar to that asked by the Sanhedrin, Jesus aware of its political character, leaves the decision to the prefect. Here, Mark presents Pilate, simply as the Roman official judging the case presented to him as a political issue.

Verse 3 suggests that a lack of a clear denial of the accusation, leads to other accusations, although they are not named, presented probably in order to strength the main accusation and persuade the prefect of Jesus' guilt. A specification of these charges is impossible to determine based on Mark's account but can be outlined based on information provided by Luke in his Gospel (Lk 23, 2)¹⁵. Mark in this verse indicates that, before Pilate, Jesus was accused not only of declaring Himself the king of Jews, but also about others serious issues, which were recognized as such by the Roman official.

Verses 4-5 again focuses on the relationship between Pilate, the judge and Jesus the accused. Verse 4 starts with another question from Pilate, which is

¹³ After the accusation about speaking against the Temple (which would be counted by the Romans as a political crime) was found unconvincing (Mk 14, 56-59), the only accusation that was affirmed by Jesus concerns His Messianic dignity. The Jewish authorities by omitting the religious context of Jesus claim, make it sufficient reason for accusing Him of a crime against Rome, which as a political issue led to a trial before Pilate. In such a case, the Roman official usually acts quickly and brutally, since the men that claim to be the Messiah caused much trouble for Rome as well as for the Jewish authorities. J.R. Donahue, D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, SP 2, Collegeville 2002, p. 431.

¹⁴ M. Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, Grand Rapids, 2008, pp. 306-307.

¹⁵ M.L. Strauss, *Mark*, p. 675.

probably provoked by the passive attitude of Jesus toward the charges that have been made. According to Mark, Pilate seems to be taken aback, and his words seek to provoke Jesus to make His own defense. However, Jesus remains silence. It is not clear if Pilate was shocked by the passive attitude of Jesus, or already at this stage of trial he recognized the reality of the situation¹⁶. This part of the trial, which involves Pilate, Jesus and representatives of Jerusalem's elite (mentioned in Mk 15, 1) ends with no conclusion or proclamation of a sentence. It seems that Pilate did not make any final judgment¹⁷. The case stays open, but Pilate seems to be more sympathetic toward Jesus, probably for the reason given in verse 10.

In the first pericope, where Pilate is presented by Mark, the most important point for the author is to note the contrast in attitude toward Jesus, between Pilate and the Jews. Not only the structure of this unit (A-B-A¹-B¹) but also the text shows the antagonistic attitude of the Jews toward Jesus and the rather sympathetic approach of Pilate toward Him. Mark, write almost nothing about Pilate himself, and because of that, all that can be said about him must be deduced from his attitude toward Jesus. It seem to us to be no accident, but a consciously planned and craftily executed way of presenting Pilate, which is in accordance with the general evaluation of Gentiles in Mark's Gospel.

¹⁶ Ch. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man. Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, New York 1990, p. 379.

¹⁷ This statement opens a door to dispute, whether Pilate used *abolitio* in case of Jesus' trial as in B. Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark*. p. 391. However, it is also possible to understand Jesus' silence as kind of admission to guilt, since under the Roman law, the man who makes no response to charges was treated on the same level as a man found guilty of the charges. H. K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*, Cambridge 2004, p. 108. In both interpretations, a question remains concerning the reason for involving the crowd in the following narrative, in the manner presented by Mark.

3.2. Meaning of the sentence passed by the crowd (Mk 15, 6-15)

Mk 15, 6-15 narrates Pilate's struggle with the crowd in order to save Jesus. Before we start analysis of meaning, a few prefatory remarks must be made. First, there is no direct continuity between the trial before Pilate (Mk 15, 1-5) and this gathering (Mk 15, 6-15). In Mark's narrative the gathering of the crowd seems to be a different event from the trial (Mk 15, 8). Secondly a crowd has gathered to call upon Pilate to respect a tradition of releasing a prisoner to mark the festival. So the gathering of the crowd is not necessarily a direct result of the trial. Thirdly, the text does not allow us to presume that Pilate has already sentenced Jesus (Mk 15, 9). Rather it seems that Pilate wants the crowd to name the sentence and the one who will be sentenced (v 7). Fourth, the Sanhedrin seems to have sufficient time to "prepare" the crowd acts according to the Sanhedrin's interests, and so force Pilate to act against his own judgement and intentions. These elements, not all of which are easily explained historically, seem to spring from, or be significantly influenced by Mark's own theological perspective. (Mk 15, 10-11).

In verse 6, at the start of this pericope, Mark refers to a custom existing in Judea where one prisoner, one guilty of a capital crime, is granted an amnesty as a mark of respect for Jewish customs and traditions at the time of the Passover Feast. However, there is no evidence of the existence of such a custom in Jewish literature, which makes the Gospels our only possible source¹⁸. The closest parallels in ancient literature are for cases where for some reason governors or procurators did amnesty prisoners, however the decision was made by them in line with the mandate they exercised. Any consultation with people was

¹⁸ C.F.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According To St Mark*, Cambridge 1959, p. 449.

certainly not part of the process¹⁹. The custom mentioned by Mark must be considered exceptional.

In verse 7, as noted above Mark introduces a new agent Barabbas, Barabba meaning “the son of the father”²⁰. He is introduced as someone, probably a leader or participant in a recent act of insurrection, and was charged with killing a Roman soldier²¹. This charge warranted the death sentence, and since the victim was a Roman citizen, an amnesty would have been considered out of the question²². Consequently Pilate’s decision directly contravenes both Roman policy and the law. Lack of external evidence makes it impossible to prove or deny the authenticity of either Barabbas’ identity or his alleged crime, raising the question as to why Mark introduces such a controversial character. One possible answer to this question is that it offers as radical, as it can be possible, contrast between these two subjects (Barabbas vs Jesus), serving to highlight the enormity of the unjust behavior of the crowd.

Verse 8 returns the focus to verse 6 and the custom of an amnesty, which now is the subject of crowd’s main interest. Here, the custom is presented as a kind of annual event, which was taken by the crowd as kind of right, one which the Roman prefect was obliged to respect²³. The crowd has gathered to ask for a favor, which they were convinced they would receive. For obvious socio-military reasons, since such a custom would open-up the possibility of granting an amnesty to a rebel leader or participant every year, it is hard to consider it as a custom in accord with Roman policy. Mark’s narrative in this pericope also

¹⁹ M.L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp. 676-677.

²⁰ Some manuscripts of the Gospel according to Matthew have the reading “Jesus, the son of Barabbas”. M.L. Strauss, *Mark*, p. 677.

²¹ Probably it would be better to think of some single and incidental but quite common action of Jewish patriots against Roman soldiers, rather than about a huge scale war against Rome. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp. 630-631.

²² C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16, 20*, WBC, Mexico City 2000, p. 481.

²³ M.L. Strauss, *Mark*, p. 678.

shows that from the very beginning until the end, the crowd is here a protagonist.

In verse 9, Mark presents, for the first time in this pericope, Pilate as person taking the initiative, although the prefect's action is the result of pressure from the crowd. (Mk 15, 8). Pilate's question is an answer to the crowd, but it is not clear if it is an answer to their request to observe the custom or to a particular request of the crowd. As a response to a request to observe the custom then, it is a response fraught with ambiguity. Both subjects (Jesus of Nazareth and Barabbas), if we follow Matthew, seem to have had the same personal name, Jesus. Probably because of that Pilate is seeking clarification, though v 10 seems to rule out that possibility. As to the second possibility, Pilate does seem to be indicating his candidate for release (v 9)²⁴. Also in context of the following narrative this option is more possible. However from an historical perspective this seems to fit Mark's narrative approach rather than Pilate's strategy. The prefect would have been aware of the antagonism toward him among the Jews, which would always result in the likely negation by the crowd of all proposals presented by him. Also, use of a title "the king of Jews", first used in v 2 and repeated in v 9, wouldn't have carried as much weight among the Jews, particularly their leadership, and it here carries more than a note of irony.

In verse 10, Mark not only clarifies the doubts of Pilate implicit in v 9, but also indicates Pilate's reason for supporting Jesus of Nazareth. He seems to possess knowledge concerning bad will against Jesus among members of the Sanhedrin (Mk 15, 4), and most probably the attitude of the Sanhedrin, rather than any empathy for Jesus was a reason for his action. From verse 11 until the end of the pericope we see a struggle between Pilate's option (to free Jesus of Nazareth) and the Sanhedrin option (to free Jesus the son of Barabbas). Given

²⁴ C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16, 20*, p. 481.

what we know from the writings of Josephus, the relationship between the Sanhedrin and the prefect of Judea was characterized by a constant struggle for power and influence over the general population, such a portrayal of the struggle seems historically reliable.

Verse 11, seems to indicate that the Sanhedrin had come prepared to respond to a variety of different scenarios. Possible objections that Pilate might raise to the charges were considered. One of those scenarios was the use of the *vox populi* to push for the observing of the custom to grant an amnesty. Barabbas, already imprisoned, was seen as a useful alternative candidate, should Pilate suggest releasing Jesus in keeping with the custom. Time had possibly allowed the Sanhedrin to gather a crowd, or a group within the larger crowd who would move them in the desired direction. They were looking to make a pre-emptive strike.²⁵ Mark's narrative suggests also that Pilate was not expecting a Sanhedrin plot. Demonstrating a naivety that left him unprepared when the call came up from the crowd. Such suggestions are however no more than ones the later reader can draw from the wider narrative context. More significant is Mark's presentation of the Sanhedrin as the ones who mold and guide the crowd's call for an amnesty, and the option for Barabbas.

Verse 12, presents another question from Pilate addressed to the crowd, showing him to be in a defensive position. Already in verse 9, Pilate has handed the initiative to the crowd, which automatically puts him in weaker position, one not be easily reversed. The question in verse 12, amplifies the position established in verse 9, because Pilate again asks the crowd for a decision concerning the fate of Jesus, so giving the crowd control of the situation²⁶. How dominant their position is emerges clearly in the next verse. Although sometimes in an indirect way, Mark presents Pilate as one who opts for Jesus by

²⁵ Concerning this hypothesis cf. J.R. Donahue, D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 434.

²⁶ M. Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 309.

being willing to free “the King of Jews” (v. 9) and showing sympathy for “the King of Jews” (v. 12) and strongly suggesting to the crowd that He is their king, a very strange suggestion if we consider his duties as prefect, he emerges in Marks narrative as a man that handles the case from the losing side, the wrong side²⁷. To the question put in verse 9 the crowd answered asking for Barabbas’ freedom, and to the question put in verse 12, the crowd gives an answer that ends all hopes for Jesus. Pilate loses the gamble on both occasions.

Verse 13 sees the crowd answer Pilate’s question. It is a stark, direct and cannot in anyway be softened. They clamour for the crucifixion of Jesus, no more and certainly no less.²⁸ This is the first mention of the word in Mark’s Gospel, making the use of *πάλιν* usually translated as “again” sound not just strange but also problematic. There isn’t any verse in Mark until Mk, 15:13 to even hint at the word. Because of that, it might be better to translate *πάλιν* as “thereupon” creating a cause (v. 12) – effect (v. 13) relation within the narrative. This translation would suggest that Pilate’s question (v. 12) and use of the phrase (*the man you call the King of the Jews?*) was understood by the crowd as provocative.

Verse 14 brings us to the final stage in the escalation of Pilate’s problems, caused by his own badly chosen tactics. Again, Pilate poses a question for the crowd, one they would have possibly found hard, even impossible to answer. The question also seems to indirectly express Pilate’s own conviction regarding Jesus’ innocence, and at least his awareness of a lack of legal grounds warranting His condemnation²⁹.

We could consider this verse as Pilate’s “swan song”, an act of desperation. The image of Pilate attempting to reason with the crowd is certainly not one that

²⁷ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, p. 451.

²⁸ The crowd did not asked for imprisonment, they asked rather for the most severe form of punishment. C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16, 20*, p. 482.

²⁹ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, p. 451; B. Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark*. p. 392.

would normally mark his dealings with the Jewish people. It is in marked contrast with the image of Pilate that one gains from reading Josephus' record of other controversies that occurred during the Passover in other years³⁰. Does this verse mean, as Evans suggest, that Pilate is genuinely asking the crowd to offer a legal argument to justify a sentence of crucifixion, in order to secure a lack of his political responsibility for the sentence³¹. Verses 10-11 certainly don't seem to warrant such a reading, for there we find a clear indication that the call for crucifixion from the crowd came from the manipulations of the crowd by the Sanhedrin and their underlings. Another suggestion that Pilate sees the case as a trap laid by the Sanhedrin is also not supported by the text, even if the crowd were being manipulated by the Sanhedrin and or their underlings, the focus of Mark is the clash between Pilate and the crowd. Though Pilate has a central role at this juncture in the narrative, Mark's "hero" is Jesus. Mark is clear that Pilate doesn't accept or recognize the charges brought by the Sanhedrin (Mk 5, 10), and as far as it is within his power, without jeopardizing his own position, he does try to save Jesus, as is attested by his failed attempts to negotiate with the crowd (Mk 15, 9-14). This interpretation is supported also by the structure of the pericope (A-B-C-B¹-C¹-B²-C²-A¹), where B concerns Pilate and C concerns the crowd, the two main agents of this unit. While Mark's Pilate is willing to engage in constructive dialog, the crowd are portrayed as implacably unwilling to engage in dialog, to co-operate in any way, the crowd, urged on by the Sanhedrin were firmly focused on having Jesus sentenced to death, having him crucified. The last words of the crowd, as Mark sets down for the record, couldn't be clearer, "Crucify him!!"

³⁰ The case of *Corbonas* (BJ 2.175-177) may serve as an example.

³¹ Evans is of the opinion that Pilate's way of approaching the crowd comes from the fact that "he wishes only to extricate himself from responsibility". C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16*, 20, p. 483.

Verse 15, ends the pericope by relating the final result of Pilate's attempt to free Jesus. Pilate sentences Jesus to death on the cross, which would have surprised some, given that the narrative so frequently avers to the Pilate goodwill held toward Jesus. There are no grounds to conclude that Pilate had changed his mind and found Jesus guilty, quite the opposite, until the end Pilate remains convinced of Jesus' innocence (Rom 15, 14). The decision of Pilate is not based on legal grounds, moral virtues or logical reasoning, but from what we can describe as one made from the perspective of military pragmatism. Pilate's "wish to satisfy" the crowd certainly did not come from his sympathy with them or in support of their claim, but rather from calculating the possible consequences caused by his decision.

Though Mark offers a generally positive presentation of Pilate, he also places the responsibility for the death of Jesus firmly in his hands. His decision hinges on two facts, two realities he felt he couldn't ignore. Firstly, from the beginning he was very conscious of the intentions of the Sanhedrin, of their antipathy towards Jesus. Secondly, as the confrontation with the crowd escalated (Mk 15, 13-14) he realized he was facing an immovable force. Verse 15, which only refers to the crowd, and his wish "to satisfy the crowd" seems to suggest that the opinion of the crowd now weighed more heavily on him compared with any pressure from the Sanhedrin. The reasons why he finally concedes to the crowd are purely political and pragmatic³². Pilate's order to flog Jesus before the crucifixion is presented by Mark as standard procedure³³.

Our analysis of Mk 15, 6-15 allows us to offer the following observations on the Markan Pilate we encounter in this pericope. In Mk 15, 1-5, the Pilate

³² This was not the first time that the prefect loses out to the Jewish crowd. Josephus records an incident in Caesarea, which occurred at the beginning of Pilate's time in office (*AJ* 18.56-59).

³³ Similarly in Mt 17, 26, but in contrast with Lk 13, 22 and J 19, 1-16, where flogging seems not to be an act preceding the crucifixion.

portrayed there is someone who is competent in the exercise of his office and duties as a prefect. He handles the case according to the established norms, with a keen sense of what the Sanhedrin were seeking, as seen in his conclusion (v 10). However as the wider context of Mk 15, 6-15 shows, when faced with the crowd and their demands, he loses control and lets the initiative pass to them. He becomes almost a passive spectator when he puts the decision as to who shall be freed into the hands of the crowd. One wonders was he unaware of how dangerous an option this was, particularly since he was also conscious of the ulterior motives of the Jewish leadership (v 10). His vain hope that the crowd would support Jesus evidences a certain gullibility on his part. Though, while he may have been aware of the motives behind the Sanhedrin's actions, he may not have fully grasped the level of their involvement in the crowds support for Barabbas. This neglect of attention given to the relationship between the Sanhedrin and the crowd proved critical.

In the light of Pilate seemingly going against his best intentions in his final decision, Mark's presentation almost reads like an apologia. Throughout the narrative, Mark creates picture of a just (Mk 15, 4-5), courageous (Mk 15, 9), wise (Mk 15, 10), determined (Mk 15, 12), and logical man (Mk 15, 14). There is however a marked contrast between his attitude towards Jesus and the attitude displayed in his interaction with the crowd, those who were Jesus' own countrymen. So also allowing us a glimpse at Mark's attitude towards those who would read and hear his Gospel.

3.3. The body of Jesus (Mk 15, 43-45)

This is the last pericope in the larger unit concerning Jesus' passion and death (Mk 14, 1-15, 47), in which Jesus' body is released to one named Joseph of Arimathea. Brief as it is, it offers us another portrait of Pilate and his relationship

with Jesus. The previously offered structural analysis helps us point up in what way this pericope shows us another face of Pilate.

The pericope opens (v 43) by relating that Joseph, a member of the Sanhedrin, went to Pilate asking for the release of Jesus body. While the reader is told of Joseph's sympathy and openness to such "messianic movement" as that led by the recently executed Jesus of Nazareth, it is unlikely that Pilate was that well informed³⁴. Joseph's courage in coming forward is also noted. Jesus had been executed on a political charge, as witnessed to by the *titulus* on the cross – he claimed to be King of the Jews. In such cases the body was normally left on the cross to rot, with the passing of time, as a warning for potential followers³⁵, those who might seek to assume his mantle. Also Joseph, in coming forward, risked the suspicion and even anger of Pilate as a member of the Sanhedrin, before whom he had lost face in conceding to the crowd and ordering the execution of Jesus.

That Pilate was suspicious regarding Joseph's request (v 44), the time since the crucifixion and actual death of Jesus was short. This suspicion would have echoed with Mark's readers³⁶. Once more Pilate is surprised³⁷. That suspicion is also revealed in summoning the centurion (Mk 15, 39) who had overseen the crucifixion, and confirming that Jesus had actually died³⁸.

³⁴ This does not automatically mean that he was Jesus' disciple. J.R. Donahue, D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 453.

³⁵ On this point Roman law stood in sharp opposition to Jewish Law (Deut 21, 22-23), which obliged the mourners to bury the body on the same day; it should not remain all night upon the tree. M. Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 325.

³⁶ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, p. 462.

³⁷ Pilate's first surprise is recorded in Mk 15, 5 and concerns Jesus passive attitude towards the charges brought against Him. In some cases the convict would take two or three days to die. J.R. Donahue, D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 454.

³⁸ The phrase εἰ πάλαι - *even for a good while* suggests that before the death of Jesus and Joseph's request a period of time passed. B. Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark*. p. 392

Seeking confirmation of the death may also be influenced by the limited trust he placed in the members of the Sanhedrin³⁹.

Finally v 45 informs us that Pilate, having confirmed the death of Jesus, grants custody of the body of Jesus to Joseph. The use of δωρέομαι – *to present, to bestow, give* indicates that Pilate action was a favor granted to Joseph, and not a casual gesture⁴⁰. Pilate's show of "good will" while it may be interpreted as merely an act of courtesy towards Joseph, just as likely comes from something he saw in Jesus, in his attitude, a discreet gesture of respect towards the man he had unwillingly sent to his death. Mark's presentation of Pilate as someone acting within his area of competence (v 44), and someone granting of a favour to a member of the Sanhedrin would be considered as exceptional. However it gives his readers a positive impression of the prefect, the one who had actually executed Jesus.

4. The Portrait of Pilate in Mark's Gospel

Based on our analysis we can say Mark is not particularly concerned with Pilate as an individual person. His focus is the relationship between Pilate and Jesus. We can see this in the fact that he doesn't even inform us as to, for example, the biography, status or function of Pilate as prefect⁴¹. We have to glean any information present from the encounters between Pilate and Jesus, which Mark had been recorded. It indicates that at the core of Mark's approach

³⁹ It is also possible that Mark records Pilate's suspicion in order to assure his reader that Jesus actually died on the cross.

⁴⁰ J.R. Donahue, D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 454.

⁴¹ Most scholars interpret the lack of basic information concerning Pilate, as a sign that the fifth prefect of Judea was well known to the addressees of Mark's Gospel, but his is no more than a supposition and not an argument in itself.

to Pilate's presentation in his personal attitude towards Jesus, the subject of his judgment. There are two complementary elements to this attitude of Mark.

The first of which seems to be in response to the antagonistic attitude the Jews show towards Jesus⁴². Mark consistently points up the antagonism of the Sanhedrin, and more widely the crowd – the Jews (probably with the exception of Joseph of Arimathea) towards Jesus, their fellow countryman (Mk 14, 55-65; 15, 1-15)⁴³. By the end of Mark's narrative we are left in no doubt as to the depth of this antagonism, and more significantly their responsibility for the death of Jesus (Mk 15, 1; 15, 12-14). Those who would like to offer an apologetic for them are left with no arguments in hand. If there were any he has consciously left them out, since there is no evidence whatsoever for anything resembling a pro-Jesus attitude shown by them. Compared with such negative picture of the Jews, Pilate is portrayed as the only one committed to justice, and who, although he does not succeed, makes a convincing attempt to save the convict, Jesus. Pilate is portrayed as a contrasting counterpoint. At one of Jesus darkest hours he is portrayed as one willing to stand at the side of Jesus. Something in Jesus' attitude, positively or negatively, seems to have inspired Pilate, made him see something different in Jesus (Mk 15, 5). He uses the title "the King of Jews", on two occasions, which should not be taken in an ironical sense, but rather as a positive presentation of the subject (Jesus) to the crowd, in a way that could earn the sympathy of those who are about to decide His fate (Mk 15, 10; Mk 15, 12-13). He seems to have perceived, or maybe had been informed, of the true reason

⁴² In our opinion this is attested by the structure of Mk 15, 6-15, where presentation of these two approaches to Jesus is the main subject of the subsection.

⁴³ It is difficult to determine the motive for the action of Joseph, whether it was undertaken because as Mark notes he was waiting for the Kingdom of God (Mk 15, 43), which would indicate messianic socio-religious sympathies or it was motivated by his zeal for observance of Jewish Law. The second possibility seems to be less possible, if we consider that the other two persons crucified together with Jesus were also Jews.

for the antagonism of the Jewish leadership towards Jesus (Mk 15, 11) so legitimating his attempt to defend Jesus. Pilate even goes as far as attempting to debate with, and possibly persuade the crowd. His action can only be considered unprecedented. Romans in a position of authority don't appeal directly to ordinary Jews, but rather with the official representatives of the people (Mk 15, 14). Though Mark has hinted that Pilate has his suspicions regarding the motives of the Sanhedrin in bringing charges against Jesus (Mk 15, 10), he ultimately fails to save Him, but at least he takes a stand (Mk 15, 15). Later, in his response to the petition of Joseph of Arimathea, he demonstrates the burgeoning of a certain respect for Jesus (Mk 15, 44-45). This comparatively positive portrayal of Pilate, in turn hints to possible readers of his Gospel that Gentiles may not necessarily be antagonistic towards Jesus, his Gospel and consequently Christianity. It is possible that this particular perspective on Pilate, serves to achieve an aim of the author, who tries to send a message to the readers, which in some way may regard to their existential situation. This horizon of possible readers is wider than an initial reading seems to indicate.

The second element is the way Mark portrays Pilate, the Roman official with considerable power that could influence the fate of his subordinates. There are three key points in Mark's presentation. First at the trial of Jesus (Mk 15, 1-5) where Pilate as prefect is responsible for judging the case against Jesus brought by the Jerusalem elite, the leading figures in the Jerusalem of that time. Strangely Mark doesn't record the official passing of a verdict against Jesus. Instead he tells us of a Pilate faced with both an accused and a charge brought that he had never previously encountered. Never had he encountered an accused who took a stance such as that taken by Jesus. As already noted he had his suspicions respecting the true motives of the Jewish leadership, but no grounds strong

enough to allow him to dismiss the case (Mk 15, 10)⁴⁴. Since Jesus was actually crucified we cannot doubt that a formal sentence was passed, but Mark's silence on this topic seems to reflect a conscious decision on the author's part. Secondly is the custom of a Passover amnesty. Pilate puts all his energy into seeking to free Jesus rather than Barabbas. Without the unrecorded verdict, Jesus couldn't be proposed as an alternative candidate for amnesty. He consciously promotes the "innocent" Jesus, as a far more valid candidate for amnesty when compared to the crowds' candidate, the rioter Barabbas. It is tactical choice since it allows him to follow his own convictions, and to oppose the Sanhedrin, whom he distrusts (Mk 15, 10) and hopefully hide behind a crowd that has more than once changed allegiance (see Mk 11, 8-10). However it fails since the Sanhedrin's hold over the crowd is stronger than he had expected (Mk 15, 11). He loses this game of political chess and he loses the life of Jesus (Mk 15, 15). Thirdly there is his response to Joseph of Arimathea's request to release to body of Jesus to his custody (Mk 15, 42-45). Roman regulations were clear on how the body was to be disposed of in such a case. Formal burial was not an option. We cannot but presume that Pilate wasn't surprised at the request. Even more surprising is that he granted it. He does however first confirm that Jesus was dead, a death that would have been considered premature when most who were crucified died after about three days following actual crucifixion. It was an act in clear defiance of Roman regulations⁴⁵. In this particular case, Mark presents Pilate as the prefect with a human heart.

These three points serve to offer a portrait of an individual which contrasts strongly with Mark's portrait of the Jewish leadership. He remains a Roman official, someone used to privilege and exercising authority. He plays a political

⁴⁴ H. K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, p. 112.

⁴⁵ Also worthy of note is that Pilate was only surprised "*that he was already dead*".

game, hoping to secure a stronger position, a more dominant position in the complex mosaic that made up the complex mix of politics and religion that marked the land of Judea in those times. Mark does not directly blame Pilate for Jesus' crucifixion (contrary to directly blaming of Jews), but at the same time he does not allow the prefect to escape from the judgment of the readers, whose own reading of the narrative will be influenced, in turn, by the *Sitz im Leben* within which they hear and read Mark's Gospel.