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# Perspectives about Pontius Pilate in the Ante-Nicene Fathers

*Frank F. Judd Jr.*

WHENEVER A NEW MOVIE DEPICTS THE EVENTS associated with the Gospel accounts of Jesus's passion, it must decide how to portray the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Was Pilate a pawn in the hands of the Jewish leaders? Was he acting independently according to his own imperium? What responsibility did the Roman governor bear in the trial and condemnation of Jesus? These questions are not new, for early Christians dealt with the same issues and came to a variety of conclusions.

By the Middle Ages, Pilate was considered a Saint in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have suggested a progressively linear tendency of early Christian writers to exonerate Pilate. Paul Winter, for example, in his detailed study of the trial of Jesus observed: "The more removed from history, the more sympathetic a character [Pilate] becomes."<sup>2</sup> Ernst Bammel likewise claimed that Christians from the second century to the Middle Ages tended to turn Pilate into a witness of Jesus's innocence.<sup>3</sup> These modern assessments of Pilate being

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1. See E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church: A Translation of the Ethiopian Synaxarium* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 1:xlvi; 4:1032.

2. See Paul Winter, "Pilate in History and in Christian Tradition," in *On the Trial of Jesus*, 2nd ed., rev. T. A. Burkill and Geza Vermes (New York: de Gruyter, 1974), 88.

3. Ernst Bammel, "Pilatus," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed., ed. Kurt Galling (Tübingen: Mohr, 1961), 5:383–84. For similar comments, see, George J.

progressively exculpated in early Christian literature do not take full account of what the ante-Nicene church fathers said about Pilate.

Just as today, early Christian authors did not hold one unified view of Pilate. Some Christians eventually demonized the Roman governor. The medieval document *Mors Pilati* relates the tradition that Pilate committed suicide, after which his body was thrown into various bodies of water from the Tiber River in Rome to the Rhone in Vienne, France, and eventually plunged into Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. According to this document, demons followed Pilate's body, and wherever it was deposited they haunted the local inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

In actuality, early Christian writings, including apocryphal literature, assess Pilate and his role in the death of Jesus in various ways—some positive, some negative. This study, however, will focus on what the ante-Nicene fathers said about the Roman governor. Most of the references to Pilate in these writings are incidental, not containing substantive assessments of the Roman governor, and are often employed as a foil to the Jews. In addition, some of these writers use Matthew 27:24 to exculpate Pilate, while others use the same passage to condemn him. This paper will demonstrate that there is no smooth and linear progression in the writings of early church fathers about the Roman governor.

### Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 CE)

One of the earliest Christian writers to discuss Pontius Pilate was Justin Martyr,<sup>5</sup> an important Christian apologist from the second century who

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Reid, "Apocrypha," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al. (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 1:609; and Alexander Demandt, *Hände in Unschuld: Pontius Pilatus in der Geschichte* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), 216.

4. See J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 216–17.

5. On Justin Martyr's life, theology, and writings, see the studies of Leslie W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Erwin R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr* (Jena: Frommann, 1923); Robert Joly, *Christianisme et philosophie: études sur Justin et les apologistes grecs du deuxième siècle* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1973); Charles Munier,

mentions the Roman governor twelve times in his extant writings.<sup>6</sup> Most often he simply employs Pilate's name as part of a standard formulaic identification of Jesus: "Jesus Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate."<sup>7</sup> However, Pilate is also mentioned alone or together with Herod the Great or Herod Antipas, with no additional commentary.<sup>8</sup> Other times it looks as though Justin Martyr uses the name of Pilate simply as a chronological marker for the time period of Jesus's life.<sup>9</sup>

Justin's overall opinion of the Roman governor is not readily apparent from his writings. How did Justin feel about Pontius Pilate's responsibility in the trial of Jesus? Unfortunately, Justin does not give us explicit information about that. The only clue Justin gives is connecting the Roman governor with Herod Antipas, who is characterized negatively in his writings.

For example, Justin follows the Lukan interpretation of Psalm 2:1–2: "Why do the gentiles conspire, and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed."<sup>10</sup> Justin offers this interpretation

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*L'Apologie de Saint Justin, philosophe et martyr* (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1994); and Eric Osborn, *Justin Martyr* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1973).

For the Greek text of the apologies, see Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis* (New York: de Gruyter, 1994). For a recent English translation, see Leslie W. Barnard, *St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies* (New York: Paulist, 1997). For the Greek text of the *Dialogue*, see Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone* (New York: de Gruyter, 1997). For an English translation, see A. L. Williams, trans., *Justin Martyr: The Dialogue with Trypho* (London: SPCK, 1930). The English translations used in this section are taken from Barnard and Williams.

6. See *1 Apol.* 13.3, 35.9, 40.6, 46.1, 48.3, 61.13; *2 Apol.* 6.6; and *Dial.* 30.3, 76.6, 85.2, 102.5, 103.4.

7. See *1 Apol.* 13.3, 61.13; *2 Apol.* 6.6; and *Dial.* 30.3, 76.6.

8. See *1 Apol.* 40.6; *Dial.* 102.5, 103.3.

9. See, for example, *1 Apol.* 46.1: "Christ was born a hundred and fifty years ago under Quirinius, and somewhat later, under Pontius Pilate, taught what we say he taught." See also *Dial.* 85.2.

10. Author's translation; see Acts 4:25–28: "By the mouth of our father David, your servant, did say by the Holy Spirit: [Psalm 2:1–2]. For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you did anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand

of the Psalmist's words: "[David] testifies of the conspiracy which was formed against Christ by Herod the King of the Jews, and the Jews themselves, and Pilate, who was your procurator among them, with his soldiers."<sup>11</sup> This indicates that he viewed Pilate as a co-conspirator with Herod and the Jews in the death of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

### Melito of Sardis (died c. 180 CE)

Melito, who was bishop of Sardis in Asia Minor during the second century, also mentions Pontius Pilate.<sup>13</sup> All his works have subsequently been lost except a single homily and scattered fragments. The homily provides a window into the Quartodeciman celebration of the Pasch. Quartodecimans (from the Latin word for "fourteen") felt that the Christian celebration of Easter should coincide with the Jewish Passover on the fourteenth of Nisan, while others felt it should always be celebrated on the following Sunday. Melito's sermon is also pointedly anti-Jewish and the first Christian document to directly accuse the Jews of deicide. This vitriolic sermon also contains an important reference to Pontius Pilate and the incident of his handwashing.<sup>14</sup>

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and your plan had determined beforehand to take place." On Justin's use of Psalm 2, see also David Rokéah, *Justin Martyr and the Jews* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 125; and Oskar Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr's Proof-Text Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 123–24.

11. *1 Apol.* 40.6.

12. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin again links the Roman governor to Herod Antipas. See *Dial.* 103.4: "Herod [Antipas] succeeded Archelaus, and received the authority that was allotted him, to whom Pilate also showed the favor of sending Jesus bound."

13. On Melito in general, see L. H. Cohick, *The Peri Pascha Attributed to Melito of Sardis: Setting, Purpose, and Sources* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000); Pierre Nautin, "Méliton," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, ed. Marcel Villier et al., 17 vols. in 24 pts. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–95), 10:979–90; and Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Lamb's High Feast: Melito, Peri Pascha and the Quartodeciman Paschal Liturgy at Sardis* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

14. For the Greek text and an English translation of Melito's Paschal sermon and other fragments, see S. G. Hall, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). The English translations in this section are from Hall.

After Pilate unsuccessfully offers Barabbas to the Jewish crowd instead of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew says: “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’” (Matthew 27:24, author’s translation). According to the *Gospel of Peter*, a second-century apocryphal account: “But of the Jews none washed their hands, neither Herod nor any of his judges. And as they would not wash Pilate stood up” (*Gospel of Peter* 1.1). Both citations imply that handwashing is a way to symbolically declare one’s own innocence. Many scholars suspect that this type of ritual handwashing was a Jewish rather than a Roman custom.<sup>15</sup> The irony of the Roman governor performing this rite in front of the Jewish leaders—the leaders of Israel—was apparently not lost on Melito.

Melito makes an important reference to this handwashing incident. After accusing the Jews of killing their own Lord, Melito declared:

You cast the opposite vote against your Lord. For him whom the gentiles worshipped and uncircumcised men admired and foreigners glorified, over whom even Pilate washed his hands, you killed at the great feast. (*Peri Pascha* 92)

In this passage, Melito uses the Matthean scene of Pilate’s handwashing to contrast the guilt of the Jews with the innocence of the Roman governor. By collocating the handwashing of Pilate with the gentiles worshipping, admiring, and glorifying Jesus, Melito further separates the Roman governor from the Jewish leaders in their guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate becomes a symbol of gentile acceptance of Christ. Melito’s condemnation of Jews for the trial and death of Jesus did not extend to Pilate.

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15. Davies and Allison conclude that the Matthean and other Jewish references to ritual washing “as a sign of innocence” must be distinguished from references to ritual washing “to cleanse from guilt or sin,” found in Herodotus, Ovid, and Virgil. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 3:590. Kötting, following Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, also concludes this kind of handwashing was a Jewish, and not a Roman, custom. See Bernhard Kötting, “Handwaschung,” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Ernst Dassmann (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1986), 13:581–85.

## Irenaeus of Lyons (died c. 202 CE)

The Roman governor next appears in the writings of Irenaeus, a bishop in Lyons, France, during the second century.<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus's only surviving writings, apart from fragments, are the compendious *Against the Heresies* and his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, a summary of Christian teaching perhaps written as a catechetical work.<sup>17</sup> In these two works, a total of fifteen references to Pontius Pilate appear. Unfortunately, virtually all these references either invoke the name of Pontius Pilate in a formulaic way<sup>18</sup> or cite the Roman governor's role with Herod Antipas in the New Testament passion accounts without giving further explanation or expansion.<sup>19</sup>

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16. See Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.3.4. On Irenaeus in general, see the works of André Benoît, *Saint Irénée: introduction à l'étude de sa théologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1960); J. Fantino, *La théologie d'Irénée: lecture des Écritures en réponse à l'exégèse gnostique* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1994); Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

17. The text of *Against the Heresies* was originally written in Greek, but only fragments have survived. The entire text has been preserved in Latin. For the Latin text, Greek fragments, and a French translation, see A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau et al., eds., *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les hérésies*, 9 vols. (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965–82). For an English translation, see F. R. Montgomery Hitchcock, *The Treatise of Irenaeus of Lugdunum against the Heresies*, 2 vols. (London: SPCK, 1916). English translations in this section are from Hitchcock.

The text of Irenaeus's *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, originally composed in Greek, has been preserved only in Armenian translation. For the Armenian text, see Karapet Ter-Mékérttschian and Stephen G. Wilson, eds., *Irénée de Lyon: Démonstration de la Prédication Apostolique* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989). For a convenient English translation, see John Behr, trans., *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997). English translations in this section are from Behr.

18. See *Haer.* 2.32.4, 3.4.2, 3.12.9, 4.23.2, 5.12.5; and *Epid.* 97. *Haer.* 1.27.2 uses the name of Pontius Pilate to mark the date of the crucifixion of Jesus.

19. See *Haer.* 1.7.2, 3.12.3, 3.12.5, 4.18.3; *Epid.* 74, 77; and *Fr.* 54. In *Haer.* 4.18.3, Irenaeus compares God's statement to Cain concerning Satan ("[Satan's] desire will be to you, and you will rule over him") to Jesus's words to Pilate ("You should have no power at all against me, unless it were given to you from above").

Irenaeus, however, does tell us that an early Christian group called the Carpocratians believed that Pilate himself had made an image of Jesus before the crucifixion:<sup>20</sup>

They [the Carpocratians] call themselves Gnostics and possess images, some of which are paintings, some made of other materials. They said Christ's image was copied by Pilate at the time that Jesus lived among men. On these images they put a crown and exhibit them along with the images of the philosophers of the world. (Haer. 1.25)<sup>21</sup>

Apocryphal Pilate literature of the first four centuries has a few references to images in general.<sup>22</sup> None of these references, however, mentions a tradition of Pilate making an image of Jesus. Medieval traditions would later preserve a tradition that Veronica, whom Jesus had healed from an issue of blood, possessed an image of Jesus that was made by wiping a cloth on his face.<sup>23</sup>

As far as Irenaeus's reference is concerned, it is not known from where he obtained this information about Pilate. P. C. Finney has proposed that Irenaeus may simply have fabricated this information, using it as a "literary topos against images" to fortify his polemic against the Carpocratians.<sup>24</sup> Whether or not Finney's proposal is correct, one should

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20. For information on the Carpocratians and early Christian art, see P. C. Finney, "Gnosticism and the Origins of Early Christian Art," in *Atti del IX Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1978), 391–405; and Robert M. Grant, "Carpocratians and Curriculum: Irenaeus' Reply," in *Christians among Jews and Gentiles*, ed. G. W. E. Nickelsburg and G. W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 127–36.

21. English translation from Dominic J. Unger and John J. Dillon, trans., *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies, Book 1* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

22. See, for example, *Acts Pil.* 1.5–6, where the Roman standards, on which are images of Caesar, bow down to Jesus when he enters the Praetorium.

23. Various forms of this tradition, all of which are medieval in origin and beyond the scope of this study, survive. See Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 213–16; and M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 157–61.

24. See the discussion in Finney, "Gnosticism and the Origins of Early Christian Art," esp. 398–405.



be cautious in accepting at face value any early Christian author's assertion—and not just those of apocryphal Christian literature—regarding the Roman governor.<sup>25</sup> But whether Irenaeus was fabricating this information or copying it from a written source, this unique tradition about Pilate making an image is not found in any other independent witness of the first three centuries.<sup>26</sup>

Because no substantive discussion of the Roman governor occurs in his extant writings, it is difficult to determine precisely how Irenaeus felt regarding Pilate and his role in the trial of Jesus. In his treatise *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus quotes from Acts 3:13, where Peter addresses a group of Jews at the temple concerning Jesus: “Whom you delivered up for judgment, and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he wished to let Him go.”<sup>27</sup> If Irenaeus was assigning culpability with the statement, then this indicates at a minimum that Irenaeus attached less blame to Pilate than to the Jews.<sup>28</sup>

### Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170–235 CE)

Hippolytus, an important theologian in Rome during the third century, mentions Pontius Pilate only a few times.<sup>29</sup> Like Irenaeus, most of

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25. Popular books about Pilate repeat information about him from various ancient or medieval sources as if they were fact. See, for example, *The Archko Volume*, originally published by W. D. Mahan in 1887 (= W. D. Mahan, *The Acts of Pilate: Ancient Records Recorded by Contemporaries of Jesus Christ regarding the Facts concerning His Birth, Death, Resurrection* [Kirkwood, MO: Impact Christian Books, 1997]); and W. P. Crozier, *Letters of Pontius Pilate, Written during His Governorship of Judea to His Friend Seneca in Rome* (New York: J. H. Sears, 1928).

26. Hippolytus exactly reproduces this reference in his own *Haer.* 7.32.8.

27. *Haer.* 3.12.3.

28. Irenaeus also approvingly refers to passages from Acts that blame Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus. For example, Irenaeus quotes Acts 2:22–23, 36, in *Haer.* 3.13.2; Acts 3:12–15 in *Haer.* 3.13.3; and Acts 4:8–10 in *Haer.* 3.13.4. After quoting Acts 2:36, Irenaeus comments: “The apostles . . . preached faith in [Jesus], to those who did not believe on the Son of God, and exhorted them out of the prophets, that the Christ whom God promised to send, he sent in Jesus, whom they crucified and God raised up” (*Haer.* 3.13.2).

29. For Hippolytus in general, see Allen Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop*

Hippolytus's references simply repeat information from the New Testament.<sup>30</sup> In his *Commentary on the Book of Daniel*,<sup>31</sup> however, Hippolytus makes a unique statement about the Roman governor. In LXX Daniel 13, which is the book of Susanna in the Apocrypha, the Jewess Susanna is falsely accused of immoral behavior, is condemned to die, and cries out to God that she is innocent.<sup>32</sup> At that same moment, the young Daniel shouts out: "I want no part in shedding this woman's blood."<sup>33</sup>

Hippolytus saw Daniel as a type of Pilate, who in Matthew 27:24 declared: "I am innocent of this man's blood." Hippolytus concluded: "Therefore [Daniel] also was not guilty of [Susanna's] death just as Pilate did with respect to the Lord, who having washed his hands said, 'I am clean of his blood.'"<sup>34</sup> As will be shown, the references of Melito, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus imply a more positive assessment of Pilate's culpability than is found in subsequent early Christian writers.

### Tertullian of Carthage (died c. 240 CE)

At roughly the same time as Hippolytus, Tertullian, an important theologian in Carthage, made some noteworthy statements regarding

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(Leiden: Brill, 1995); J. Friskel, *Das Dunkel um Hippolyt von Rom: Ein Lösungsversuch* (Graz: Eigenverlag des Instituts für Ökumenische Theologie und Patrologie an der Universität Graz, 1988); Pierre Nautin, *Hippolyte et Josipe: Contribution à l'histoire de la littérature chrétienne du troisième siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1947); and C. Scholten, "Hippolytus II (von Rom)," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Theodor Klausner et al., 21 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950–), 15:492–551.

30. For example, Hippolytus contains a credal usage of Pilate's name in a baptismal formula (*Trad. ap.* 21.15) and also his role as judge of Jesus (*Fr. Ps.* 18; *Noet.* 18). As mentioned above, Hippolytus reproduces Irenaeus's reference to Pilate making an image of Jesus (*Haer.* 7.32.8).

31. For the Greek text and a French translation, see M. Lefèvre, *Hippolyte: Commentaire sur Daniel* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1947). For a German translation, see J. Ziegler, *Der Bibeltext im Daniel-Kommentar des Hippolyt von Rom* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952). The English translations in this section are my own.

32. See Susanna 1:28–43 (= LXX Daniel 13:28–43).

33. Susanna 1:46 (= LXX Daniel 13:46).

34. Hippolytus, *Comm. Dan.* 1.27.5.

Pontius Pilate.<sup>35</sup> While most of Tertullian's references are incidental or scripture citations, providing no exegesis of the person of Pilate,<sup>36</sup> two references to the Roman governor in Tertullian's *Apology* discuss Pilate sending a report about Jesus to Rome.<sup>37</sup>

Tertullian claims that after the crucifixion "this whole story of Christ was reported to Caesar (at that time it was Tiberius) by Pilate, himself in his secret heart already a Christian" (*Apol.* 21.24). Like Justin Martyr's claim about an official record of Pilate, or Irenaeus's claim about an image of Christ made by Pilate, it may be that Tertullian is deriving this tradition from popular Christian imagination. According to T. R. Glover, "This report to Caesar was a presumption; the pagan was challenged to look in the archives for it. The idea was fertile in literature of a kind."<sup>38</sup>

Further, Tertullian claims that this information was presented to the Roman Senate.<sup>39</sup>

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35. On Tertullian in general, see Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); René Braun, *Approches de Tertullien: vingt-six études sur l'auteur et sur l'œuvre (1955–1990)* (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 1992); Jean-Claude Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1972); Rainer Kampling, *Das Blut Christi und die Juden: Mt 27, 25 bei den lateinischsprachigen christlichen Autoren bis zu Leo dem Grossen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1984), esp. 27–38; Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and J. Steinmann, *Tertullien* (Lyon: Éditions du Chalet, 1967).

36. For example, besides the standard formulaic use of Pilate's name (*Praescr.* 25.5; *Virg.* 1.3), Tertullian mentions Pilate in his role as the judge of Jesus (*Apol.* 21.18; *Adv. Jud.* 8.18, 13.22; *Marc.* 4.42.1; *Prax.* 16.6), judge of the docetic Christ (*Marc.* 4.42.7; *Val.* 27.2), Pilate's handwashing incident (*Bapt.* 9), and the Lukan interpretation of Psalms 2:1–2 in Acts 4:25–27 (*Marc.* 4.42.2–3, 5.6.8; *Res.* 20.4; *Prax.* 28.2).

37. For the Latin text and an English translation, see T. R. Glover, *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1931). The English translations in this section are from Glover.

38. Glover, *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis*, 112, note c.

39. For an attempt at defending the historicity of this apocryphal story, see Edoardo Volterra, "Di una decisione del senato Romano Ricordata da Tertulliano," in *Scritti in onore di Contardo Ferrini: Pubblicati in occasione della sua beatificazione*, 4 vols. (Milan: Società editrice "Vita e pensiero," 1947–49), 1:471–88.

So Tiberius, in whose reign the name of Christian entered the world, hearing from Palestine in Syria information which had revealed the truth of Christ's divinity, brought the matter before the Senate, with previous indication of his own approval. The Senators, on the ground that they had not verified the facts, rejected it. Caesar maintained his opinion and threatened dire measures against those who brought accusations against the Christians. (*Apol.* 5.2)

A little more than a century later, Eusebius of Caesarea recalled this same tradition. After mentioning that it was the custom of provincial governors to keep the emperor informed of important information, Eusebius repeated the basic information contained in Tertullian's account: Pilate wrote a letter to the emperor Tiberius about Jesus; Tiberius brought this information before the Roman Senate to vote upon Jesus being recognized as a god; the proposal was rejected; Tiberius continued to hold his opinion that Jesus was a god.<sup>40</sup> It is very likely that Eusebius was dependent upon Tertullian for his information, for after mentioning this tradition he quotes directly from Tertullian's *Apology*, book 5.<sup>41</sup> Eusebius adds the detail that the letter contained specific information about Jesus's resurrection and miraculous deeds.<sup>42</sup> Instead of Tertullian's information that Tiberius threatened those who accused Christians, Eusebius says more mildly that Tiberius made no evil plans against the teachings of Christians.

Various forms of a letter have survived in which Pilate informs the emperor Tiberius of the miracles that Jesus performed before his

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40. See Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.2.1–3.

41. See Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.2.4–6.

42. Both the *Doctrina Addai* (late fourth century) and Moses of Chorene (fifth century) preserve correspondence between the Emperor Tiberius and King Abgar of Edessa, in which the emperor tells the king that Pilate has already sent a letter informing Tiberius of Jesus's miracles and divinity. See *Doctrina Addai* f. 23b–24b; and Moses of Chorene, *History of Armenia* 8. For English translations, see G. Howard, trans., *The Teaching of Addai* (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholars Press, 1981); and Robert W. Thomson, *Moses of Khoren: History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

crucifixion.<sup>43</sup> None of these apocryphal epistles can be dated before the Middle Ages and are outside the scope of this study. A letter purporting to be from Pilate to the emperor Claudius, which possibly originated in the late second or early third century, has survived.<sup>44</sup>

How did Tertullian view the culpability of Pilate? Besides his reference to Pilate secretly being a Christian already in his heart,<sup>45</sup> Tertullian in a number of places implies the innocence of Pilate. For example, speaking of the Jews at Jesus's trial, Tertullian concluded: "They brought [Jesus] to Pontius Pilate, who at the time was governing Syria in the interests of Rome, and by the violence of demands they forced Pilate to hand him over to them to be crucified."<sup>46</sup> In a similar passage Tertullian says: "All the synagogue of Israel did slay him, saying to Pilate, when he was desirous to dismiss him, 'His blood be upon us, and upon our children.'"<sup>47</sup>

Significantly, Tertullian presents a different interpretation of Matthew 27:24 than Melito. Whereas Melito used the Matthean handwashing episode to justify his view that Jews, not Pilate, were responsible for the trial and death of Jesus, Tertullian uses it to emphasize washing one's hands before prayer as a symbol of spiritual cleanliness. Tertullian was concerned that Christians "go not up to the altar of God before [they] cancel whatever of discord or offence [they] have contracted."<sup>48</sup> This must not be done hypocritically, for "what sense is there in addressing

43. For example, see *The Letter of Pilate to Tiberius* and the *Anaphora Pilati*. For the Latin texts, see Constantin von Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Metzger & Wittig, 1876). For English translations, see Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*.

44. See Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 206, 211.

45. See Tertullian, *Apology* 21.24.

46. See Tertullian, *Apology* 21.18.

47. See Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 13.22. For the Latin text, see H. Tränkle, Q. S. F. *Tertulliani Adversus Iudaeos: Mit Einleitung und kritischem Kommentar* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1964). For an English translation, see Sydney Thelwall, "An Answer to the Jews," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:151–73. The English translations in this section are from Thelwall.

48. Tertullian, *Or.* 11.1. For Tertullian's Latin text and an English translation, see Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Tract on the Prayer* (London: SPCK, 1953). The English translations in this section are from Evans.

oneself in prayer with washed hands but a dirty spirit?”<sup>49</sup> This recalls New Testament passages where Jesus rebuked Pharisees for being clean on the outside by washing their hands but for being dirty on the inside without repentance (see Matthew 15:1–20 and Mark 7:1–23). Tertullian found the counsel to be cleansed on the inside rather than just the outside

to be a recollection of Pilate, because he washed his hands upon delivering up the Lord. We worship the Lord; we do not deliver him up; in fact, we ought to set ourselves against the example of the man who delivered him up, and for that reason not wash our hands, unless we wash them for some defilement of human conversation for conscience' sake. (*Or.* 13.1)

In this case, Pilate is a negative example—in spite of his handwashing, he was not clean on the inside because he delivered Jesus up to be crucified.

Thus, Tertullian exhibits both positive and negative attitudes about Pilate's guilt in the trial and death of Jesus. It may be that Tertullian felt free to use the example of the Roman governor in different ways, depending upon the point he wanted to make.

## Pseudo-Cyprian

A few decades following Tertullian, Cyprian was bishop in the same north African city of Carthage.<sup>50</sup> A large number of the epistles of Cyprian have been preserved, but none of them mentions Pilate. A few references to Pilate in Cyprian's other treatises are incidental scriptural

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49. Tertullian, *Or.* 13.1.

50. For works on Cyprian's life and theology in general, see J. P. Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Charles Saumagne, *Saint Cyprien, évêque de Carthage, "pape" d'Afrique*, 248–258 (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1975); and Ulrich Wickert, *Sacramentum unitatis: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Kirche bei Cyprian* (New York: de Gruyter, 1971).

citations without any exegesis of the passage.<sup>51</sup> Not enough information is preserved in his writings to conclude with certainty how Cyprian felt about the Roman governor.

On the other hand, contemporaries of Cyprian (whose writings were later attributed to him) mention Pontius Pilate.<sup>52</sup> Three of these Pseudo-Cyprianic works make reference to the Roman governor. One reference is a quotation of Luke 13:1 without further exegesis,<sup>53</sup> but the remaining two references are instructive.

The first is in *De montibus Sina et Sion*, written sometime during the first half of the third century CE in North Africa.<sup>54</sup> This Pseudo-Cyprianic author refers to Pilate making the *titulus* and placing it over Jesus's cross and adds information about Pilate's actions that could be interpreted in a positive light.<sup>55</sup> After paraphrasing LXX Psalm 95:10. "Announce the kingdom of God in the midst of the nations because the Lord reigns from a tree,"<sup>56</sup> the author states:

[Jesus] fulfilled this prophet's word that came through Pontius Pilate as he was hanging on a tree in his suffering. Moved by God, Pontius Pilate took a tablet and wrote a title in three languages—Hebrew, Greek, and Latin—"Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews."

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51. For example, three times Cyprian mentions the Roman governor's role as judge in the trial of Jesus without any further elaboration (see *Idol.* 13; *Pat.* 23; and *Test.* 2.29).

52. For more on Pseudo-Cyprianic literature, see Kampling, *Das Blut Christi und die Juden*, esp. 16–26; G. Landgraf, "Über den pseudo-cyprianischen Traktat 'Adversus Iudaios,'" *Archiv für lateinische Lexikographie und Grammatik* 11 (1900): 86–97.

53. See Ps.-Cyprian, *Adv. Nov.* 15.

54. For a recent study of the complex issues surrounding this work, see A. M. Laato, *Jews and Christians in De duobus montibus Sina et Sion* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1998), esp. 19–29. See also Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1994), 2:371. For the Latin text and an Italian translation, see Clara Burini, *Pseudo Cipriano: I due monti Sinai et Sion. De duobus montibus* (Fiesole: Nardini, 1994). For an English translation, see Laato, *Jews and Christians*, 170–81. The English translations in this section are from Laato.

55. Each of the Synoptic Gospels mentions the inscription placed over the cross (see Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; and Luke 23:38). Only the Gospel of John, however, mentions Pilate's role in writing the inscription and the languages in which it was written (see John 19:19–20).

56. Ps.-Cyprian, *Mont. Sina* 9.1.

He nailed the tablet with the title “King of the Jews” at the top of the tree and showed clearly the prophet’s words that, spiritually understood, Mount Zion is the cross that is the power of God. (*Mont. Sina* 9.2)

According to the author, God inspired Pilate to put the *titulus* on the cross. The author does not indicate whether he felt Pilate recognized the inspiration of God or whether the Roman governor was an unwitting participant.<sup>57</sup> Although this reference does not explicitly exonerate or condemn Pilate, it does suggest that the Roman governor was an instrument of divine purpose.

The other reference to Pilate is in a polemical tract entitled *Adversus Iudaeos*, probably written sometime during the first half of the third century in North Africa.<sup>58</sup> The author of this treatise offers an interpretation of Pilate’s handwashing incident:

Pilate, a foreigner, a secular judge with temporal power, purified his hands and washed away the crime that was laid upon him by necessity, saying, “I am pure and innocent of the blood of this man” [cf. Matthew 27:24]. (*Adv. Jud.* 36)<sup>59</sup>

Not only does the author present Pilate as being innocent of the “crime” because it was “of necessity (*scelus necessitates*),” but his rephrasing of Matthew 27:24 also reflects this outlook. Whereas the Old Latin version of Matthew 27:24 reads: “I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man (*innocens ego sum a sanguine iusti huius*),”<sup>60</sup> the author

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57. Concerning this, Laato concludes: “It is clearly stated that God was leading Pontius Pilatus’ thinking, so that he was acting as a prophet.” Laato, *Jews and Christians*, 177n8.

58. For a study of these issues, see Dirk van Damme, *Pseudo-Cyprian, Adversus Iudaeos: Gegen die Judenchristen, die älteste lateinische Predigt* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1969), esp. 31–68. See also Quasten, *Patrology*, 2:370.

59. For the Latin text and a German translation of this text, see van Damme, *Pseudo-Cyprian, Adversus Iudaeos*, 109–38. The English translation is my own.

60. For the Old Latin version, see Adolf Jülicher, ed., *Itala: Das Neue Testament in altlateinischer Überlieferung*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: de Gruyter, 1972), 204. The



has Pilate say, “I am pure and innocent of the blood of this man (*innu-nis et innocens sum ab huius sanguine*).” Thus, while Pilate in the Old Latin of Matthew claims to be innocent, in this reference (whether from this Pseudo-Cyprianic author or possibly from his Old Latin recension) Pilate claims to be both pure and innocent. This expansion of Matthew 27:24 further emphasizes Pilate’s innocence.

### Origen (c. 185–254 CE)

During the same general period—the first half of the third century CE—in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, Origen was becoming one of the most prolific writers for the cause of Christianity.<sup>61</sup> Due to the sheer volume of his writings, Origen makes reference to Pontius Pilate more than any other Ante-Nicene author. Origen refers to Pilate in numerous New Testament citations without any further expansion or commentary.<sup>62</sup> Other references to Pilate, however, reveal a mixed view concerning the Roman governor.

In the middle of the third century, Origen responded to the accusations of the pagan Celsus in his *Contra Celsum*.<sup>63</sup> In one particular

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Vulgate of Matthew 27:24 has the same reading. See *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983), 1572.

61. For studies of Origen’s life, theology, and exegesis, see Henri Crouzel, *Origen* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989); Kampling, *Das Blut Christi und die Juden*, esp. 39–59; Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit: l’intelligence de l’Écriture d’après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950); Pierre Nautin, *Origène: sa vie et son œuvre* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977); and Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

62. For example, Origen uses Pilate’s name in a standard formulaic way: see *Comm. Jo.* 20.269, 20.272. Origen also mentions Pilate’s role as judge of Jesus in the New Testament narratives. See *Princ.* 3.2.4; *Hom. Jer.* 19.12.3; *Hom. Luc.* 21.1; *Comm. Jo.* 1.129, 19.61, 28.118, 28.232–34, 32.241, 32.376; and *Cels.* Pref. 1 and 1.51. See also *Comm. Matt.* 17.25, where Origen repeats information from Josephus’s account of when Pilate brought iconic standards into Jerusalem. See Josephus, *Ant.* 18.3.1–3 (§§55–64).

63. For the Greek text, see Marcel Borret, *Origène: Contre Celse*, 5 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967). For an English translation, see Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). The English translations in this section are from Chadwick. For a handy recent English translation of Origen’s

passage Origen seems to cast Pilate in a negative light. After discussing the words of the Johannine Jesus: “He who has seen me has seen the Father who sent me” (John 14:9), Origen offers this interpretation:

In these words no one of any intelligence would say that Jesus was here referring to his sensible body which was visible to men. . . . For in that event God the Father would have been seen even by all those who said, “Crucify him, crucify him,” and by Pilate who received power over his human nature, which is absurd. (*Cels.* 7.43)

Origen did not think that persons like Pilate and those who called for Jesus’s crucifixion could see God the Father. Why? Origen continued: “No one can know God but by the help of divine grace coming from above, with a certain divine inspiration.”<sup>64</sup> In Origen’s view, it was ridiculous to suppose that the Roman governor received a glimpse of God the Father through divine assistance or inspiration.

Origen’s homilies on Luke contain two additional references to Pilate that are very similar to the preceding.<sup>65</sup> Origen says that only the worthy were able to see Jesus as the Word of God.

Those who deserve to see God’s voice see it with different eyes. In the Gospel, however, it is not a voice that is seen but a word, which is more excellent than a voice. . . . The apostles themselves saw the Word, not because they had beheld the body of our Lord and Savior, but because they had seen the Word. If seeing Jesus’ body meant seeing God’s word, then Pilate, who condemned Jesus, saw God’s Word; so did Judas the traitor. . . . But far be it that any unbeliever should see God’s Word. (*Hom. Luc.* 1.4)

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citations of Celsus, see R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Celsus: On the True Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

64. *Cels.* 7.44.

65. Origen’s collection of homilies on Luke, originally written in Greek, only survive in Latin with a few Greek fragments. See Henri Crouzel, *Origenes: Homélie sur S. Luc* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962). For an English translation, see J. T. Lienhard, *Origen: Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996). The English translations in this section are from Lienhard.

They saw his body, but, insofar as he was Christ, they could not see him. But his disciples saw him and beheld the greatness of his divinity. . . . Pilate, who saw Jesus, did not gaze upon the Father. Neither did Judas the traitor. Neither Pilate nor Judas saw Christ as Christ. Nor did the crowd, which pressed around him. Only those whom Jesus judged worthy of beholding him really saw him. (*Hom. Luc.* 3.4)

In these passages, Origen categorizes Pilate and Judas as sinners and unbelievers who were unable to see Jesus as the Word of God.

In his commentary on Matthew's Gospel, Origen twice comments on Pilate. Both passages are ambivalent. Origen first speaks of Pilate's condemnation of Jesus.

When the last of the prophets [John the Baptist] was unlawfully killed by Herod [Antipas], the king of the Jews was deprived of the power of putting to death; for, if Herod had not been deprived of it, Pilate would not have condemned Jesus to death; but for this Herod would have sufficed along with the council of the chief priests and elders of the people, met for the purpose. (*Comm. Matt.* 10.21)<sup>66</sup>

Origen's view is that if Herod Antipas had possessed the power of capital punishment, he, along with the Sanhedrin, would have condemned Jesus to death instead of Pilate, since Pilate would not have been given *the opportunity*.

Origen also speaks of Pilate's motives:

Herod [Antipas] and Pilate became friends with one another that they might kill Jesus; for, perhaps, their hostility with one another

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66. The history of the preservation of Origen's commentary on Matthew is very complex. On this, see Crouzel, *Origen*, 42–43. For the Greek text, see E. Klostermann, *Origenes Werke: Origenes Matthäuserklärung* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1935); and Robert Girard, *Origène: Commentaire sur L'Évangile selon Matthieu* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970). For a complete German translation, see Hermann J. Vogt, *Origenes: Der Kommentar zum Evangelium nach Mattäus*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1983, 1990, 1993). For an English translation of books 10–14, see J. Patrick, "Origen's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 9:409–512. English translations in this section are taken from Patrick.

would have prevented Herod from asking that He should be put to death, in order to please the people, . . . and would have influenced Pilate, who was somewhat inclined against His condemnation, his hostility with Herod giving fresh impulse to the inclination which he previously cherished to release Jesus. But their apparent friendship made Herod stronger in his demand against Jesus with Pilate, who wished, perhaps, also because of the newly formed friendship to do something to gratify Herod and all the nation of the Jews. (*Comm. Matt.* 12.1)

In other words, according to Origen, Pilate had previously been “inclined against [Jesus’s] condemnation” and “cherished to release Jesus.” It would seem on the surface that this is a positive assessment of Pilate’s culpability. But even if Pilate previously wanted to release Jesus and even if Pilate’s motivation—friendship—is morally neutral, in the end it does not make the decision to condemn Jesus any less heinous. It might even make that decision look worse. In both of these passages Origen is putting forth a historical context and rationale for Pilate’s actions, evaluating the circumstances and motives, rather than Pilate’s guilt or innocence.

A clearer assessment of Pilate’s role in the condemnation of Jesus is seen again in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*. Here, Origen responds to Celsus’s contention that nothing bad happened to Pilate after the crucifixion as a result of Pilate’s role in the proceedings.

It was not so much Pilate who condemned [Jesus], since he knew that “for envy the Jews had given him up,” as the Jewish people. This nation has been condemned by God, and torn in pieces, and scattered over all the earth. (*Cels.* 2.34)

Here Origen clearly places the blame, not “so much” upon Pilate, but upon the Jewish people, who he believed were suffering divine retribution for their part in the condemnation of Jesus.

Another passage seems to indicate even more clearly that Origen did not always judge Pilate to be an unworthy individual. In an interesting section of his homilies on Leviticus, Origen compared Barabbas

to the scapegoat that was released into the wilderness and Jesus to the scapegoat which was led to be sacrificed.<sup>67</sup>

If you ask who it is who led this he-goat “into the wilderness” to verify that he also was washed and made clean, Pilate himself can be taken as “a prepared man.” Certainly he was the judge of the nation itself who sent him by his sentence “into the wilderness.” But hear how he was washed and made clean. When he had said to the people, “Do you want me to release to you Jesus, who is called the Christ,” and all the people had shouted out, saying, “If you release this one, you are not a friend of Caesar,” then it says, “Pilate demanded water and washed his hands before the people, saying, I am clean from his blood; you should see to it.” Thus, therefore, by washing his hands he will appear to be made clean. (*Hom. Lev.* 10.2.2.)

Origen compares Pilate to the “prepared [or ready] man” [*anthrōpos etoimos*]<sup>68</sup> who was to wash himself after sending away one scapegoat and sacrificing the other (see Leviticus 16:24, 26, 28). So also Pilate washed himself after sending away Barabbas and “sacrificing” Jesus. This would seem to clear Pilate of culpability, as Origen concluded: “by washing his hands he will appear to be made clean.”

Thus continues the inconsistency that is seen in Tertullian and other authors. Although inclined to group Pilate with Judas and the Jewish leaders, even Origen seems to minimize Pilate’s role in the condemnation of Jesus. It would seem that the Roman governor was used in whatever way best suited the exegesis at hand.

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67. These homilies, originally written in Greek, only survive in Latin. See Marcel Borret, *Origenes: Homélie sur le Lévitique*, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1981). For an English translation, see G. W. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus 1–16* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990). The English translations used in this section are from Barkley.

68. See LXX Leviticus 16:21: “And Aaron shall lay his hands on the head of the live goat, and he shall declare over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their unrighteousness, and all their sins; and he shall lay them upon the head of the live goat, and shall send him by the hand of a ready man into the wilderness.”

## Eusebius of Caesarea (died c. 340 CE)

The final author I will consider in this paper is Eusebius, the “father of church history.”<sup>69</sup> Eusebius, like the other Christian authors, refers to the New Testament account of Pilate without any further discussion.<sup>70</sup> I have already discussed Eusebius’s use of earlier Christian authors.<sup>71</sup> Beyond this, in his *Ecclesiastical History* Eusebius relates some unique information about the Roman governor following his discussion of Josephus’s and Philo’s accounts of Pilate’s bringing iconic standards into Jerusalem.<sup>72</sup> Eusebius concludes by relating this story:

It is also worthy of note that in the reign of Gaius, whose times I have described, Pilate himself—he of the Savior’s era—is reported to have fallen into such misfortune that he was forced to become his own executioner and to punish himself with his own hand. Divine justice, it seems, did not delay his punishment for long. (*Hist. eccl.* 2.7)<sup>73</sup>

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69. On Eusebius of Caesarea in general, see Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata, *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Timothy D. Barnes, *Eusebius and Constantine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Monika Gödecke, *Geschichte als Mythos: Eusebs “Kirchengeschichte”* (New York: Lang, 1987); Robert M. Grant, *Eusebius as Church Historian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980); and David S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Eusebius of Caesarea* (London: Mowbray, 1960).

70. See, for example, Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.6.

71. Recall Eusebius’s reference to Tertullian’s story regarding Pilate, the emperor Tiberias, and the Senate (*Hist. eccl.* 2.2), as well as Irenaeus’s formulaic use of Pilate’s name in *Haer.* 2.32.4 (*Hist. eccl.* 5.7). Eusebius also mentions the apocryphal Acts of Pilate (*Hist. eccl.* 1.9–10 and 9.5).

72. See Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.5–6; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.257–60; *War* 2.169–70 and 175–77; and Philo, *Legat.* 43. For the Greek text of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, see Kirsopp Lake and John E. L. Oulton, *Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926, 1932). For an English translation, see Paul L. Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999).

73. Maier said concerning Eusebius’s source: “Eusebius himself ascribes this to tradition, and in his *Chronicon* he cites ‘the Roman historians’ rather than the Greek as his source for the same claim (J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* [Paris: 1857], 19:538), demonstrating that he had trouble documenting this.” See Maier, *Eusebius*, 65n9. Note the comments of Lawlor and Oulton: “No known extant document of authority confirms the statement of Eusebius [concerning Pilate’s suicide]; but that he had some

Although authors in the Middle Ages would later expand this tradition,<sup>74</sup> Eusebius was the first known author to record the idea that Pilate committed suicide after his tenure as governor of Judea. Eusebius ascribes the suicide to personal misfortune resulting from the punishment of divine justice.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the references to Pontius Pilate in the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers. One can see that this literature contains no substantive discussions of Pilate himself nor of his role in the condemnation of Jesus. Often references to Pilate are only incidental, stemming from the citation of a particular scripture that happens to mention him. But in such cases the author does not give any concrete exegesis of Pilate in the biblical citation.<sup>76</sup> This makes it difficult to assess the characterization of Pilate in any one author, let alone collectively.

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evidence for it cannot be disputed.” See Hugh J. Lawlor and John E. L. Oulton, *Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea: The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine* (London: SPCK, 1928), 2:63.

74. For a summary of later medieval legends which expand upon and present various versions of Pilate’s death, see Ann Wroe, *Pontius Pilate* (New York: Random House, 1999), esp. 355–70; and Wilhelm Creizenach, “Legenden und Sagen von Pilatus,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 1 (1874): 89–107.

75. Recall that in the second century, Celsus claimed that no calamity happened to Pilate after the condemnation of Jesus (*Cels.* 2.34). In the third century, Origen responded to this claim by saying that it was not so much Pilate as the Jews who condemned Jesus and that the Jews have indeed suffered calamity (*Cels.* 2.34). It is noteworthy that Origen does not mention a tradition about Pilate’s suicide in response to Celsus’s accusation, when it would have been natural to bring it up had he known such a tradition.

76. See, for example, Justin, *1 Apol.* 40.6 (= Psalm 2:1–2 = Acts 4:25–26); Melito, *Peri Pascha* 92 (= Acts 4:25–26); Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.12.3 (= Acts 3:13); Hippolytus, *Comm. Dan.* 1.27.5 (= Sus 1:28–43 = LXX Dan 13:28–43); Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 13.22 (Matthew 27:25); Ps.-Cyprian, *Mont. Sina* 9.2 (= John 19:19–20); Origen, *Cels.* 7.43 (= John 14:9); Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 10.21 and 12.1 (= Luke 23:6–16); Origen, *Cels.* 2.34 (= Matthew 26:18); Origen, *Hom. Lev.* 10.2.2 (= Lev 16:21–28); and the various interpretations of Matthew 27:24.

Further, these incidental references to Pilate are frequently employed, not to tell us about Pilate, but rather as a foil to the Jews. Pilate is made to look better in comparisons for the purpose of making the Jews look worse.<sup>77</sup> If authors do not really find Pilate innocent, he is at least a useful tool for polemic. No author explicitly states that Pilate is completely innocent of the condemnation of Jesus. In passages where the Roman governor's innocence is emphasized, the implication is that, at best, Pilate is less guilty than the Jews.

This analysis has also shown that Pontius Pilate is not viewed in a progressively more positive light over the course of time. Though some scholars have emphasized early Christian efforts to exonerate Pilate, it is clear that not all Christians agreed with this positive assessment of the Roman governor. Justin Martyr mentions Pilate as a co-conspirator with Herod Antipas,<sup>78</sup> while Melito emphasizes that Pilate washed his hands of responsibility for Jesus's death.<sup>79</sup> Irenaeus, on the other hand, says that Pilate did not want to participate in the condemnation of Jesus.<sup>80</sup> Hippolytus taught the same in comparing Pilate to Daniel, who did not want Susanna to be slain.<sup>81</sup> Tertullian claimed that Pilate wrote a letter to Tiberius in defense of Jesus, was already a Christian in his heart,<sup>82</sup> and was forced by threat of violence to condemn Jesus.<sup>83</sup> In spite of this, however, Tertullian elsewhere declares that Pilate's washing of his hands did not cleanse him.<sup>84</sup>

Origen, like Tertullian, describes Pilate's innocence in one place while emphasizing his guilt in another. For Origen, Pilate was like Judas and other unbelievers who were unworthy to see the Word of God.<sup>85</sup> But Origen also

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77. See, for example, Melito, *Peri Pascha* 92; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.12.3; Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.18 and *Adv. Jud.* 13.22; Ps.-Cyprian, *Adv. Jud.* 36; Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 10.21, 12.1; *Cels.* 2.34; and *Didas.* 21 [5.19].

78. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 40.6.

79. Melito, *Peri Pascha* 92.

80. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.12.3.

81. Hippolytus, *Comm. Dan.* 1.27.5.

82. Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.24, 5.2.

83. Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.18 and *Adv. Jud.* 13.22.

84. Tertullian, *Or.* 13.1.

85. Origen, *Cels.* 7.43; *Hom. Luc.* 1.4 and 3.4.



claims that Pilate was not as guilty as the Jews<sup>86</sup> because he was not initially inclined to condemn Jesus and only did so because of his friendship with Herod.<sup>87</sup> Origen implies that Pilate's handwashing, like the washing of the "ready man" of LXX Lev. 16:21, appears to have made him clean.<sup>88</sup>

Pseudo-Cyprianic writers emphasized the innocence of Pilate. They taught that Pilate's mind was moved upon by God to write on the *titulus* that Jesus was king,<sup>89</sup> and that Pilate was pure and innocent of the crime because it was laid upon him by necessity.<sup>90</sup> But by the fourth century, Eusebius, who also mentions the report that Pilate wrote a letter to Tiberius in defense of Jesus,<sup>91</sup> concludes that Pilate committed suicide because of his own misfortune and also out of divine retribution for his crimes against Jesus.<sup>92</sup>

Clearly, no uniform view of Pilate emerges during the first few centuries. From what little the early Christian fathers say about the Roman governor, those who seem to have a positive view are Melito, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and the Pseudo-Cyprianic authors of *Mont. Sina* and *Adv. Jud.* Origen and Tertullian present mixed views of Pilate, while Justin and Eusebius, in their few words about Pilate, mention him in negative contexts. Contrary to previous suggestions, the evidence does not support a sequential progression of views in which the early church fathers eventually find Pilate innocent.<sup>93</sup> Positive views are chronologically bracketed by negative views, while others are mixed.

How can one account for the variety in these ante-Nicene views of the Roman governor? Early Christian authors' interpretation of Pilate is situational, stemming from their current needs. Their presentation of Pilate depends upon the exegetical point they are trying to make. The mixed views of both Tertullian and Origen illustrate this. Both

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86. Origen, *Cels.* 2.34.

87. Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 10.21 and 12.1.

88. Origen, *Hom. Lev.* 10.2.2.

89. Ps.-Cyprian, *Mont. Sina* 9.2.

90. Ps.-Cyprian, *Adv. Jud.* 36.

91. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.2.

92. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.7.

93. See Bammel, "Pilatus," 5:383; Demandt, *Hände in Unschuld*, 216; Reid, "Apocrypha," 1:609; and Winter, "Pilate in History," 88.

authors apparently felt free to use Pilate in the way that best suited their purpose at the moment, whether it emphasized the Roman governor's culpability or innocence.

The different interpretations of Pilate's handwashing incident among the church fathers illustrate the variety of perspectives among Christians of the first few centuries (see Matthew 27:24). Melito, Hippolytus, the Pseudo-Cyprianic author of *Adv. Jud.*, and Origen all use this Matthean verse to emphasize Pilate's innocence. But Tertullian uses the same scripture to emphasize that Pilate was not cleansed on the inside. Analysis of these occasional references to Pilate does not reveal a unified portrait. No single, cohesive view of Pilate and his responsibility for the condemnation of Jesus emerges in the ante-Nicene fathers.

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