

『南山神学』42号（2019年3月）pp. 1-24.

PORTRAITS OF PILATE ACCORDING TO THE CHRISTIANS' CANONICAL WRITINGS AND JEWISH HISTORICAL WORKS

Part four: Pilate in the Narrative of Matthew's Gospel

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Introduction

As the one of Synoptic Gospel, the Gospel according to Matthew is a part of long discussion concerning relationship between three Gospels (Mt; Mk; Lk), where the most exiting topic regards relationship between the Mark's Gospel and the Matthew's Gospel¹. Although tradition places the Gospel of Matthew on the first place in the New Testament, the resent studies prefer the Gospel of Mark as the first written Gospel that serves for Matthew and Luke as one of the sources for their versions. Depends on the preference, the information concerning the Gospel of Matthew may differ, and for this reason, without going into the detailing explanation we present the basic and very general description of this writing. According to the tradition, the author the Matthew's Gospel is the apostle Matthew, however this tradition is challenged due to the Synoptic Problem². The addressers of the Gospel are Palestinian Christian or Christian (both from Gentile and from Jews) living in east parts of Mediterranean Sea, which also indicates the palace of origin that usually is determined as Palestine

¹ Brief and holistic presentation of the Synoptic Gospels is offered by: C. R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 2005, pp. 39-51.

² More about the problem of the author of the Matthew's Gospel, cf. C. Mitch & E. Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2010, pp. 16-18.

or Syria³. Concerning the date of composition of the Gospel, it depends of accepted authorship of the writing. If the author is the apostle Matthew, it was written after AD 70, that means after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. However, if the author differs from the apostle Matthew, the Gospel was probably written in Ad 80's or 90's⁴. Concerning the genre, naturally the Matthew's writing is a Gospel, which primal purpose is proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God⁵. Depends on an approach to the Matthew's Gospel several structures were presented⁶. For a purpose of this study, here, we will present only a structure of narrative regarding the trail of Jesus (Mt 27, 11-26), which is the basic text for analysis concerning Matthew's presentation of Pilate. The pericope (Mt 27, 11-26) can be divided into three parts, where first one concerns Jesus' trial before Pilate (Mt 27, 11-14); the second one concerns the Pilate arguing with Jews (Mt 27, 15-23); and third one concerns a problem of responsibility for Jesus' death (Mt 27, 24-26). The structure of the first pericope (Mt 27, 11-14) is: A-B-A¹ where A is verse 11 (*now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so;*); B is verse 12 (*but when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer*); and A¹ are verses 13-14 (*then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed*). This structure exposes that the main issue of this pericope is Jewish accusation. The second pericope (Mt 27, 15-23) has structure A-B-A¹ where A are verses 15-19 (*now at the festival the governor*

³ D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, MG, Collegeville 2007, pp. 10-16.

⁴ J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Paternoster Press, Grand Rapids 2005, pp. 14-17.

⁵ Some scholars attempt to specify the genre. For some examples, cf. G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2010, pp. 30-31.

⁶ For some the most representative structures cf. G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Matthew*, pp. 40-47.

was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time, they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So, after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him) which concerns Pilate's involvement in election by the crowd a one prisoner to be freed; B is verse 20 (*now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed*) which indicates the Sanhedrin's influence over the crowd in matter of favoring Barabbas; and A¹ are verses 21-23 (*the governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!*) which expose Pilate's action in order to free Jesus. The structure of the second pericope shows that the main focus is the action of the Sanhedrin. The third pericope (Mt 27, 24-26) has structure A-B-A¹ where A is verse 24 (*And when Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves."*) exposing Pilate's denials of taking responsibility for Jesus' death; B is verse 25 (*And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children!"*) showing that Jews accept the responsibility for Jesus' death, and A¹ is verse 26 (*Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified*) indicating that Romans did the death penalty. The structure of the third pericope indicates the Jewish responsibility for Jesus execution. The analysis of the structure of narrative concerning Jesus' trial seems to expose that the main author's focus, in positive way, is Jews' responsibility for rejection of Jesus. Indirectly, in negative

way, it exposes lack of any responsibility for Jesus' death on side of the prefect (in particular) and Romans (in general).

1. Introducing Pilate

καὶ δέσαντες αὐτὸν ἀπήγαγον καὶ παρέδωκαν Πιλάτῳ τῷ ἡγεμόνι. (Mt 27, 2)

They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor. (Mt 27, 2)

Matthew for very first time introduces Pilate as the governor, even if this title was reserved in strict technical meaning for the Roman official ruling the province of Syria, which Judea was only one of the part⁷. In fact, Pilate was a *prefect* – a commander of auxiliary Roman troops, who takes responsibility for maintaining an order in Judea, which *de facto* including the collecting of taxes and protecting the Cesare's properties in this region⁸. Prefect was in Judea a representing the governor of Syria Province, to whom was subordinated⁹. For this reason, his prerogatives were limited, and inhabitants of Judea have rights to appeal to the governor of Syria, when they found the decision of a prefect to be unjust. It forced a prefect to cooperate to some extent with local administration, which in case of Judea was represented by the elite related to the Jerusalem Temple. Since, the local administration was semi-independent (mostly in matter concerning religious and cultural issues) they may make plans,

⁷ Similar to Luke's narrative (Lk 3, 1), but contrary to Mark's narrative where the title is not used (Mk 15, 1).

⁸ G. R. Osborne, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Matthew, p. 1010.

⁹ The date of Pilate's administration of Judea (26-36 AD) as prefect is known to us from Josephus Flavius' account concerning the prefects and procurators of Judea (*BJ* 2.169-170), among whom Pilate is the fifth in group of prefects.

decisions or judgements in limits of their powers, but all of them must be approved by the prefect. The trial of Jesus is one of these cases, where the Sanhedrin within the Jewish trail, after founding Jesus guilty, condemned him to death (Mt 26, 66), but this decision has to be approved by the Pilate¹⁰. He is the person who will have to make a decisive sentence, which makes him the agent taking the main responsibility for Jesus' fate.

2. A trial before Pilate (Mt 27, 11-14)

¹¹ Ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἐστάθη ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ ἡγεμόνος· καὶ ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτὸν ὁ ἡγεμὼν λέγων· σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἔφη· σὺ λέγεις.
¹² καὶ ἐν τῷ κατηγορεῖσθαι αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχιερέων καὶ πρεσβυτέρων οὐδὲν ἀπεκρίνατο. ¹³ τότε λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· οὐκ ἀκούεις πόσα σου καταμαρτυροῦσιν; ¹⁴ καὶ οὐκ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ πρὸς οὐδὲ ἓν ῥῆμα, ὥστε θαυμάζειν τὸν ἡγεμόνα λίαν. (Mt 27, 11-14)

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." ¹² But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. ¹³ Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" ¹⁴ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed. (Mt 27, 11-14)

¹⁰ Between the narrative concerning the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Mt 26, 57-68) and the information regarding handing Jesus to the prefect (Mt 27, 2), Matthew placed a narrative concerning Peter's denial of Jesus (Mt 26, 69-75) and between the information about handing Jesus (Mt 27, 2) and a narrative concerning Jesus' trial before Pilate (Mt 27, 11-54) he placed a narrative about Judas' suicide (Mt 27, 3-10). Including of these two cases does not be accidental, rather it is a preparation for comparative layout, which presents Pilate in context of the disciples' attitude. Note, that the narrative regarding Judas' death is included only in Matthew's Gospel.

Mt 27, 2 indicates that Jesus hands were bound, which another way to say that He was arrested. For this reason, the narrative regarding the Jesus' trail before Pilate, starts directly with the prefect's question that indicates rather advance point of the trial than its beginning. Matthew omitted not only a casual greeting but also the presentation of the initial Jewish accusation against Jesus¹¹. According to the author's narrative, Pilate already knows that Jesus is accused of claiming to be the King of Jews, which suggests that an accusation with sufficient argumentation has been presented to him. Did it contain only this one particular crime, or had it been more complex list of Jesus' crimes? It is possible that the accusers named more than one crime, which is supposition based of casual trial presiding known to us from many records regarding the trials before Romans officials. Even if we accepted that it was an exceptional case, and the accusation concerns initially only the one crime, verse 12 suggests that later the Jewish authorities presents other crimes in order to strengthen the initially accusation or in order to present more convicting accusations¹². Matthew's account focuses on the accusation that is presented to the reader from Pilate's perspective that is exposed in his question "are you the King of Jews"? It indicates that Pilate understood the Jewish accusation in strictly political sense. We do not know if Jews presented their accusation against Jesus in such a way, but Matthew's narrative strongly suggests this option. Certainly, Jesus did not take this question in the same way as Pilate, since His answer although in bit puzzling manner but His answer is much closer to meaning "yes" than meaning "no". Never in the Gospel of Matthew, has Jesus in direct speech presented Himself as the Messiah, however in the passion narrative, He two times was

¹¹ For proper form of presentation an accusation compare Ac 14, 1-9 as an example.

¹² The second possibility is not support by the text, however is it still possible, since Matthew's narrative focuses only on the accusation with the strongest sounding political connotation.

asked about His Messianic dignity, and in all cases, He answered in the same way¹³. It gives us a hint to understand a meaning of Jesus' answer to Pilate's question, since based on answer given in Mt 26, 64 the Sanhedrin found Him guilty in the same way should be interpreted His answer to the prefect¹⁴. De facto Jesus's answer was most probably understood by Pilate as a confirmation of the charge.

In Mt 27, 12 Matthew gives an account that specify Jesus attitude toward Pilate from His attitude toward the Sanhedrin. Jesus answered to Pilate's question, but He stayed silence toward Jewish accusations, which probable did not differ much from these used during the trial before the Sanhedrin, but probably they presented them in stronger political context. The reason for Jesus' silence stays mysteries, since no information allowing to make convincing statement regarding this matter was provided by the author. For this reason, an interpretation of Jesus' silence became a subject of less or more convincing theory. In our opinion, if the accusation presented by Jews during the trial before Pilate does not differs *in meritum* from these presented in Mt 26, 59-66, Jesus has nothing to add to that He had said already during the trial before the Sanhedrin. Although less possible and hardly supported by text, however still possible is theory that attitude of Jesus' who do not offend the Jews before the Gentile, contrasts sharply with attitude of Jews, who harshly accused and handed Him to the Gentile¹⁵.

¹³ The two cases concern Jesus's trials; first the trial before the Sanhedrin (Mt 26, 64) and second during the trial before Pilate (Mt 27, 11). Additionally, the same answer (*you say so*) is given to the question of Judas (Mt 26, 25). D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 388.

¹⁴ As in Mt 26, 64 Jesus agrees with indirectly implicated Him messianic dignity, so in Mt 27, 11 He agrees with Pilate's unaware statement regarding His kingship.

¹⁵ As rather unconvincing interpretation, we found theory of Nolland, who wrote "He accepts his situation and refuses to fight back". J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 1162-1163. The reason for our position is that Matthew does not presents Jesus as one, who lost hope or one who is not in control of entire situation. The theological message of the

The strange in the eyes of Pilate attitude of Jesus caused his reaction (Mt 27, 13). This rhetorical question (*do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?*) exposes more than one aspect of Pilate's character. This question indicates that to passive attitude of Jesus toward the initial accusation, Jewish answer with definitive attack, where all possible accusations were probably presented in order strength an advantage they have already won and to secure a final victory. It also indirectly suggests that the new accusation only strengthen the position of the Sanhedrin and deeply weaken a Jesus' one. It seems, that according to Mathew to this situation Pilate answered with attitude not free from emotional involvement of the judge. Pilate's question verbally expresses his doubt concerning kind of physical deafness on Jesus side (*do you not hear...*), but here it should be taken rather in figurative sense expressing great astonishing on the prefect side. Although it is impossible to answer questions if it was a first time in Pilate's carrier when he met an accused showing so passive attitude during facing his accusers, or he was simply surprised by the importance of accusations, however he was deeply convinced that Jesus's should take an action in order to protect Himself¹⁶. It seems that according to Matthew, Pilate met a great challenge that questions his Hellenistic values, which underline, among others, natural right to protect one's own life. Pilate was a soldier with simple common sense that, in time of danger, if you do not protect you own life it would be taken from you by your opponents. We can assume that Pilate was convinced that Jesus' should take action defending himself, which indirectly indicates that was some chance for Jesus' success.

periscope (cf. Is 53, 7) should be stresses more than socio-psychological approach. D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC, Thomas Nelson, Mexico City 1995, pp. 818-819.

¹⁶ Osborne suggests that Pilate could be also angered by Jesus' attitude. G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary*, p. 1016.

Verse 14 shows that Jesus not only does not take any actions expected by Pilate, but He event to not bather Himself to talk to the prefect. Considering the legal context of the event (Jesus is judging by Pilate), we could expect that Jesus' silence would works not only against Him, since the lack of defense was usually interpreted as confirmation of guiltiness, but also as offence toward the judge¹⁷. However, the second one is probably not a message intended by Matthew. The message expressed by the author in verse 13 in form of question, now is repeated in form of direct statement. Pilate was amazed (despite the fact if this amaze regards only Jesus' attitude toward Jewish accusation or also Jesus' attitude toward Pilate), which must be consider as rather surprising attitude for soldier who has seen much. It seems that Jesus maid a great impression on Pilate, which would explain the prefect's attempt to save Jesus, who made any attempt to save Himself¹⁸.

In Matthew's version of narrative regarding the trial before Pilate, the prefect is not only a main agent of the event but also the author's particularly focus. This special interest in Pilate's attitude has much common with Matthew's evaluation of the prefect, which is built not on comparative approach (Pilate versus Jewish) but on positive perspective on him.

3. A Passover's custom (Mt 27, 15-18)

⁵ Κατὰ δὲ ἑορτὴν εἰώθει ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἀπολύειν ἓνα τῶ ὄχλω δέσμιον ὃν ἤθελον. ¹⁶ εἶχον δὲ τότε δέσμιον ἐπίσημον λεγόμενον [Ἰησοῦν] Βαραββᾶν. ¹⁷ συνηγμένων οὖν αὐτῶν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Πιλάτος· τίνα θέλετε ἀπολύσω

¹⁷ H. K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 130.

¹⁸ Patte takes Pilate's amaze as expression of his positive attitude toward Jesus. D. Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew. A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1987, p. 378.

ύμῖν, [Ἰησοῦν τὸν] Βαραββᾶν ἢ Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν; ¹⁸ ἦδει γὰρ ὅτι διὰ φθόνον παρέδωκαν αὐτόν. (Mt 27, 15-18)

¹⁵ Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷ So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" ¹⁸ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. (Mt 27, 15-18)

From verse 15 the narrative jumps directly to Pilate's attempt to free Jesus, without indication of the final result of the trial. It suggests that the trial did not end with a positive decision for Jesus, which can be supposed from verse 14 where Pilate's amazement possibly was caused by a manner Jesus lost against His accusers. It is possible to assume that this stage of Matthew's narrative exposes Pilate's personal attempt to free Jesus¹⁹. From this reason, Matthew writes about Pilate's attempt to free a prisoner during the time of Passover feast, without connecting it directly with the Passover feast as one of events connected to this festival²⁰. Pilate is in control of the situation, he initiates the event, and he gives the people a right to make a choice who will be grounded with the prefect's mercy.

Verse 16 exposes a new information concerning a fact that Romans captured a man well known for his criminal activities. Matthew gives also his full name, Jesus Barabbas²¹. However, the verse is not just a short, laconic but still

¹⁹ Some scholars think that the costume was Pilate's own invention. D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 822.

²⁰ Matthew's account fits better to non-biblical sources that mention some local officials, who practiced such customs in a way similar to this presented in the narrative. Cf. Josephus, *Ant* 20:208-209; 2015.

²¹ Some manuscripts omit the name Jesus (cf. Byzantine Codex). Cf. J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1168-1169.

informative sentence, but it is very skillfully crafted sentence containing indirectly this kind of information, which cannot be said in direct manner²². First, Matthew says that “they have” instead of “Roman captured”. Second, he says about “notorious prisoner” instead of “rioter against Rome”. Third, he gives the full name of the prisoner, which is a crucial information for interpretation of the rest of narrative, since both candidates for Pilate’s mercy had the same name (Jesus). It seems that Matthew consciously used euphemistic approach to announce important but “sensitive” information. Did he do this in order to avoid potential problems from side of Romans, or to omit any information that would doubt Pilate’s virtues²³. We favor the second possibility, and arguments for this will be presented during the following analysis.

In verse 17, Pilate presents to the crowd two candidates from whom they have to choose one. Pilate did this in form of open question, with clearly indication of the name for each candidate. He gives to the crowd a right to decide about a life for one, and consequently a death for another. Matthew approach to presentation the event again seems to be little bit strange for few reasons²⁴. First, readers are not informed (until verse 17) that Jesus will be opponent to Barabbas, which creates effect of surprise stimulated by fact that in verse 16 the focus was put on Barabbas and not on Jesus. Second, he presents a full name of Barabbas (the second time) and full name of Jesus (for the first time). Third, in presentation of Jesus, Matthew’s Pilate says, “Jesus who is called Christ” (the Messiah), which

²² Bond rightly noted that presentation of Barabbas (also it applies to presentation of Jesus) is “completely depoliticized”, and all event is settled more in socio-religious context rather than in political context. H. K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*, p. 128.

²³ In this case, a focus is Pilate’s way of performing the office of the prefect.

²⁴ Gundry recognizes verse 17 as the Matthew’s attempt to presents Pilate in pro-Jesus light. R.H. Gundry, *Matthew. Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, Eerdmans Publisher, Grand Rapids 1982, p. 561.

was rather quit controversial title among Jews²⁵. Forth, Matthew's Pilate does not suggest his will to the crowd, allowing the event to run in any direction, since no arrangements were undertaken. Taking to consideration these reasons, it is possible to deduce that according to Matthew, Pilate failed to recognize a real state of things.

The last statement seems to be attested by verse 18, where Matthew indicates Pilate's knowledge regarding a real reason for handing Jesus to him. Does he realized the reason during the trial or the knowledge came from other sources? we really don't know; however, it seems that he had possessed this knowledge before he presented two candidatures to the crowd. If so, Matthew's narrative may indirectly show Pilate as very naive ignorant, who is not capable to predict possible development of situation based on possessed knowledge. However, verse 18 is rather a postpone explanation for Pilate's action described in verse 17. If so, Pilate presents two candidatures in order to save Jesus called Messiah, even Matthew had no desire to indicate it directly.²⁶.

4. A dram of Pilate's wife (Mt 27, 19)

¹⁹ Καθημένου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ λέγουσα· μηδὲν σοὶ καὶ τῷ δικαίῳ ἐκείνῳ· πολλὰ γὰρ ἔπαθον

²⁵ Here we refer to underspending of title "Messiah" by common people, who mostly thought about Messiah in category of powerful leader who will liberate Jewish nation from suppressing Roman power. T.H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Hodder and Stoughton, London1951, p. 228.

²⁶ Since the name Jesus means *God is salvation* and both candidatures have this name, is possible to assume kind of Matthew's theological cryptography in this very laconic narrative of Jesus' trial. Barabbas is a one potential way for Jewish salvation understood as the liberation from the enemy by using power and force, and Jesus of Nazareth is the second way for Jewish salvation understood as the liberation from hatred and sin by favor love and forgiveness. Matthew's Pilate let Jews to decide the way they will follow.

σήμερον κατ' ὄναρ δι' αὐτόν. (Mt 27, 19)

¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." (Mt 27, 19)

Verse 19 obviously interrupts narrative concerning presentation of two candidatures to the crowd (Mt 27, 15-18. 20-26). Not only this, but also its content is a unique account restricted only to Matthew's Gospel²⁷. Unnamed Pilate's wife gives him a warning, which is a result of her own experience, namely she has suffered what she had been touched. It took place during her sleep, and the reason for it somehow was directly connected to Jesus of Nazareth. Indirectly, Matthew suggests that Jesus in some way was a reason for her suffering. It is safe to suppose that the suffering took shape of a nightmare, this kind which disturbs not only a sleep but also deeply influenced our unconsciousness causing several possible negative sensations like fear, panic, sadness, depression and many others. This experience of Pilate's wife was so intensive that provoked her action to warn her husband, but it would be probably too much to assume that she suffered from some kind of revelation, since no sign characteristic of biblical revelation (even during the sleep) is recorded²⁸. Rather, Matthew presents the event in a way characteristic of non-monotheistic religion's system, namely institution of oracles, which were based on divine inspiration. The oracle of Pilate's wife contains one message for her husband and one juridical (in meaning) statement. The message "μηδὲν σοὶ καὶ τῷ δίκαιῳ ἐκείνῳ" - *have nothing to do with that innocent man* takes a direct meaning, which is not so far

²⁷ Naturally it alarms us to a special function, which this verse takes in Matthew's narrative regarding the trial of Jesus.

²⁸ Scholars usually point to a socio-religious function of dreams in the ancient times and see in Matthew's narrative a kind of divine intervention. Cf. G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary*, p. 1018.

from taking an obligation force. Pilate should not involve himself in condemnation of Jesus, even he is sitting "on the judgment seat", which obligated him to pass the verdict²⁹. This circumstance makes the message to be something more than just suggestion. This, at least, strong request contains to arguments, where first one concerns innocence of Jesus (juridical level), and the second one a trouble she has already experienced (personal level)³⁰. Since, the personal level is placed after the juridical level, the information concerning the suffering of Pilate's wife can be interpreted as indication of possible consequences in case Pilate would involve in condemnation of Jesus.

5. Pilate contra the crowd (Mt 27, 20-23)

²⁰ Οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ἔπεισαν τοὺς ὄχλους ἵνα αἰτήσωνται τὸν Βαραββᾶν, τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν ἀπολέσωσιν. ²¹ ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ ἡγεμὼν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τίνα θέλετε ἀπὸ τῶν δύο ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· τὸν Βαραββᾶν. ²² λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Πιλάτος· τί οὖν ποιήσω Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν; λέγουσιν πάντες· σταυρωθήτω. ²³ ὁ δὲ ἔφη· τί γὰρ κακὸν ἐποίησεν; οἱ δὲ περισσῶς ἔκραζον λέγοντες· σταυρωθήτω. (Mt 27, 20-23)

²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. ²¹ The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³ Then he asked, "Why,

²⁹ This part of the message explains a contain of narrative included in verse 24.

³⁰ Matthew used adjective τῶ δικαίῳ which can be translated as "righteous" or "innocent". Osborne for theological reason prefers "righteous" (Matthew's theological message to readers), however "innocent" fits better to literary context of verse 19. G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary*, p. 1019.

what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" (Mat 27, 19-23)

Verse 20 goes back to narrative Mt 27, 15-18 which was interrupted by another layer (v. 19). Matthew, after indicating in verse 18 that Pilate was aware of the Sanhedrin's true intention, now is given arguments proofing the statement of verse 18. The Sanhedrin influenced the crowd not only to opt for Barabbas but also to demand death for Jesus of Nazareth. In this way, the author indicates that the main aim of the Sanhedrin was not to free Barabbas but to put to death Jesus³¹. Probably, for this reason, Matthew does not write much about Barabbas himself³².

After creating in verses 18 and 20 necessary background for progressing the narrative, Matthew in verse 21 turn back to dialog between Pilate and the crowd, which starts with repeating the question presented in verse 17, similar in meaning but simplified by omitting the names of the candidatures³³. This affirmative question (who would be freed) is answered by affirmative answer that it is Barabbas whom the crowd wants to be released³⁴.

After clarifying positive aspect of the problem (who should be freed), Matthew's Pilate without any sign of emotional reaction precedes with negative aspect of the problem.

In verse 22, Pilate asks the crowd about Jesus fate. It may suggest that for him, rejection of Jesus in favor for Barabbas did not automatically mean Jesus's condemnation to the death. Second time, Pilate puts positive question to the

³¹ It naturally makes them to be blame for Jesus crucifixion. C. Mitch & E. Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 354.

³² Harrington is on opinion that a death of Jesus is a consequence of the Sanhedrin's will to release Barabbas. D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 388.

³³ J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1174.

³⁴ In this way Matthew exposes a natural approach in regarding to both candidatures.

crowd allowing them to decide also a fate of the one who was rejected³⁵. This time, he uses the name of subject in way identical to that of verse 17. Still there is not a truck of emotional involvement of Pilate, who seems to clarify the negative aspect of the problem, possible with some hope that Jesus also may find some favor from side of the crowd. Contrary to possible expectation of Pilate, the crowd demanded the crucifixion for Jesus called Christ, which was the reaction that not only surprised Pilate but also caused his emotional reaction exposed in the next question.

In verse 23 for the very first time Matthew's Pilate openly shows his emotion and pro-Jesus's attitude, which the most probably was caused by negative answer to very generous offer of Pilate that the crowd also may decide the fate of the second candidature. Pilate's dements for naming crimes committed by Jesus stayed unanswered. The crowd, that take part in juridical prerogative of Pilate to judge the prisoner, showed no mercy³⁶. If Pilate hoped that the crowd shows the mercy, his calculation failed. If Pilate hope that the crowd will take a full responsibility for Jesus's death, he won. However, it is probably no matter of what actually Pilate thought but rather the matter of Matthew's narrative strategy and aim in presentation of Pilate. Concerning the following narrative, we can suppose that Matthew wants to place whole responsibility for Jesus' death only on all Jews, and clearly excluding consciously any evilly motivated action of the prefect.

6. Pilate's handwashing (Mt 27, 24-26)

²⁴ ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Πιλάτος ὅτι οὐδὲν ὠφελεῖ ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον θόρυβος γίνεται,

³⁵ J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1175.

³⁶ Matthew used imperfect ἐκράζον to indicate that the crowd repeatedly yelled for Jesus's crucifixion. R.H. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 564.

λαβὼν ὕδωρ ἀπενίψατο τὰς χεῖρας ἀπέναντι τοῦ ὄχλου λέγων· ἀθῶός εἰμι ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵματος τούτου· ὑμεῖς ὄψεσθε. ²⁵ καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς πᾶς ὁ λαὸς εἶπεν· τὸ αἶμα αὐτοῦ ἐφ' ἡμᾶς καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ τέκνα ἡμῶν. ²⁶ τότε ἀπέλυσεν αὐτοῖς τὸν Βαραββᾶν, τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν φραγελλώσας παρέδωκεν ἵνα σταυρωθῇ. (Mt 27, 24-26)

²⁴ 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." ²⁵ Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" ²⁶ So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (Mt 27, 24-26)

Verse 24 starts a subsection (Mt 27, 24-26) in the narrative regarding Jesus' trial, which can be called "Matthew's pro-Pilate approach" and which is continuation of verse 19³⁷. First, Matthew presents reason for Pilate's action, where he informs that the prefect's logical arguing with the crowd brought no results, but quiet contrary, situation seems to go out of hand, heading for possible much serious consequences³⁸. As the prefect, Pilate already has had experience of people apprising against him, which forced him to use the force and caused him troubles with his superior. For this reason, Matthew's Pilate makes a symbolical gesture of washing the hand with simultaneous statement that he disagrees with their will, which indirectly is a confession of Jesus' innocent³⁹. By saying "*I am innocent of this man's blood*" Pilate excluded himself from the responsibility for the crowd's verdict, which is exactly the attitude

³⁷ Both, Mk 27, 19 and Mk 27, 24-25 are exclusively Matthew's material.

³⁸ Pilate's question for the reason for the crowd's demand, probably was interpreted as an attempt to undermine the will of the crowd, which was sufficient reason for exposing their dissatisfaction or even more, their antagonistic feeling toward the Roman official.

³⁹ R.H. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 565.

request from him by his wife (Mt 27, 19)⁴⁰. However, he goes even much far saying also “*see to it yourselves*” which means he led the crowd to do according to their will. Does it mean that he in the end refused to pass the sentence (precisely, to confirm the sentence passed by the crowd), and in this way make the trial go back to the within Jewish issues? The answer to this question depends on how we will interpret the next two verses (Mt 27, 25-26).

Verse 25 seems to give a positive answer to the last question, since the all Jews take full and exclusive responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion, when they say, “*his blood be on us and on our children*”. On the one hand this statement makes them to be the only one who will bear a responsibility for the decision and all consequences that may be a result of the decision⁴¹. Consequently, this excludes Pilate from any responsibility and consequences. On the other hand, the crowd is making the decisions not only about releasing of Barabbas but also about the fate of the one who was not released, even if it was not a part of the Pasover costume. Consequently, the trial of Jesus in the end finished with no sentence from side of Pilate, instead it turned into a kind of the crowd’ lynch. However, the crowd by using the idiom, do not confess its own guiltiness but only

⁴⁰ Herrington is on opinion that Pilate here follows rather Jewish custom (Deut 21, 6-9; Is 1, 15-16) then a Roman one. D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 389. However, in Hellenistic literature there are signs of similar custom. Cf. G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary*, p. 1020.

⁴¹ This idiom “*his blood be upon us*” indicates taking of responsibility for someone death, and it is often used in the Old Testament texts (cf. Lev 20, 9; Deut 19, 10; Josh 2, 19; 2 Sam 1, 16; Ezek 18, 13). Matthew adds “*and on our children*” which makes the idiom to be understood in two possible ways. First, it can be taken as indication of all Jews, which may be supported by the fact that the author exchanged term “the crowd” found in Mt 27, 10 (the particular approach) for term “people” in Mt 27, 25 (the generalization), which usually indicates the whole Israel, as the historic people of God. Second, it can make limitation regarding the responsibility and consequences, which are limited only to the two generations (those who demand Jesus’ death and their children), but do not apply to the whole Jewish nation. D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 389-390.

expresses the readiness to take a full responsibility for the decision⁴². Verse 25 if it stays alone, puts all responsibility for Jesus' death on the Jews, and at the same time makes Pilate free from responsibility or guiltiness⁴³.

However, verse 25 is not the last in the narrative of Jesus' trial, it is followed by verse 26, where Matthew informs that Pilate acts according to will and decision of Jews, namely he freed Jesus Barabbas for them, and ordered to crucify Jesus of Nazareth. Such the ending of the narrative leaves the reader with reflection that that the Sanhedrin achieved the desired aim, namely after sentenced Jesus to death (Mt 26, 66) and the trial (not free from some difficulties), they on expenses of the people (all Jews) were satisfied by Romans executing the death penalty⁴⁴. The readers of Matthew's Gospel are aware about the fact that Jesus was crucified by Romans, but the responsibility for rejection of the Messiah lies on Jesus' countrymen (the Jews).

7. Jesus' body (Mt 27, 57-58)

⁵⁷ Ὁψίας δὲ γενομένης ἦλθεν ἄνθρωπος πλούσιος ἀπὸ Ἀριμαθαίας, τοῦνομα Ἰωσήφ, ὃς καὶ αὐτὸς ἐμαθητεύθη τῷ Ἰησοῦ. ⁵⁸ οὗτος προσελθὼν τῷ Πιλάτῳ ἠτήσατο τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ. τότε ὁ Πιλάτος ἐκέλευσεν ἀποδοθῆναι. (Mt 27, 57-58)

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. (Mt 27, 57-58)

⁴² This indicates determination of the crowd. Probably, for the readers, the idiom indicates that the crowd confess the guiltiness. J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1178.

⁴³ In our opinion it is a basic axiom in Matthew's presentation of Pilate in particular and the Jesus' trial in general. D. Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. p. 380.

⁴⁴ J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1988, p. 124.

The last narrative where Pilate's name appeared is Mt 27, 57-58, which concerns releasing of Jesus body and a burial. Matthew starts with presentation of Joseph from Arimathaea, which comparing to similar in contain but drastically different in details an account of Mark, is consciously modified in order to achieve a particular aim. According to Matthew, Joseph is a disciple of Jesus (v. 57), and not the member of Sanhedrin with sympathetic attitude toward Jesus' teaching according to Mark's presentation of Joseph⁴⁵. Here, the action of Joseph is not viewed as an act of courage, like it is presented in Mark's version⁴⁶. Matthew's Joseph just goes to Pilate and ask for body of man, who was officially crucified (according to information place on the cross - Mt 27, 37) because of the Sanhedrin's accusation that He claimed to be the King of Jews (Mt 27, 11)⁴⁷. All these juridical and socio-political aspects creating a necessary background for interpretation of information given in Mt 27, 57-58 were consciously omitted by Matthew⁴⁸. For this reason, Matthew's account contains any sign of a problem connecting to asking for body of Jesus and receiving it. According to Matthew's narrative, Pilate without any questions or doubts (which are exposed in Mark's narrative – Mk 15, 43-45) just makes the order to release the body to Joseph. Taking to consideration the crime for which Jesus (officially – Mt 27, 37) was crucified, and the Roman regulation regarding a treatment of those who were

⁴⁵ Instead, Matthew described Joseph as "a reach man" which may indicate person of important social status, without forward specification. R.H. Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 580. These two presentations do not contradict each other, rather they show different perspective on Pilate as well as different aim in presentation of the prefect.

⁴⁶ Some scholars are on opinion that Joseph action was marked by some risk, since it was not common practice for the prefect to give this kind of favor. Cf. F.V. Filson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, A&C Black, London 1975, p. 298. However, this opinion is strongly influenced by Mark's version of the narrative concerning the Joseph request, rather than Matthew's version on the same issue.

⁴⁷ Note, that this aspect was raised only in the Sanhedrin's accusation of Jesus before Pilate (Mt 27, 11), but is constantly absent in narrative regarding Pilate facing the crowd (Mt 27, 15-26).

⁴⁸ G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 1048-1049.

sentenced for political issues, even if we respect the prefect's rights to act with considerable freedom in cases involving no-Roman, the Pilate's decision in general and its presentation by Matthew in particular must raise tremendous surprise on side of readers sharing the Christian faith. Since, the case of Joseph must be taken as extraordinary rather than casual one, however still passible one, its presentation, especially if we compare it to Mark's approach, exposes possible message for readers, which in are opinion has much common with way the author understood and wants to present the person of the prefect. This last recorded by Matthew, the act of good will from the side of prefect, which is not the only one in narrative concerning the Jesus's trail, seems to be the final line in painting a picture of Pilate in his narrative.

8. Characteristic of Mathew's presentation of Pilate

Concerning the narrative of Jesus's trial, the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthews show strikingly deep similarities, which usually are explained by Matthew's depends on the Mark Gospel⁴⁹. The same applies to narrative concerning the Pilate, where Matthew seems to heavily depends on Mark's version, however it does not mean just rewired the Mark's account regarding the fifth prefect of Judea. Probably, working on the Mark's material, Matthew used two devises in order to change and adopted the source material in accordance with his own theological conception and his perception of Pilate (or his desire to present a new perspective of Pilate). The first device is grammar. Matthew often without changing the source narrative in literary sense, by using

⁴⁹ According to the tradition the Gospel of Matthew was written prior to the Gospel of Mark, however recently in favor is a theory of a reverse order (Mark first and then Matthew). For short introduction to this long and vigorous debate that occupied scholars in second half of twenty century (the problem is called "the Synoptic Gospels"), cf. G. R. Osborne, *Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 33-38.

grammar changed the understanding of the material. Changing tenses of verbs, replacing words with semantically similar one, omitting or adding words, were the most frequent “innovations” that he used working on the source⁵⁰. The second device used by Matthew to modify a meaning of the source’s narrative are passages added by Matthew, which for purpose of this study we call “Matthew’s layer”. It refers to two passages in Matthew’s narrative concerning Jesus’ trial. They are material regarding the Pilate’s wife (Mt 27, 19) and Pilate’s washing hands (Mt 27, 24-25), which can’t be found elsewhere in the Synoptic Gospels. Appearance of something unusual, comparing to already existing things, naturally strongly suggests the author will contribute something new to the sources. In our opinion, the Matthew’s narrative regarding Jesus’s trial is such a case, however majority of scholars, most probably following the matrix that Matthew follows Mark in his narrative concerning Jesus’ trial, don’t pay sufficient attention to a fact that similarity in narrative does not automatically mean similarity in meaning. The consequence of this approach is common conviction that Matthew presents Pilate in the same way as Mark does, even if they are aware of “the Matthew’s layer”. The final conclusion concerning the Pilate, is that Matthew like Mark put responsibility for Jesus’ death on side of Jews, but he does not freed Pilate from sharing part of responsibility for the death of Jesus. To this conclusion we can’t agree. We are on opinion that Matthew puts all responsibility for Jesus death on Jewish side, which is strongly supported by Mt 27, 25 (a part of “Matthew’s layer”), but he completely freed Pilate from responsibility for Jesus’s death, which is supported by Mt 27, 24 (a part of “Matthew’s layer”). The stronger argument is the “Matthew’s layer” where Matthew literary exposes Jews taking responsibility for Jesus’ death (Mt

⁵⁰ Brilliant and extensive analysis of these changes can be found in the commentary of R. Gundry. R.H. Gundry, *Matthew*, pp. 550-585.

27, 25) and Pilate who is not taking responsibility for Jesus's death (Mt 27. 24). However, in the Matthew's narrative there is another aspect that support the idea that he freed Pilate from any responsibility. In Mt 27, 19 the Pilate wife directly exposes that Jesus is the righteous. In indirect way the same idea was presented by Pilate in his question "*what evil has he done?*" which in negative way indicates Jesus as the righteous⁵¹. On the one hand, Pilate and his wife in some way recognized Jesus as the righteous (in sense of innocent), on the other hand the Sanhedrin (Mt 26, 65-68) and all people (Mt 27, 25) to the last moment did not accepted Jesus as the righteous (in sense of Messiah).

Helen Bond thinks that "*the Matthean Pilate plays a much less significant role within the Roman trial scene than the Markan Pilate*"⁵² since the main concern of the author is rejection of Jesus by people. Concerning Matthew's main concern of the trial narrative, we agree with Bond, however in regarding to presentation of Pilate, we hold a different opinion. In Mark's narrative of the trial, Pilate as a person is on little concern, but Pilate attitude to Jesus is one of the most important Mark's layers, which is used by the author as position to another Mark's layer concerning Jewish attitude toward Jesus. Structure of Mk 15, 6-15 proofs that Mark is not interested in Pilate himself or the Sanhedrin itself but in attitudes of both groups toward Jesus, which in Mark's narrative is presented in manner favoring Pilate. For Mark, Pilate is only an instrument to achieve his aim. However, Matthew narrative of the trial is strongly build around the person of the prefect, mostly but not exclusively due to the "Matthew's layer" since according to the structure of the narrative Mt 27, 11-26 Pilate is presented as the protagonist⁵³. In fact, Matthew's narrative presents Jesus as the object, who

⁵¹ It is on less importance if the term "righteous" takes here theological meaning (to be right before God) or socio-juridical (to be innocent).

⁵² H. K. Bond, Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation, p. 136.

⁵³ As the protagonist, Pilate is presented in: Mt 27, 11. 13-14. 15-18. 19. 21-23. 24. 26, which creates majority of the narrative.

generated ground for presentation of two main subjects of narrative, on the one side Pilate and on the other side the Sanhedrin (Mt 27, 11-14) and the people (Mt 27, 15-26). It is important to note that the subjects opposing Jesus are changing through progressing narrative from particular (the Sanhedrin) to general (people = all Jews), and at the same time Pilate stays the protagonist throughout the whole narrative. In Matthew's narrative of the trial, Pilate is on critical importance, since it is the prefect, whom Matthew wants to totally free from responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion⁵⁴.

It is possible to discuss if the Matthew's approach is correct in accordance to socio-juridical standards of that times, but the real question concerns reason for choosing this approach. Considering the background and aim of the Matthew's Gospel and using by the author the title "governor" instead of appropriate for Pilate title "prefect" allows us to suppose that Matthew wants to convince the readers that rejection of the Messiah is within Jewish matter, and Romans play in this event no more than instrumental rule.

⁵⁴ Mt 27, 26 does not makes Pilate responsible for Jesus' death, it makes him executor of the penalty decided first by the Sanhedrin (Mt 26, 66) and then by all people (Mt 27, 25).