Portraits of Pilate According to Christian Canonical Writings and Jewish Historical Works

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Abstract

This study concerns Luke’s perspective on Pilate, the fifth prefect of Judea, as it is presented in Luke’s Gospel. Recording eight events involving the prefect, Luke shows his socio and theological understanding and the inter-operation of the event regarding Jesus’ death, which are directly related to Pilate. Luke’s account concerning Pilate does not lead to making a judgment about Pilate, but shows him rather as a mid-level official trapped between two worlds, a one world where hostility and conflicts of interests could have fatal consequences, and other world where common sense and the demands of justice and truth take second place. A place where the struggle to maintain one’s integrity makes demands almost too weighty for human fragility to bear.

Introduction

Pilate, prefect of Judea, is mentioned not only in Jewish writings but also in Christian canonical writings. All four Gospels are significant, since they portray the prefect from four different perspectives, for four different purposes, in accord with the author’s theological and literary strategy. One cannot but be intrigued by the way the same person and his deeds are presented and interpreted in different ways. Naturally this observation leads to questions concerning the reason for these differences, which most probably cannot be explained by a simple statement regarding the subjective element in each evangelists’ perception. Following on from our presentation in part one of “Pilate in Jewish writings” we now turn our attention in the following parts to the portraits of Pilate presented by each of the four Gospel writers. We are going to begin with Luke’s perspective on Pilate, because its peculiarity lies in fact that although his Gospel’s narrative heavily depends of Mark’s and Matthew’s Gospels, however his interpretation of Pilate and his involvement in Jesus’ crucifixion reveals a very different understanding of the person of the prefect and a different evaluation of his deeds.

We will start with an examination of all passages where the name of Pilate is mentioned directly or indirectly, in order to present to reader the progressive character of Luke’s presentation of Pilate. Based on the results of the analyses of biblical passages we will present our

Analysis of Relevant Pericope

1. Historical Setting Lk 3, 1

   Εν ἔτει δὲ πεντεκαιδεκάτῳ τῆς ἡγεμονίας Τιβερίου Καίσαρος, ἡγεμονεύοντος Ποντίου Πιλάτου τῆς Ἰουδαίας, καὶ τετρααρχοῦντος τῆς Γαλιλαίας Ἡρῴδου, Φιλίππου δὲ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ τετρααρχοῦντος τῆς Φιλιππαίας καὶ Τραχωνίτιδος χώρας, καὶ Λυσανίου τῆς Αβιληνῆς τετρααρχοῦντος, (Lk 3, 1)

   In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, (Lk 3, 1)

   Pilate is mentioned by Luke for the first time, in his precise delineation of the historical background to the beginning of John the Baptist’s prophetic ministry, which precedes the public appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. Since the dates of Pilate’s administration of Judea (26–36 AD) as prefect are known to us from Josephus Flavius’ account concerning the prefects and procurators of Judea (BJ 2.169–170), among whom Pilate is the fifth one, we can fix the timeframe of events related to Jesus and His trial before Pilate. The Greek text says that Pilate was governor of Judea, which here means a commander of auxiliary troops (military aspect of ruling), since Judea was administrated by military prefects (since 6 AD until 41 AD) and procurators (from 44 AD until 67 AD), and the title “governor” was reserved for Roman official ruling the whole province of Syria containing also Judea. The information provided by Luke is attested to by archeological evidence known as the “Pilate stone”, which confirms Pilate as an historical person. Lk 3, 1 informs about political and religious (Lk 3, 2) context of Pilate’s rule in Judea, which was limited to the protection of Caesars’ properties in Judea and collecting the annual taxes for Rome. It also, indirectly expose the necessity for Pilate to cooperate with local Jewish administration (political and religious) in order to fulfil his task.

2. Pilate an the Galilean Pilgrims Lk 13, 1

   Παρῆσαν δὲ τινες ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ καιρῷ ἀπαγγέλλοντες αὐτῷ περὶ τῶν Γαλιλαίων ὧν τὸ αἷμα Πιλᾶτος ἔμιξεν μετὰ τῶν θυσιῶν αὐτῶν. (Lk 13, 1)

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2 Josephus in AJ 18.35 used the title “procurator” of Judaea, however inscriptions found on the Pilate Stone uses the title “prefect” of Judea. Josephus was influenced by Tacitus’ references to Pilate. Generally, the term “prefect” was in use until 41 AD that is the beginning of the four year reign of Herod Agrippa I as the king of Judea, and it refers to the first series of Roman rulers of Judea. The term “procurator” was used after Herod Agrippa I’s death in 44 AD, and it refers to the second series of Roman rulers of Judea. Although the terms differ, the duties related to the terms are the same. Prefects and procurators were responsible for collecting the imperial taxes and keeping the region in order, and for this purpose they possessed limited military prerogatives.
There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. (Lk 13, 1)

The second time Luke mentions the name of Pilate is in context of Jesus teaching concerning the necessity of repentance (Lk 13, 1–5). The occasion for Jesus’s teaching was news of the sudden and brutal death of some pilgrims from Galilee, most probably during the Passover feast in Jerusalem.³ Related rather laconically, Pilate is blamed directly for the killing of some Galileans, who probably were not the only ones, who suffered his cruelty. The incident took place when sacrifices were being offered at the Temple. The comment that their blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices may suggest that the slaughter took place in the Temple, however other external witnesses don’t mention such a case, which would be something unusual if it really happened. For this reason, it is better to understand the information figuratively as placing Pilate’s action against the Galileans during the Passover feast, rather than placing the incident in the Jerusalem Temple. The incident itself is illustrative of Pilate’s cruelty and presents him in very bad light, however it seems to say more about his office and duties connected to it, than about him. As the military commander in charge of protecting the uncertain peace in politically the most crucial region from the perspective of Rome’s geo-political interests, earned it the name of “the city always ready to rise”. On more than one occasion he felt obliged to use military power against rebellious groups in order to prevent an incident developing into a full-scale uprising against Rome. The information provided in Lk 13, 1 seems to be one such case, since the Passover feast was always used by opponents of Rome to agitate among the vast multitude of pilgrims, using arguments blending religious and political issues. To this danger, all prefects and procurator, including Pilate, answered with equal steadfastness.

3. Conspiracy against Jesus Lk 20, 20

Kaὶ παρατηρήσαντες ἀπέστειλαν ἐγκαθέτους ὑποκρινομένους ἑαυτοὺς δικαίους εἶναι, ὅπως παραδοῦναι αὐτὸν τῇ ἀρχῇ καὶ τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ τοῦ ἡγεμόνος. (Lk 20, 20)

So they watched him, and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. (Lk 20, 20)

In this phrase, instead of the name of Pilate, his function, here again described as the governor of Judea, is mentioned. Pilate appears here in the context of a possible “conspiracy plot” by Jesus and reported by the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin, (Lk 20, 18–26), that justifies handing him over to the Roman authorities. Since the Jewish authorities were fearful of what they perceived as dangerous elements in Jesus’ teaching, they decided to eliminate him by using Pilate (Lk 20, 20). However, as we noted in part one, the Roman authorities were not interested in cases concerning the Jewish Law or customs, sufficient reason for Pilate to pay attention on Jesus, had to be framed as political or economic issues. Thus they asked Jesus about necessity of respecting the Roman taxation system, one of the most vexing issue in

³ In our opinion, the event mentioned in Lk 13, 1 is the same as this mentioned by Flavius in AJ 18.60–62.
relation between Roman officials and their subjects (Lk 20, 21–26). Jesus “wrong” answer to their question, could have led to an accusation of political agitation against Rome, major crime under Roman law. This passage focuses more on Pilate’s function rather than his character. Pilate as the prefect of Judea had a juridical prerogative over the Jews only in cases concerning political and economic issues, which excluded all kind of religious or culture aspects of Jewish society. Here we can also see the roots of the *titulus*, the description of the Jesus’ crime that was placed over his head on the cross.

4. The wider context of the narrative regarding Pilate - Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Lk 22, 66–71)

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. They said, “If you are the Messiah, tell us.” He replied, “If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer.” But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” All of them asked, “Are you, then, the Son of God?” He said to them, “You say that I am.” Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!”

In the Gospel of Luke the name of Pilate appears, not surprisingly, most frequently in the narrative concerning Jesus’ trial, persecution and death. Luke does not place Pilate as the subject of the narrative since the focus of his account always concentrates on Jesus of Nazareth. The Roman prefect appears as the person, who somehow is rather accidentally connected to fate of Jesus, due to his office. The author does not present his background or even a schematic biography. Also, his family and his future fate are not subjects for Luke’s consideration. Pilate is the official who just happened to be involved in case of the main hero of Luke’s historical account. The presentation of Pilate is always fragmentary and rather indirect and can be found in Lk 22, 47–23, 56. However, this does not mean that Luke’s presentation of Pilate is nothing more that some unconnected information given without method and purpose. Although, Pilate is not the main interest of Luke’s narrative, he plays a very important role in the author’s historical account of Jesus’s death. Luke consciously uses the person of Pilate as a contrasting example of attitudes toward Jesus, which is compared with the attitude of the Jewish leadership and the Temple authorities. For this reason, it is worthwhile noting the wider context where Jesus is portrayed as abandoned and rejected by the Jews.

It starts with the narrative of Jesus’ arrest, where Judas betrayal and Peter’s weakness are exposed (Lk 22, 47–63). It is followed by short account regarding disrespectful attitude of some people toward Jesus (Lk 22, 64–65). Finally it ends with short and rather schematic but precise enough account regarding Jesus’ trial before Sanhedrin, which found Him guilty (Lk
22, 66–71). All these events reveal Jesus’ isolation, His rejection by Jews and abandonment by the disciples. In this way Luke’s prepares the stage for presenting Pilate’s attitude towards Jesus. However, before we proceed to the narrative of Jesus before Pilate, a short analysis of Luke presentation of the trial before the Sanhedrin seems in order to create a comparative context to the narrative concerning the trial before Pilate. Luke indicates three groups participating in Jesus’ trial (the elders of the people, the chief priests and scribes), which is in accordance with Josephus’ description of the Sanhedrin (AJ 12.142) as the ruling authorities in matters regarding religious issues according to the prerogative given them by Roman officials (Lk 22, 66). Next, he directly moves to an exposition of the main accusation against Jesus presented in the form of questions (Lk 22, 67, 70) to which Jesus in indirect manner answers positively (Lk 22, 67b 69, 70b). Finally, he presents the conclusion of the Sanhedrin, who found Jesus to be guilt of blasphemy. It is important to note that the Sanhedrin made the decision to hand over Jesus (the Jew) to the hands of Roman, based on a verdict concerning a strictly religious matter that could have been resolved by the Sanhedrin itself based on their jurisdiction over religious matters recognized by Roman law. Even more interesting is that this religious reason for handing Jesus over to Roman jurisdiction, did not became the main accusation against Jesus during the trial before Pilate, where the focus is put on strictly political accusations. It indicates Luke’s message that it was not reason sufficient to hand over Jesus to the Roman hands, and the reason that caused the decision of the Sanhedrin differs from the reason presented by the Sanhedrin before Pilate (Lk 23, 2).

5. The trial of Jesus - Jesus before Pilate (Lk 23, 1–7)

Καὶ ἀναστὰν ἅπαν τὸ πλῆθος αὐτῶν ἤγαγον αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὸν Πιλᾶτον. Ἡρῴδατο δὲ κατηγορεῖν αὐτοῦ λέγοντες τοῦτον εὐρίμενα διαστρέφοντα τὸ ἐθνὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κολλῶντα φόρος Καίσαρι διδόναι καὶ λέγοντα ἑαυτὸν χριστὸν βασιλέα εἶναι. ὁ δὲ Πιλᾶτος ἠρώτησεν αὐτὸν λέγων· σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς αὐτῷ ἔφη· σὺ λέγεις. Πιλᾶτος δὲ ἀκούσας ἐπηρώτησεν εἰ ὁ ἄνθρωπος Γαλιλαῖος ἐστιν, καὶ ἐπιγνοὺς ὅτι ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας Ἡρῴδου ἐστὶν ἀνέπεμψεν αὐτὸν πρὸς Ἡρῴδην, ὅταν καὶ αὐτὸν ἐν Ἱεροσόλυμος ἐν ταύταις ταῖς ἡμέραις.

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.” Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.” But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.” When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he

6 Although the question in verse 67 concerning Jesus as the Messiah could be interpreted in political categories, the question in verse 70 concerning Jesus as the son of God has a strictly religious character, which indirectly indicates that question in verse 67 is also of a religious nature.
7 This means that the verdict of the Sanhedrin was the final stage of the realization of the plot mentioned in Lk 20, 20.
learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. (Lk 23, 1–7)

The trial before Pilate was the final step in realizing the plan mentioned in Lk 20, 20, which from the beginning was to hand over Jesus to the prefect, rather than work out the issue among themselves (Lk 23, 1). We can be sure that in handing over one of their own countryman to the Roman authorities, they were conscious of the consequences of their action. Pilate is here presented as the official, who has to pass judgement, in a recognized legal forum, a regular trial. The accusers presents the case as a strictly political issue (Lk 23, 2) that has nothing in common with the narrative of Lk 22, 66–71. All three accusations were serious crimes against Roman law, however the Lukan Pilate pays attention only to the issue regarding the kingship of Jesus, probably because it was the most crucial accusation among those presented by the Jews, a direct challenge to Cesar. The first part of the trial is reduced in Luke’s narrative to a simple question, is Jesus really the king of Jews? To this question Jesus gave a laconic answer, on which basis Pilate found Jesus to be free from the charges made. Luke’s record of this part of the trial should be taken as a schematic summary of a much longer and more specific interrogation. Since Pilate as the prefect of Judea, whose duties were to protect the peace and stability of the region, the regular collection of taxes and the safety of Caesar’s properties in Judea, the decision of Pilate is not unexpected. The reasons for the Lukan Pilate’s decision could possibly be influenced by Pilate’s unfavourable attitude toward the Jewish religious authorities who attempted to use him to achieved their own aims (a possibility favored by us), or by neglecting his duties (a possibility we suggest is less plausible). The supposition that Pilate’s decision was based on an unfavourable attitude towards the Jewish authorities seems to be supported by verses 6–7 where Pilate eagerly cedes the case to Herod Agrippa I (also known as Herod Agrippa I) the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (Lk 3, 3). Verse 12 suggests that Pilate’s action was hardly based on a friendly attitude toward Herod. We may assume that Pilate is attempting to escape from an open clash with the Sanhedrin concerning Jesus’ case by placing the case within Jewish jurisdiction (Herod Agrippa I and the Sanhedrin), given his opinion the case has no political character, as verses 14–16 seem to indicate. This account presents Pilate as a master of the political, who plays the political games between him and the Sanhedrin as well as between him and Herod Antipas with high level skills. Pilate knew that adjudicating the case of a very popular among ordinary Jews, the rabbi Jesus, during the Passover, even at the request of the Sanhedrin, was highly dangerous and might lead to a riot. Also, Pilate may have suspected that the Jesus’ case was part of the Sanhedrin’s constant attempt to place the Roman prefect in conflict with the inhabitants of Jerusalem (AJ 18.55–59; AJ 18.55–59).

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8 The accusation, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king” presents Jesus as a dangerous rebel spreading antipathy against Rome among Jews by questioning the Roman imposition of taxes and calling himself the one who will unite the Jews.

9 Garland is of the opinion that Pilate’s action was intend only to seek the opinion and advice of Herod rather than to cede the case to him. However, Luke precisely says “ὅτι ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας Ἡρώδου ἐστίν”, which emphasizes Herod’s jurisdiction over Jesus. D. E. Garland, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Luke, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 905.
When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ interrogation before Herod Agrippa I contains little concerning Pilate, however it stands as a quite peculiar narrative within a strictly Jewish context where religious and political interest are mixed. Verses 8–9 show that Herod was excited by an opportunity to meet the well-known and highly controversial rabbi, from whom he expected answers and signs confirming Jesus’ extraordinary power. Lack of a response to Agrippa’s expectations led to Jesus being treated with contempt and being mocked by Herod and his soldiers. The mockery of Jesus that Herod Agrippa condoned, reflects his disappointment with Jesus, and there is a hint of irony in his oblique recognition of Jesus as king, a gesture possibly intended as a sign of favor to Pilate. Luke also informs that the passive attitude of Jesus was used to their advantage by the Jewish authorities in framing their accusation. Did they use religious arguments or political ones similar to these presented in the first step of the trial before Pilate? The action of Agrippa suggests rather the second possibility. The narrative ends with a laconic comment concerning a change in the relationship between Pilate and Herod Agrippa I, over two different periods, and presents the case of Jesus as the turning point in their relationship. Until Jesus was sent to Agrippa, Pilate and Herod had been enemies, a reference exclusive to Luke’s Gospel, leading to much speculation concerning the reason for it. Lk 13, 1 may suggest one of the reasons for their enmity, since Pilate took a severe action against the Herod’s subjects. It is also possible that Herod Agrippa with his own ambition to become the King of Jews (which in fact several years later became the reality) naturally, without particular reason at all, treated Pilate as his opponent. Lack of internal and external evidence leave the problem on a speculative level. However more interesting is the comment that after Agrippa sent back Jesus to Pilate, they became friends. If this information is analyzed in strict political context, it may mean that on the one hand Agrippa was pleased by Pilate’s respectful gesture and on the other

10 At least the Lukan Pilate interpreted the action of Agrippa in this way (Lk 23, 15).
hand Pilate was satisfied with Agrippa’s recognition of his jurisdiction in Jerusalem\textsuperscript{11}. If the comment is analyzed in a religious, more precisely in Luke’s theological context, the friendship between Pilate and Agrippa is evidenced by the fact that both found Jesus not guilty of the crime, the Sanhedrin accused him of.

7. Jesus before Pilate again (Lk 23, 13–25)

13 Pilátos de syugkalodáménous toús árgmêrês kai toús árghontas kai toûn laôôn 14 eîpen prôs aûtóûs: aorôtan eîpon tòn ãnthrôiôn toûtôn ós ãppostérfononta toûn laôôn, kai idoû égho ãnópoion ùmón ãnarkrînas ùôthên eîron en tô ãnthrôiôn toûtôn aûtôn ãn kataghoreiê Kat’ aûtôû. 15 Ûl. oude Êrâdóû, ânêpêmen eîphô aû tôûn prôs ëmês, kai idoû oudeîn ãxion ãthnâtôû ãsîn pepraghménôn aû tôû. 16 paiâdêúsas ùon aû tôûn âpolóûsas. [17] 18 Aôkryanô de pâmîplêhei lêgonntes: aîre toûtôn, âpòlóûsas de ëmôn tôûn Barabbaû. 18 Òstis õn õi õiû õiû kai õiû oudeîn ãnêpêmen. 15 Òstís õiû õiû diû õiû kai õiû õiû kai õiû kai õiû õiû õiû. 20 Õiû õiû õiû kai õiû oudeîn ãnêpêmen aû tôûn oudeîn. 20 Õiû õiû õiû oudeîn. 20 Õiû õiû õiû. 22 Õiû õiû oudeîn ãnôs õiû õiû õiû. 22 Õiû õiû õiû õiû. 22 Õiû õiû õiû. 22 Õiû õiû. 22 Õiû õiû. 22 Õiû õiû. 22 Õiû õiû.

13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, \textsuperscript{14} and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. 15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. 16 I will therefore have him flogged and release him.” \textsuperscript{17} 18 Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” \textsuperscript{19} This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder. 20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, 21 but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” 22 A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” 23 But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. 24 So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. 25 He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished. (Lk 23, 13–25)

The problem returns to Pilate, who is forced to call for a meeting with the Sanhedrin, the elders of people and interestingly the crowd, a very different setting from that of the interrogation, where the Sanhedrin, the elders of the people and the scribes were present (Lk 22, 66–22, 2).\textsuperscript{12}

Verse 13 not only indicates the public character of the trial but it also raises a question concerning the very dangerous decision of Pilate to involve the crowd gathered for the feast\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{11} In this case, the whole event would be nothing more than a diplomatic courtesy that achieved its goal.

\textsuperscript{12} The reference to the crowd indicates a context change from the interrogation before Pilate to a meeting where the final sentence must be pronounced, giving it a more public character. A totally new element, which appears in the narrative is Barabbas, a man guilty of a crime, who supported by the whole crowd, sees his life saved at the expenses of Jesus.

Did he hold the view that the crowd would go against the will of the Sanhedrin? Did he gamble that the crowd would save the famous teacher, or presume that the Sanhedrin would consider that the reaction of the crowd may not be favor them and withdraw the accusation? Pilate, based on his experience, knew that bringing up a controversial issue during the Passover, with the strong possibility it could lead to unpredictable consequences. He gambled for reasons we cannot fully discern.

Concerning the meeting, no accusation is presented by the accusers, however the accusation can be deduced from three issues (*his man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king*) in Ac 23, 2, to only one accusation, and it is presented by Pilate as the introductory part of his pronouncing the sentence (Lk 23, 14). Since, the accusation that Jesus was someone who was “leading the people astray” could be understood by the crowd in its religious sense as spreading false teaching it may suggest that Pilate attempted to present the religious character of the case, which would help him to expose the Sanhedrin’s wrong doing, in handing over to the Romans their own countryman, even they possessed the right to judge the case themselves. It is also possible that Pilate hoped the crowd contrary to the Sanhedrin’s understanding of Jesus’ teaching would find Jesus’ teaching be faithful to tradition, creating a drift between the Sanhedrin and the Jews.

The second possibility can be argued if we consider that Pilate contradicted the action of the Sanhedrin by his own declaration of Jesus’ innocent of crime (v. 14). This suggestion is strengthened by the additional fact that in this case, both Pilate and Herod Agrippa are of the same mind (v. 15). These two verses also suggest that Pilate sought to discredit the Sanhedrin’s authority. By pronouncing that there is no reason for death penalty, Pilate rejected recognizing the case as a political one, in accordance with his original opinion expressed during the interrogation (Lk, 23, 1–5). In this context the final decision of Pilate is in sharp contrast with his personal convictions and raises questions concerning his ambivalent attitude. Luke underlines that Pilate three times attempted to save Jesus, which can be taken as an historical credible fact and at the same time as a rhetorical figure indicating that he did everything that was possible to support Jesus. However, Lk 23, 23 suggests the escalation of crowd’s mood, caused in part by Pilate’s refusal to respond to their request, may possibly be behind Pilate’s final decision in favor to Barabbas. Pilate probably finally recognized that his goal in this public confrontation to set two opposite powers, the Sanhedrin and the crowd against each other was

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14 The substance of the accusation is the same although Luke changed διαστρέφοντα (v. 2) into ἀποστρέφοντα (v. 14) and ἔθνος (v. 2) into λαόν (v. 14). This accusation in verse 2 takes stronger political sense than that in verse 14, since the expression “leading the people astray” is often connected with teaching of false prophets and idolatry. L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 370.

15 The Lukan Pilate refuses to accept that the accusations were political in character, thus making the case against Jesus one of a strictly religious nature.

16 Notice that the words of Pilate, although spoken in front of the crowd, are addressed rather to the Sanhedrin than to the crowd (Lk 23, 14 and Lk 23, 18).

17 However note in contrast the Lukan interpretation of Pilate’s attitude toward Jesus that is presented in Ac 4, 27 as a part of the community’s prayer (Ac 4, 23–31).
unreachable, and in order to prevent a possible uprising he sacrificed his pride and an innocent life.

8. Josephus’ request (Lk 23, 50–56)

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.

It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Lk 23, 50–56)

The last mention of Pilate in Luke’s narrative occurs in the story of Joseph of Arimathea’s request for permission to bury the body of Jesus. Burial of someone who had died was for the observant Israelite an essential act of ritual piety extending even to the burial of the bodies of enemies (2 Sam 21, 12–14). The body should be buried before sunset (Deut 21, 23) even in the case of one sentenced to crucifixion (JW 4.316–317). Therefore, while the request and subsequent action of Joseph is fully understandable, there were many inherent risks on his side, as a member of the Sanhedrin who after much intrigue had formally requested the execution, and the fact that Jesus was officially executed for a political crime against Rome.

Less understandable is Pilate’s agreement to the request, which though not formally recorded can be deducted from the narrative. Customarily for political crimes, especially those associated with rebellious activities, the body was left on the cross until it completely decayed, a warning to potential followers. The titulus placed above the head of Jesus informs us that “This is the King of Jews”, indicating the political grounds that had warranted capital punishment, consequently the body should have been left to rot, and not honoured with formal mourning and burial. A possible reason for Pilate’s action may be seen in his reservations regarding his judgment of the Jesus’s case (Lk 23, 3. 14–15), leading him to choose loyalty to his own convictions rather than follow standard procedure. It must be considered that in this case Luke presents Pilate in a positive light. The “hero” of the narrative is of course Joseph of

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18 If it was Joseph’s private initiative, as the text suggests, he may be named as one more sympathizer of Jesus in the Sanhedrin, and as one whose possible reservations regarding the Sanhedrin’s decision was to find an echo in Pilate’s favorable decision. J. R. Edwards, The Gospel According to Luke, pp. 702–703.

Arimathea, but the decision of Pilate respecting the burial is deemed worthy of special mention.

Pilate according to Luke.

Without taking a big risk, it is possible to say that Luke did not know Pilate when he was the prefect of Judea, and his knowledge about him comes from the secondary sources. However Luke does not simply quote the written (the Gospel of Mark?) and oral sources available — for example those who had lived in Judea at that times. What he received were not “pure facts” but information, from secondary sources, that had been interpreted by his sources. We do not know what value Luke placed on these sources, we have little access to the criteria he used to prioritize the information. What we do have are some insights into the theological vision that inform both his Gospel and Acts. Rather than presuming that in Luke’s writings we meet the Pilate ‘of history’, we meet the Pilate of Luke. A Pilate who is not the protagonist, but rather at one point a significant figure in the way the life of Jesus unfolds. No common, or unifying reason may be discerned for all passages in which Pilate features. Therefore it seems to us more useful to look at all passages from a socio-historical perspective.

The very first appearance of Pilate in Luke’s Gospel (Lk 3, 1) is strictly historical in character.

Luke mentions him in a broad sketch of the socio-political background to the beginning of John the Baptist’s mission. It helps us to date with reasonable approximation the date for the beginning of that mission, in 29 AD — the fifteenth year of the reign Tiberius as Caesar, and that the mission began in Judea where Pilate held the office of prefect. Other sources fill out the duties of prefect in the troubled but strategic location of Judea, during a period that is also identified as the period of Second Temple Judaism. Laconic but precise it sets the stage for not just the mission of John the Baptist but also that of Jesus. Pilate assumed office of prefect of Judea in 26 AD, almost 30 years after the division of Herod’s kingdom by Caesar Augustus among his three sons. Since 6 AD Judea was under control of Roman prefects and procurators. It created sometimes strong antipathy even hostility of the religious authorities and political leaders toward Roman officials. Pilate as a prefect of a strategically important region, was just one more cog in the well-oiled machine that was the Roman Empire, who find himself in the middle of conflict between Roman political interest and Jewish socio-religious reality.

The second pericope in which Pilate is mentioned gives us some insights into the Roman modus operandi as it sought to maintain security and stability and so guarantee a flow of tax-income from the region. (Lk 13, 1–5). During what was in all probability the Feast of the Passover, which saw an influx of Jews from near and far, including many from Galilee, Pilate was forced to use military force to maintain peace. The Feast of Passover was frequently used as an occasion by nationalist groups, many of whom were based in Galilee, to stir up the crowd with talk that heightened expectation of the coming of the Messiah, who would restore the kingdom of King David. Josephus, whom we treated in an earlier article, mentions more than
one incident when Pilate authorized the use of military force, but Luke uses this incident to focus on Jesus’ teaching about the importance of repentance in the face of sudden death. It in turn offers wider contextual information on relations between Pilate and Herod Agrippa I, who had charge of the Galilean region, which were not always friendly (cf Lk 23, 8–12).

Luke brings together in anticipation three of the protagonists who will feature there, Jesus a Galilean, Herod and Pilate. Not only Galileans were seen as “troublemakers”, but whole Galilee was seen as the land of outsiders, non-believers - pagans, a place where no observant Jew would willingly live. (Jn 7, 52, Mt 4, 15, Ac 5, 37). Herod Agrippa, who descended from Herod the Great, only half-Jewish by ancestry, and considered an apostate, ultimately was under the authority of the Roman Governor in Syria. And then Pontius Pilate to whom fell ultimate responsibility for maintaining civil order, not always easy in the tinder-box that was Jerusalem at the time of major festivals, a place Josephus describes as always on the edge of an uprising. So as we mentioned, while Luke uses the incident as background to the teaching of Jesus, in all probability Pilate’s action was actually undertaken in fulfilment of his mandate, to reduce the possibility of a riot, at the same time in line with the image of Pilate from Josephus, it illustrates his anti-Jewish sentiment and his willingness to use force when he deemed it necessary.

Above we looked just at Lk 20: 20. This verse comes at the end of a longer passage, (Lk 20, 9–20) where through the telling of a parable by Jesus, which is highly critical of the Jewish leadership - the Sanhedrin, we are made aware of looming clouds of conflict on the horizon. So a decision is made to take action against their opponent (Lk 20, 19–20), looking to an occasion when “they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor”. From the very beginning there is a determination to deliver Jesus up to Pilate, even if at the centre of the conflict was only a religious matter. The first hearers and later readers of the Gospel will have been aware that, as a matter of principle Roman officials avoided involvement in all kind of cases regarding strictly Jewish religious matters (Ac 18, 14–16). It was the prerogative of the Sanhedrin to judge the religious cases with the exception of those that might lead to a call for capital punishment. As the succeeding verses show, the Jewish leadership were willing to make a case against Jesus that had a more obviously political character (Lk 20, 20–26). Without such a case it would have been impossible to ask Pilate to hear their accusation and offer a judgement. For Pilate, the one thing he wished to avoid were riots, civil disturbances promoted by political agitators.

While this passage focusses more on the intentions and acts of the Jewish leadership-the Sanhedrin, who seemingly from the beginning had no interest in resolving the problem that Jesus was as an internal matter, in confronting and judging Jesus for what he taught, instead they chose to betray one of their own. To achieve their aim they seem to be willing to co-operate with the Romans, more specifically Pontius Pilate, the enemy of the Jewish people. The narrative does not allow us to state clearly that what ensued resulted from a carefully thought out and executed plan to co-operate agreed upon by both sides. Rather, Luke seems to hint that the Sanhedrin engaged in some deft political maneuvering that they use Pilate to achieve
their goal. Made all the easier by Pilate’s commitment to avoid politically motivated agitation at all costs. Pilate for the Jewish leadership is the indispensable tool whereby the threat they saw in Jesus to their social and political life is eliminated. (Ac 2, 23; 3, 13. 17)

The Sanhedrin before Pilate accused Jesus of three strictly political crimes that are absent in within Jewish the trail of Jesus. (Lk 23, 1–25). When brought before Pilate the accusations, three in number, are strictly political, and strikingly different from the trial before the Sanhedrin. The accusation are: perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king. However Luke indicates that such accusations were already in mind as the Jewish leadership set out to trap Jesus (Lk 20, 20). Consequently, in the absence of a religious dimension to the accusations made by Jesus’ fellow countrymen Pilate is forced to interrogate Jesus. In Luke’s accounting of the accusations they are reduced to one question, and a very brief but telling response from Jesus. Luke’s narrative purpose precludes the necessity of a more expanded, never mind a complete record of the trial. The briefness of the dialogue marks it out as similar to the trial before the Sanhedrin, though there the political accusations are replaced by religious ones (Lk 22, 70)20. Jesus’ answer is neither a denial nor a confirmation, placing the decision firmly in Pilate’s hand21. Pilate’s judgement in turn is presented as just and appropriate in the absence of supporting convincing evidence. It is a judgement made before the crowd, here mentioned for the first time (Lk 23, 4). To the judgement the crowd reacts against resulting, pressing for a different verdict. Pilate fearing the worst case scenario, and as Luke relates it, to avoid an even stronger expression of rejection, as he feels himself wavering, seeking to avoid further escalation, passes the case to Herod Agrippa, who was then in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. (Lk 23, 5–7).

While Luke has gone out of his way to portray Pilate as someone anxious to make a just and correct judgement in a case where the evidence does not warrant a guilty verdict, at the same time Pilate, whom Luke describes is a pragmatist, who bends to the will of the Jewish leadership and the crowd. The possible political and social consequences override the demands of justice.22 Only a false optimism could pretend that passing the case over to Herod Agrippa and his judgement would see an end to his involvement in the case. The case came back to him without any final judgement passed by Herod. Pilate then used the lack of a judgement by Herod, one who also considered himself “King of the Jews” as confirming him in his wish to set Jesus free.23 Pilate is probably reading more into encounter between Jesus and Herod, as he seeks to release Jesus. Ameliorating the crowd by punishing Jesus before release (Lk 23, 16) turns out not to be a winning move. Placed instead in a defending position, he asks

21 In Lk 22, 70 and in Lk 23, 1, the language of Jesus’ response is remarkably similar. In the first instance responsibility is placed firmly with the Sanhedrin, in the second, the burden is fully put on the prefect.
22 By moving from an offensive to a defensive position Pilate passes the initiative to the crowd, who controls the situation from this point.
23 Note, the narrative relating the encounter of Jesus with Herod Agrippa (Lk 23, 8–12) does not record Herod’s decision.
the crowd to name the evil Jesus has done, only to meet once more with the crowd continuing
to call for crucifixion, and to find himself unable to defend his own wish, to save Jesus and set
him free. Luke uses a classic pattern of a thrice repeated plea, slowly building up the drama,
but Pilate is unable to move the crowd, instead he gives in to the crowd by releasing Barabbas,
who had received just and appropriate judgement for his proven crimes (Lk 23, 3–4, Lk 23, 14–
16 Lk 23, 22). Pilate tried to stand by Jesus, but was defeated by a crowd bent on having its will
fulfilled.

In his portrayal of Pilate, as he outlines the strategies and tactics Pilate used to allow him to
free Jesus, Luke also seems be seeking to minimize Pilate’s responsibility and shift it to the
Jews. The difficulties are however more that evident as the narrative proceeds. Pilate stays
with his initial judgement, but is unable to stand by his convictions. A convicted criminal is
released in an act of dubious legality (Lk 23, 25), pragmatism wins through, and peace in the
city of Jerusalem at Passover is maintained by sacrificing a life, the Just One.

The last time we encounter Pilate in Luke’s gospel is when Joseph of Arimathea approaches
him and requests permission to bury (Lk 23, 50–56). He proposes to bury Jesus in a grave
prepared for his own future use. Pilate grants this unusual request, even though Roman law
forbad the formal burial of one sentenced to death. That Pilate granted the request is seen by
some as his wish to honor Jesus, showing the dead Jesus the mercy he couldn’t show when he
was alive.24 One other interpretation is that the request of Joseph was granted as a mark of
respect to a member of the Sanhedrin. Neither of these proposals are of concern to Luke,
rather we see here his concern to portray Joseph of Arimathea as pious and righteous Jew.25
Pilate’s willingness to respond in accord with Jewish custom and religious sensibility must still
be considered extraordinary. However, the fact that Pilate allowed to buried the body of man,
who was sentenced to death officially because of the crime against Rome, at the same day and
according to Jewish custom, most be recognize as extraordinary case. Once more it
demonstrates that Pilate is capable of a certain flexibility in applying the law, giving human
relations a priority.26

Conclusion

Luke’s presentation of Pilate is neither negative nor positive, although both elements can be
easily detected in his narrative. His presentation of Pilate’s weak and strong points leads not to
such a simple judgment but rather is guided by Luke’s own theology; only the facts that suit the
theological agenda are given priority. The Lukan Pilate is just another person involved in the

26 Some have also suggested that money was exchanged, but this can be dismissed as pure speculation, rather the focus
is on how Luke wishes to portray the two of them.
realization of God’s plan of salvation. As a person with a high social position, but limited though still powerful prerogatives, he is involved in a case he cannot avoid because of his office, but with no understanding of the religious and theological meaning of the event. The Lukian Pilate is the official trapped between reality of the world he lives in, where the ongoing struggle for political and social power continually generate hostility on all sides, and often leads to conflict of interests, that ends with the extermination of the opposite side or resolved by the application of simple human common sense, who offers at least a sign of being just and to be responsible to the truth. Pilate, who was probably more than aware of the real reasons behind the accusations made against Jesus, because of his social and political status and his role as the representative of Roman authority, had to continually consider the wider possibilities, the broader implications of the decisions he made. Temporary solutions could have wider implications, implications that could affect the fragile stability of the region, the maintenance of the Pax Romana. Reading the narrative of Jesus’s trial and death in from within the context of Pilate’s administration of the Judea region, allows us to understand that Pilate was a man in an office where his behavior was forced by duties and responsibility, but who stayed still sensible to human’s tragedy.