

THE BIBLE IN THE HOLY LAND

# *Pilate's Wife: From Sinner to Saint*

By T.J. Wray

The Dream of Pilate's Wife, engraving by Alphonse François (1814-1888). Library of Congress

As Christians around the world prepare to celebrate Easter, our thoughts invariably turn to the events of that first Holy Week over two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth, makes his triumphal entrance into the holy city of Jerusalem. By week's end, he is arrested on trumped up charges, beaten, tried, and sentenced to death.

The Gospels present us with a constellation of characters whose actions contribute to the execution of an innocent man. These include a small contingent of the Temple elite, led by the high

priest Caiaphas, Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve who betrays Jesus, and the maniacal Roman "prefect," Pontius Pilate, who is responsible for handing down Jesus' death sentence.

Should the wife of Pilate be added to the list of those who seek to harm Jesus? [See box on pg. 17]. Pilate's wife, who is mentioned briefly in a single verse in the Gospel of Matthew, is largely remembered because of a dream she has about Jesus. The dream is so disturbing that she interrupts Pilate's legal proceedings against Jesus with a written message. "Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I have suffered much in a dream



today because of him.” (Matthew 27:19). Some say her message has the power to change the course of human history; others gloss over her note and wonder why Matthew alone decides to include it in his version of the Passion Narrative.

### Who was she?

The first thing we can say about Pilate’s wife is perhaps the most obvious: She is nameless. Recognized only through her connection to her husband, she takes her place among the vast majority of women in the Bible who are unnamed. (Of all of the named characters in the Hebrew Bible and

New Testament, female names constitute less than ten percent of the total.) People without names are more forgettable, and thus their stories are under-read, under-studied, and under-appreciated. Perhaps this is one reason why the role Pilate’s wife plays in the death of Jesus is rarely emphasized.

To gain a better understanding of Pilate’s wife, we begin by retracing her footsteps from Rome to a far-flung corner of the Roman Empire. She leaves the relative comfort and splendor of Rome around the year 26 CE to travel with her husband as he takes up his new post as prefect of Judea. As the wife of a political official and member

Stained glass window in the Church of the Flagellation, Jerusalem, depicting Pontius Pilate washing his hands of Jesus’ blood.

Christ Before Pontius Pilate, Monvaerni Master, The Walters Art Gallery



of the upper class, we can assume that Pilate's wife is accustomed to a comfortable lifestyle, afforded some level of education, and though she is not allowed to vote or hold office, Pilate's wife is able to offer her husband political advice.

There is evidence that Roman women may act as political counselors to their husbands; the best example of this is Livia (58 BCE-29 CE), the wife, and advisor to her husband Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE). Livia is such a trusted advisor that, after her husband's death, she is deified during her lifetime. It would seem that Pilate's wife, like Livia, is also accustomed

to offering her husband advice on legal matters. This notion helps to explain why Pilate, in the very midst of a trial before the people, accepts and reads a message from his wife.

## Jesus' actions in Holy Week

In order to understand the context of the message, we must review Jesus' actions during that Holy Week, beginning with Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. This event involves a great deal of fanfare, so much so that the entire city is in turmoil (Matthew 21:10). Are Pilate and his wife watching as Jesus makes his grand entrance? The Gospels do not provide such details, but we can assume that even if they do not watch the parade, they are surely made aware of it. Processions are very important occasions for the Romans, particularly military processions, and Jesus' regal entrance is an affront to Roman sensibilities.

Once in the city, Jesus encounters the moneychangers and animal mongers, selling various poor creatures in cages and in stalls for ritual sacrifices. When Jesus sees the greedy moneychangers and fetid arena of sacrificial animals, he is sickened and outraged; turning over their tables, he drives them away (Matthew 21:12-13). This action alone should sound the alarm for Pilate, who typically has his spies disguised in plain clothes, circulating among the crowd, and reporting back to him, but Pilate does not yet arrest Jesus.

Perhaps it is Jesus' healing and teaching activities that render him a marked man. Healing the sick, and teaching his disciples to do the

same, muscles in on the Temple economy. The Temple priests, who are notoriously corrupt, are in charge of healing the sick, and like physicians today, there is a fee for their services; but Jesus and his disciples heal for free.

Alongside Jesus' ministry of healing is his powerful message, about the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. Jesus and his followers are apocalyptic thinkers who believe that God is about to unleash a new world that, among other things, will liberate the Jewish people from the tyrannical Roman occupation. Thus, Jesus and his followers pose a threat to Roman imperial rule. Moreover, the small slice of the Temple elite, led by the high priest, Caiaphas (appointed by Pilate) seem concerned with Jesus' growing popularity and large following. They are threatened by his mass appeal and conspire

against him (Matthew 26:3-5).

All of Jesus' actions thus far not only rankle the Temple elite, but his popularity among the people might incite a riot, and there is nothing Pilate hates more than a riot! The Jewish historian Josephus confirms this, depicting Pilate as brutal and cruel, detesting mobs and crushing rebellions. Aware of Jesus' actions and knowing her husband's predilection for violence to quash rebellions, Pilate's wife must take action to prevent a riot.

The wheels of injustice move quickly. After celebrating Passover with his disciples, Jesus and the Twelve depart for the Mount of Olives. Presently, a group led by his betrayer, Judas Iscariot, descends upon Jesus and arrest him as his disciples scatter in fear (Matthew 26:47-56). Jesus is brought first to the house of Caiaphas, where an impromptu trial is held. Matthew

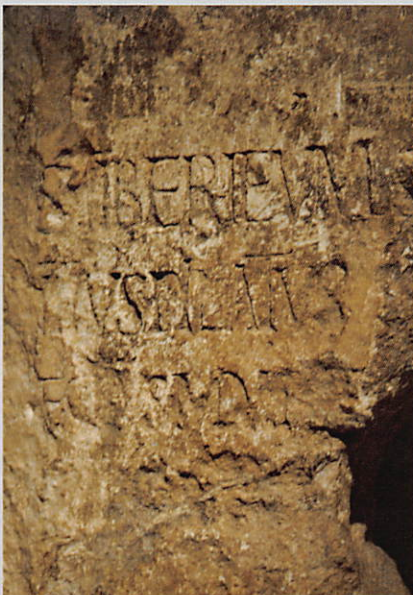


Photo credit: Greg Friedman, OFM

There is some scholarly confusion concerning Pilate's exact title; the Jewish historian Josephus refers to him as "Procurator" while the Gospels refers to him as "Governor." Archaeology provides an answer to this confusion. In 1961, Italian archaeologists led by Dr. Antonio Frova unearthed a partial inscription on a limestone block at Caesarea Maritima, Pilate's official residence, and the seat of Roman Imperial rule in Judea. The artifact, commonly referred to as the "Pilate Stone," comes to us from the first century and appears

to be a dedication plaque for a building (or temple) called the "Tiberieum" constructed by Pilate in honor of the emperor, Tiberius Caesar Augustus, who rules from 14-37 CE. The building no longer exists, but the plaque confirms Pilate's title as "prefect" of Judea. The English translation of the Latin inscription reads:

*To the Divine Augusti [this?]  
Tiberieum  
...Pontius Pilate  
...prefect of Judea  
...has dedicated [this?]*

relates that Jesus, by in large, refuses to answer any questions, which seems to confirm his guilt (Matthew 26:63-64). He is then turned over to Pilate.

### Jesus before Pilate

In Matthew, Pilate appears as somewhat of a weakling; an indecisive leader who is torn and who does not really want to execute Jesus. This image of Pilate is quite different from the historical accounts of him. For instance, Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish Philosopher and contemporary of Jesus, describes Pilate as abusive and violent, with a history of executing untried prisoners (*Legatio*, XXXVIII. 302).

It is important to underscore

the fact that when the Gospels are written, Christianity is an illegal religion. Most scholars agree that the sympathetic portrait of Pilate in the Gospels reflects the dire circumstances of the second half of the first century and the iron-fisted Roman rulers, under whose watchful eyes the Gospels are written. Aware of the Roman censors, this apologetic image of Pilate is meant, among other things, to placate the Roman oppressors in order to gain more freedom for early Christians.

Returning to the trial, Matthew reports that Pilate, believing Jesus to be innocent, bargains with the unruly crowd. "While he [Pilate] was seated on the judgment seat" (Matthew 27:19), in the midst of

*The Message of Pilate's Wife*, James Tissot (1836-1902), Painting Cycle: The Life of Christ, Brooklyn Museum



all of this chaos, a message arrives. "Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I have suffered much in a dream today because of him" (Matthew 27:19, NAB).

### 'Have nothing to do with that righteous man.'

A close examination of this message in conjunction with Jesus' Holy Week activities is in order because historically, this message has been largely misunderstood. Pilate's wife instructs her husband to "have nothing to do" with Jesus, which is another way of saying, "don't get mixed up in this affair." She wants Pilate to end the trial quickly before the restless mob gets out of hand.

Pilate's wife refers to Jesus as a "righteous man." Some translators render the word *righteous* to read *innocent* which is a mistranslation and changes the meaning of the message. In her opinion, Jesus is *not* innocent. The words *righteous* and *innocent* are not synonymous, not now and not then.

In describing Jesus as a "righteous man," Pilate's wife concurs with her husband's supposition that Jesus is guilty. The Greek word *dikaïos* (righteous) means that a person is faithful and their actions justified before God. When Pilate's wife refers to Jesus as "righteous," she is labeling him as a man who feels justified in his beliefs; he is the Son of God, the Messiah, and the *King of the Jews* (Matthew 26:63; 27:11). Only the Romans may appoint a king, but Jesus is behaving like a king, entering the city in a grand procession, overturning the tables of the moneychangers, and gathering a large following of converts with

his seditious teachings about the Kingdom of God! Pilate's wife fears this self-righteous Jesus will not back down and shrink away after his brush with the law. If left unchecked and empowered with his sense of "righteousness," Jesus will continue to grow in popularity, and he therefore poses a direct threat to Roman supremacy.

As if to bolster her advice, she frames it in terms of a dream she has about Jesus—one that causes her great suffering. People in the ancient world, including the Romans, believe that dreams occur in a sacred space between heaven and earth. In the transcendent world of the dreamscape, the gods (or God) often convey important messages or prophecies to humans. Her message, when viewed in the context of a dream, gives it a sense of urgency and authenticity.

Pilate seems to concur with his wife's conviction that Jesus is a threat who must be eliminated. We know the rest of the story: Jesus is ultimately condemned to death by Pilate; he is crucified, dies, and is resurrected from the dead. His official crime is placed on a sign above his head and reads: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:37).

### The rest of her story

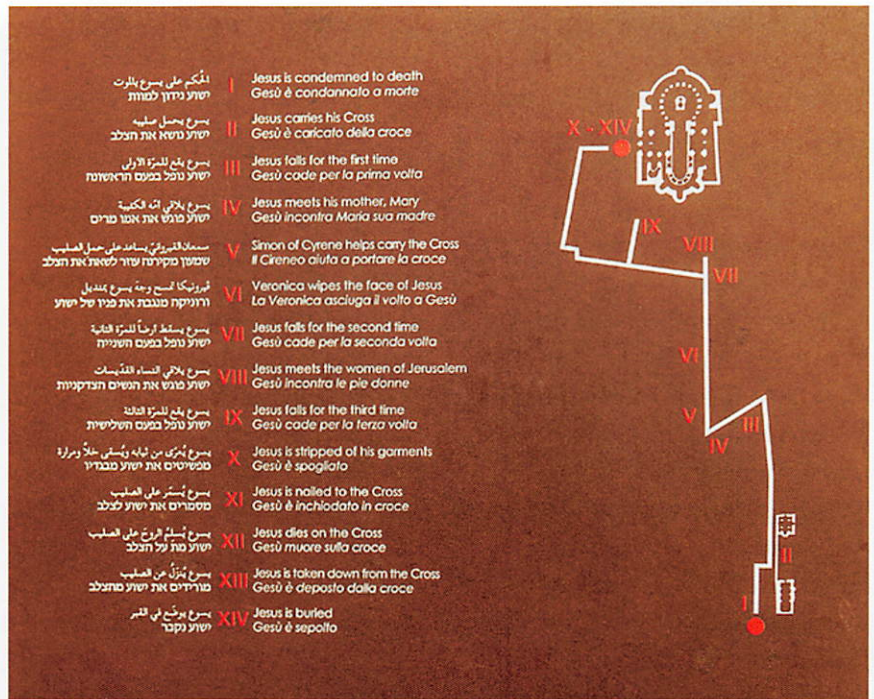
When Matthew pens his version of the Passion Narrative, Pilate's wife, a powerful Roman woman married to one of history's most despised men, is counted among the villains who plot and scheme against Jesus. Over time, however, she is elevated from co-conspirator in the death of Jesus to a sort of Jesus sympathizer, but why? The tendency to view her



Greek icon of Pilate's wife as Saint Claudia Procula.



The traditional route of the Via Dolorosa marks Stations One and Two (in photo above) as the places of Jesus' trial and where Pilate would have received his wife's message. Modern scholars dispute this location, asserting that Pilate's seat is located just outside the Western Wall of the Old City.



kindly comes from an innate desire to read her story sympathetically, to imagine that she intervenes in an effort to save Jesus' life. And, if the hand-wringing, indecisive image of Pilate is read and taken as the gospel truth, we can understand why the pair are exonerated and even elevated to saints, for this is precisely what happens!

Stories and legends about Pilate's wife begin to emerge as early as the second century. Chief among the beliefs during the centuries following Jesus' death is that Pilate's wife is a secret follower of Jesus. In *The Acts of Pilate*, part of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, written between the fourth and fifth centuries, Pilate himself proclaims his wife a practitioner of Judaism. Another interesting text written during this time period is *Paradosis Pilati*, which, among other things, claims that Pilate and his wife are

Christian converts.

Over time, Pilate's wife is rehabilitated from the wicked wife of a brutal man to a saint in the Eastern and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches, and she finally receives a name: Saint Claudia Procula (the keeper of the gate). Her feast day is October 27<sup>th</sup> (Eastern Orthodox Churches). Remarkably, in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *both* Pilate and his wife are saints who are celebrated together every June 25.

Today, the story of Pilate's wife warns us to learn from the past—to be wary of modern empires and corrupt political regimes that threaten our world. Her story also teaches us not to accept evil, or worse, participate in it as she does, but instead, to speak out against injustice and, when possible, to take action against it. ✚