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The trial of Jesus before Pilate and the politics of representation in Mark 15

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Given the Roman court procedures and the interaction between Jewish and Roman powers, the trial of Jesus before Pilate in Mark 15:1–15 presents challenges for both historical and theological interpretation. Central to the discussion is the narrative's potential intent to shift culpability from Roman officials to Jewish leaders, raising questions about historical reliability and ideological motives. This study employs a historical-critical approach to analyse the trial of Jesus before Pilate within the socio-political context of 1st-century Roman-occupied Judea. This study examines Roman legal practices, Jewish historiographical traditions and intertextual scriptural references to assess the plausibility of the events. Special focus is placed on Pilate's portrayal, the custom of releasing a prisoner and Jesus as the 'King of the Jews'. This paper offers a historically grounded interpretation that highlights the narrative's theological articulation of Jesus' identity and its response to early Christian socio-political tensions, providing insights into perceptions of power, authority and identity in the Gospel of Mark.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study examines the socio-political dynamics of 1st-century Judea, with a focus on the interactions between Romans and Jews during Jesus' trial. It examines Roman legal practices and Jewish traditions to assess the historical plausibility of Mark's narrative. The study also highlights the theological implications of Jesus being referred to as 'King of the Jews' and Pilate's role. It offers a nuanced perspective on early Christian identity, addressing the complex interplay of political tensions and power structures.

Keywords: Roman trial; Jewish leadership; Pilate; politics of representation; historical-critical; socio-political context; theological implications; early Christian identity.

Introduction

The trial of Jesus before Pilate in Mark 15:1–15 is a pivotal moment in the Passion narrative, reflecting socio-political tensions and theological motifs of early Christianity. The passage portrays the complex interplay between Jewish authorities and the Roman prefect,[1] Pilate, who succumbs to the crowd's demands and sentences Jesus to crucifixion. Mark highlights themes of injustice, political manoeuvrings and divine sovereignty, prompting questions about the author's theological motivations (Evans 2001:463). This study employs the historical-critical method to examine Mark 15:1–15 within its literary, historical and theological contexts in the Gospel of Mark. Although parallels exist in the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, this study does not focus on a comparative inter-Gospel analysis; such a comparison will not be undertaken in full detail here. The present investigation is concerned exclusively with the Markan narrative and its historical-critical implications. However, for further clarification, Table 1 illustrates these historical differences in Pilate's presentation across other evangelists. The portrayal of Pilate as a reluctant judge, pressured by the crowd, has sparked scholarly debate, with some suggesting that it serves an apologetic function, distancing Roman authorities from Jesus' execution (Hooker 1991:371). The trial narrative is critical in framing Jesus as a suffering Messiah, influencing Christian theological traditions on martyrdom, divine justice and kingship. It also provides a lens for examining power dynamics in 1st-century Judea, where Roman rule coexisted with Jewish authority (Bond 1998:95, see Crossan 1995:209). This study contributes to ongoing discussions on the Passion narrative, early Christian theology and Christian-Jewish relations.

Historical context: Roman-occupied Judea

The trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate in the second Gospel is a pivotal moment in the Passion narrative, reflecting the complex interplay between Roman authority and Jewish leadership.

1.In the early Roman Empire, particularly in the 1st century CE, terms like prefect [*praefectus*] and governor (usually referred to with terms like *procurator*, *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, or *proconsul*) had distinct meanings and connotations, though sometimes they overlap in English translations (Goodman 2007:56; Millar 1993:322).

As a scene encapsulating political and theological tensions, it has been the subject of interest in NT scholarship. Understanding this passage requires an examination of the socio-political structures of 1st-century Judea, particularly the roles of the Roman governor and the Jewish authorities in managing governance and religious matters.

Roman governance in Judea

During the 1st century, Judea was under Roman rule, following its incorporation into the Roman Empire as a client kingdom in 63 BCE and later as a province in 6 CE. Following Pompey the Great's conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BCE, Judea became a client kingdom under Roman oversight, rather than being immediately incorporated as a Roman province as a whole. Pontius Pilate was the fifth Roman prefect governing the province of Judea, 26–36 CE. Judea became an annexure to the Province of Syria in 6 CE, when Herod's son, Archelaus, lost rule over the territory. Then, the office *praefectus Iudaeae* was introduced to rule the annex. Still, the prefect was subordinate to the praetorian legate of the Province of Syria, who was the representative of the emperor. The Pilatus inscription attests that Pilatus was a *praefectus* and not a procurator, as Tacitus calls him anachronistically.

A client kingdom [*regnum socium*] was a semi-autonomous political entity ruled by local monarchs who pledged loyalty to Rome. These client rulers retained significant internal autonomy, especially regarding local religious, social and legal matters, although their foreign policy and tribute obligations were tightly controlled by Roman authorities (Goodman 2007:30). In the case of Judaea, figures such as Hyrcanus II and later Herod the Great maintained their positions as client kings by demonstrating loyalty to Roman power while managing their territories according to Jewish traditions (Josephus, Antiquities 14.79–97). During this period, Judaea did not host a permanent Roman administrative structure or garrison, and Rome typically intervened only when internal disputes or instability threatened imperial interests.

The client kingship system allowed Rome to exercise influence without the costs associated with direct rule. Herod the Great, for example, exemplified this model by heavily Romanising his administration and architecture while preserving the façade of Jewish sovereignty (Josephus, Antiquities 15.6). However, while local rulers had substantial day-to-day control, their authority ultimately depended on Roman approval, and they could be deposed if deemed ineffective or disloyal to the Roman Empire. A major transition occurred in 6 CE following the death and deposition of Herod Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great. Archelaus's rule was marred by accusations of incompetence and cruelty, prompting direct Roman intervention. Judaea was thus transformed from a client kingdom into a Roman province administered by a Roman prefect [*praefectus*] (Josephus, Jewish War 2.117–118). A Roman province was a territorial entity under direct Roman governance, where the emperor or Senate appointed officials to oversee taxation, legal matters and military defence (Millar 1993:29). Establishing a permanent Roman administrative and military presence fundamentally altered Judaea's political landscape.

As a Roman province, Judaea was initially placed under the authority of the governor of Syria. Still, day-to-day administration was managed by an equestrian-rank prefect stationed at Caesarea Maritima. This administrative change intensified tensions among the Jewish population, particularly because Roman taxation practices were viewed as exploitative and intrusive (Goodman 2007:35). The imposition of the census under the first prefect, Coponius, triggered immediate unrest, leading to the revolt of Judas the Galilean, mentioned both by Josephus and the New Testament (Josephus, Jewish War 2.118; Ac 5:37). The transition from client kingdom to province meant that Judaea lost the semblance of local sovereignty it had previously enjoyed. Under the prefects, Judaea experienced a much stricter and direct Roman control over both civil administration and religious institutions, sowing the seeds for later large-scale revolts, including the Great Revolt of 66–70 CE (Millar 1993:30–32).

The governance of Judea was characterised by a system of indirect rule in which local authorities, particularly the Jewish aristocracy and the priestly class, played a crucial role in maintaining order while remaining subordinate to Roman oversight (France 2002:592). The Roman administration functioned primarily to ensure political stability, enforce tax collection and prevent insurrection, with the governor serving as the imperial representative responsible for military, financial and judicial affairs.

Pontius Pilate, the prefect of Judea from 26 to 36 CE, operated within this structure, acting as the chief Roman authority and an intermediary between Rome and the Jewish leadership. Pilate's tenure was marked by tensions and conflicts, as evidenced by historical sources such as Josephus[2] and Philo,[3] who describe his provocative actions, including the use of Roman standards in Jerusalem and the appropriation of

2. Josephus, in Jewish War (2.169–174) and Antiquities (18.55–59), recounts an early confrontation where Pilate introduced imperial Roman standards bearing the emperor's image into Jerusalem, violating Jewish religious laws. The Jewish population protested vehemently in Caesarea, and after 5 days of escalating tensions, Pilate attempted to suppress the demonstration with force. However, the protesters' willingness to face death compelled him to withdraw the offending standards. Another significant incident described by Josephus (Antiquities 18.60–62) involved Pilate using Temple treasury funds to construct an aqueduct. This provoked mass outrage, leading to a violent confrontation in which Pilate deployed undercover soldiers among the crowd, resulting in many deaths. Josephus also records Pilate's brutal suppression of Samaritans on Mount Gerizim (Antiquities 18.85–89), where he massacred followers of a leader claiming to reveal sacred artifacts. This excessive force led to Pilate's removal from office by the governor of Syria, Vitellius, and his recall to Rome.

3. Philo of Alexandria further portrays Pilate as cruel, corrupt, and oppressive. In Legatio ad Gaium (299–305), Philo accuses Pilate of bribery, executions without trial, and unjust governance. He describes an incident where Pilate set up golden shields in Herod's palace bearing an inscription to Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Jewish leaders protested, appealing directly to the emperor, who ultimately ordered Pilate to remove the shields to maintain peace in the province. Philo's account reinforces the image of Pilate as a harsh ruler who frequently provoked Jewish resistance.

TABLE 1: Each Gospel portrays Pilate differently, reflecting their theological and historical concerns.

Gospel	Pilate's characterisation	Interaction with Jewish leaders and the crowd	Responsibility for Jesus' death
Mark	Pragmatic but pressured by the crowd	Chief priests stir the crowd to demand crucifixion (15:11)	Jews, particularly the leaders, bear the primary blame
Matthew	Weak, influenced by his wife's dream (27:19)	Pilate washes his hands of responsibility (27:24)	'His blood be on us and on our children' (27:25) places blame on the Jews
Luke	Attempts to release Jesus, sends him to Herod (23:6–12)	The Jewish leaders persistently accuse Jesus	Roman and Jewish responsibilities are both emphasised
John	More philosophical, engages in theological dialogue with Jesus (18:33–38)	Chief priests insist, 'We have no king but Caesar' (19:15)	Pilate is reluctant, but ultimately delivers Jesus to be crucified

Source: Adapted and modified from Brown, R.E., 1994, *The death of the messiah: From gethsemane to the grave: A commentary on the passion narratives in the four gospels*, vol. 2, Doubleday, New York; and Bond, H.K., 1998, *Pontius pilate in history and interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

temple funds (Edwards 2002:471). Though more concise, Tacitus[4] provides crucial Roman confirmation of Pilate's actions. In Annals (15.44),[5] Tacitus records that Jesus Christ was executed under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar (14–37 CE). While Tacitus does not delve into Pilate's administrative challenges, his account corroborates his historical role and connection to one of the most significant events in Christian history.

Although the Gospels present Pilate as a reluctant participant in Jesus' trial, historical analysis suggests that he was a pragmatic ruler who prioritised Roman interests over local sensitivities (Brooks 1991:252). His relationship with the Jewish leaders was one of mutual dependence. At the same time, he retained ultimate authority, and the Jewish elite played a significant role in mediating between the Roman administration and the broader Jewish population (Garland 1996:433). Pilate's role in Jesus' trial, as depicted in Mark 15:1–15, reflects these political dynamics. The Jewish authorities brought Jesus before Pilate, accusing him of claiming kingship – a charge with political implications that would concern the Roman administration. Mark's portrayal of Pilate's hesitancy may be a theological or narrative device rather than a strictly historical representation. Scholars have debated whether Pilate's actions align with his known historical character. Mark's account suggests a weaker, indecisive figure who ultimately capitulates to the demands of the Jewish leaders and the crowd (France 2002:598). However, within the Roman governance structure, such an action would be consistent with a pragmatic approach to maintaining order and preventing unrest.

4.Tacitus was a Roman senator, historian, and provincial governor (c. 56–120 CE) who, in his Annals (15.44), briefly mentioned Pontius Pilate as the Roman official who ordered Jesus' execution during the reign of Tiberius. Tacitus, writing around 116 CE, is significant because he provides an independent Roman confirmation of Pilate's role outside of Christian sources.

5.'Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.'(Tacitus, Annals 15.44; translation based on Church and Brodribb 1942.)

Jewish political and religious landscape

The Jewish political and religious leadership in 1st-century Judea was also complex, consisting of several key groups, including the Sanhedrin,[6] high priests and Pharisaic and Sadducean factions. The Sanhedrin, a council of Jewish leaders, played a central role in religious and judicial matters, though its authority was ultimately subject to Roman approval (Brooks 1991:261). The high priest, typically from the Sadducean aristocracy, acted as both a religious leader and a political intermediary with the Roman administration. This arrangement enabled the Jewish elite to exert significant influence while ensuring compliance with Roman governance.

The Jewish authorities' involvement in Jesus' trial must be understood within the broader political and religious framework. As leaders responsible for maintaining religious purity and social stability, they viewed Jesus as a potential disruptor, particularly given his challenges to temple authority and his growing following (Garland 1996:439). The decision to bring Jesus before Pilate suggests that they perceived his movement as a threat that exceeded their jurisdiction, necessitating Roman intervention (Edwards 2002:479). Jewish messianic expectations further exacerbated the tensions between Jewish authorities, Roman occupiers and popular movements. Many Jews anticipated a Messiah who would restore Israel's independence, either through divine intervention or political revolt. Various groups, such as the Zealots, actively sought to resist Roman rule. In contrast, others, including the Pharisees and Sadducees, adopted a more accommodating stance to preserve their status and religious authority (France 2002:603). Jesus' identity as a potential messianic figure and his radical reinterpretation of messianic expectations positioned him in conflict with the Jewish leadership and Roman authorities (Garland 1996:443).

Some scholars argue that Mark presents Jesus primarily as a suffering servant rather than a suffering *Messiah* because of Mark's deliberate emphasis on Jesus' hidden identity and mission of service, rather than his public, political kingship. For instance, in Mark 10:45, Jesus says, 'For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many', highlighting servanthood over royal power (Bible, ESV). Scholars such as Hooker (1991:90) suggest that Mark intentionally downplays the politically charged messianic expectations prevalent in Second Temple Judaism by redefining messiahship through the lens of suffering and servanthood. Watts (2000:109) also argues that

6.The Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish legal and administrative council during the Second Temple period, overseeing religious, civil, and criminal matters within Jewish society. It was composed of chief priests, elders, and scribes, with Sadducean aristocrats often holding significant influence (Josephus, Antiquities 20.200; War 2.411). Although it enjoyed considerable autonomy, especially in religious affairs, its ability to enact capital punishment was curtailed under direct Roman rule after 6 CE (Schürer 1973:193). According to the New Testament, the Sanhedrin convened to deliberate on cases like that of Jesus (Mk 14:55), yet final authority for executions required Roman confirmation (Jn 18:31). Contemporary scholars such as Goodman (2007:35) and Sanders (1993:277) affirm that while the Sanhedrin wielded significant influence in Jewish internal matters, it operated within the constraints imposed by the Roman prefects and procurators.

Mark reinterprets the concept of Messiah not through Davidic kingship but through the Isaianic 'servant of the Lord' imagery (cf. Is 53), thus avoiding association with nationalistic rebellion against Rome. Furthermore, Marcus (2009:56) contends that Mark shows Jesus' Messiahship as misunderstood even by his disciples because they expected a conquering king, not a servant who suffers and dies. The famous 'Messianic Secret' theme (cf. Mk 1:34, 8:30) supports this reading: Jesus silences proclamations about his messianic identity to prevent misunderstandings based on popular Jewish hopes for a military deliverer (see Wrede 1901:21). Therefore, in Mark, Jesus' role as a suffering servant corrects and transforms traditional messianic expectations into a model of redemptive suffering and service.

Mark's narrative reflects these tensions by portraying Jesus as a figure whose kingship is misunderstood – both by the Jewish authorities, who see him as a blasphemer, and by the Romans, who view him as a political agitator. The theological message embedded in Mark's account is that Jesus' kingship transcends earthly power structures, challenging both Jewish and Roman conceptions of authority (Edwards 2002:482). This portrayal aligns with broader themes in Mark's Gospel, where Jesus consistently subverts expectations and redefines messianic identity through suffering and service (Brooks 1991:265). Mark's depiction of these events is not merely historical but also deeply theological, presenting Jesus as a suffering servant whose kingship defies both Jewish and Roman paradigms.

Roman legal practices and the trial of Jesus

The Roman legal system in the 1st century was structured around clear procedural norms, particularly in cases involving accusations of sedition or crimes against the state. Roman governors had extensive judicial authority, including the power to hear cases, pass verdicts and enforce punishments. According to Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:196), provincial governors functioned as representatives of the emperor. They held imperium, granting them the ability to adjudicate capital cases without needing direct approval from Rome. Trials under Roman jurisdiction typically followed a structured format: The accused was presented before the governor, a formal charge was read, the governor examined the accused (often questioning them directly), and a verdict was reached based on the evidence or political expediency (Marcus 2009:103). In theory, Roman trials emphasised due process; however, political concerns often influenced outcomes in practice, particularly in volatile regions like Judea. Carter (2019:264) argues that Roman governors prioritised stability over legal precision, often siding with local elites to maintain order.

The trial of Jesus, as depicted in Mark 15:1–15, shares some similarities with standard Roman legal proceedings but also deviates in key areas. Unlike typical Roman trials, where clear charges and formal defence procedures were expected, Jesus is portrayed as largely silent, engaging minimally with Pilate's questioning. This silence aligns with Mark's narrative emphasis on Jesus' fulfilment of Isaiah's Suffering Servant motif (Juel 1999:175). Moreover, the involvement of a public crowd pressuring Pilate to release Barabbas instead of Jesus suggests a unique confluence of legal process and mob influence, which is atypical of standard Roman trials (Moloney 2012:288).

Breytenbach (2021:89) suggests that Mark's episodic narrative structure intensifies the dramatic tension between Jesus and Pilate, presenting Pilate as a hesitant figure trapped between legal procedure and political expediency. In contrast, Black (2010:249) contends that while the Gospel account reflects historical elements of Roman trials, its theological emphasis shapes the portrayal of Pilate's indecisiveness and the Jewish authorities' role in Jesus' condemnation.

Pilate's role in the trial

Pontius Pilate's governance of Judea (26–36 CE) was marked by tension and political pragmatism. As the Roman prefect, he was responsible for maintaining order, overseeing taxation and handling legal matters, particularly cases that could lead to unrest (Carter 2019:267). Historical sources, such as Josephus and Philo, depict Pilate as a rigid and often provocative ruler with little regard for Jewish customs, making his hesitation in condemning Jesus an intriguing aspect of the Gospel narrative (Marcus 2009:107). In Mark's account, Pilate is portrayed as reluctant to blame Jesus, seemingly recognising the charges as politically motivated (Mk 15:10). However, his eventual decision to authorise the crucifixion suggests that his primary concern was political stability rather than justice (Cole 1989:321). Wessel, Strauss and Carson (2010:673) argue that Pilate's actions strike a balance between upholding Roman legal expectations and placating the local Jewish leadership to prevent unrest.

Psychologically, Pilate's behaviour can be understood as an example of Roman realpolitik. Guelich (1999:419) notes that Pilate's refusal to engage deeply with the charges against Jesus, coupled with his symbolic washing of hands in Matthew's account (Mt 27:24), demonstrates his attempt to distance himself from responsibility while appeasing local factions. Additionally, Moloney (2012:290) suggests that Pilate's vacillation reflects his struggle with maintaining his authority while avoiding potential backlash from Rome and the Jewish populace. Mark's portrayal of Pilate aligns with broader themes in his Gospel, where worldly authorities misunderstand Jesus' identity and act out of self-interest rather than moral conviction. Pilate's symbolic questioning of Jesus – 'Are you the king of the Jews?' (Mk 15:2) – highlights his inability to grasp the nature of Jesus' kingship, further reinforcing Mark's theological motif of misunderstood messianic identity (Juel 1999:178). The deviations from standard Roman trials, including the influence of public pressure and Jesus' silence, highlight Mark's theological

intentions in depicting Jesus as the suffering servant, misunderstood Messiah. Pilate's role as a hesitant yet ultimately complicit figure reflects the complexities of Roman governance in Judea and the Gospel's broader theme of Jesus' rejection by worldly authorities.

Jewish traditions and intertextual references in the trial of Jesus

The trial of Jesus, as presented in the Gospel of Mark, is a complex legal and theological event that intertwines Jewish and Roman judicial traditions. Jewish legal procedures, particularly those of the Sanhedrin, played a crucial role in framing the accusations against Jesus. At the same time, intertextual references to the Hebrew Scriptures enriched the theological significance of the trial. The portrayal of Jesus as the 'King of the Jews' aligns with Jewish messianic expectations but is also manipulated within the narrative to justify his condemnation.

Jewish legal traditions were rooted in the Torah and later rabbinic interpretations, forming the basis of judicial procedures in the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin, a council of Jewish elders, priests and scribes, held authority over religious and legal matters, but its power was limited under Roman rule (Marcus 2009:110). In theory, trials followed established protocols, including the requirement of witnesses (Dt 19:15) and the prohibition on capital trials at night or on festival days (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:1).

However, the trial of Jesus, as depicted in Mark 14:53, 65, appears to contravene these norms, proceeding hastily and at night (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:287). The accusations against Jesus primarily centred on blasphemy (Mk 14:61–64), a charge punishable by death under Jewish law (Lv 24:16). However, Jewish authorities lacked the power to execute capital punishment under Roman governance, necessitating their appeal to Pilate with a political charge – claiming that Jesus posed a threat to Roman authority by proclaiming himself 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15:2) (Carter 2019:273). This shift from a theological charge (blasphemy) to a political one highlights the pragmatic strategy employed by the Jewish leaders to ensure Roman intervention in Jesus' execution (Guelich 1999:426).

Intertextual scriptural references

The trial and crucifixion of Jesus in Mark's Gospel are deeply embedded in Jewish scriptural traditions, particularly in relation to the suffering servant and messianic expectations. Two primary Old Testament references that I would like to explore, that is, Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 are key texts that shape the narrative's theological framework.

Isaiah 53: The suffering servant motif

Isaiah 53:7 (NIV) describes a figure who suffers vicariously for the sins of others:

> He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;
> he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
> and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
> so he did not open his mouth.

This passage closely parallels Jesus' conduct during his trial, particularly his silence before Pilate (Mk 15:5). Several scholars support the argument that Mark's Gospel intentionally presents Jesus' trial in a manner that aligns with the Suffering Servant motif found in Isaiah 53. For instance, Juel (1999:182) contends that Mark portrays Jesus' trial before the Jewish and Roman authorities as a means of reinforcing his identity as the innocent yet divinely appointed redeemer. Juel argues that Jesus' unjust condemnation parallels the suffering of the Servant in Isaiah 53, where the righteous servant is 'despised and rejected by men', yet through his suffering, redemption is accomplished.

Barrett (1978:317) similarly note that Mark's account of the trial underscores the innocence of Jesus and the unjust nature of his condemnation, which mirrors the description of the Suffering Servant who 'had done no violence' (Is 53:9). Marcus (2009:640) further emphasises that the tension between Jesus' mission as the Messiah and the suffering he endures is integral to Mark's theological purpose, illustrating the redemptive power of suffering. Wrede (1901), in his famous work on the Messianic Secret theory, further demonstrates that Mark intentionally subverts the conventional messianic expectations of a triumphant military leader. Instead, he presents Jesus' suffering as the path to true glory and redemption, echoing the Isaianic Servant Songs. The unjust trial and death of Jesus in Mark 14–15 is portrayed as fulfilling the Servant's mission, a redemptive act ordained by God despite the injustice of human authorities.

Finally, Marcus (2009:672) suggests that the trial scene is a pivotal moment in Mark's Gospel to illustrate how Jesus embodies the Servant of Yahweh through self-sacrificial suffering for the atonement of sin. The portrayal of Jesus' silence before his accusers (Mk 15:5), a key element of his trial, reflects the Servant's silence in Isaiah 53:7, where the servant is depicted as 'oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth'. Thus, these scholars such as agree that Mark intentionally shapes Jesus' trial narrative in alignment with the Suffering Servant motif, emphasising the theological significance of Jesus' redemptive suffering considering the Isaianic prophecy.

Psalm 22: The righteous sufferer

Psalm 22:1, traditionally attributed to David, provides another key intertextual reference:

> My God, my God, attend to me; why have you forsaken me? Far from my salvation are the words of my transgressions. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This cry, later uttered by Jesus on the cross (Mk 15:34), underlines his deep identification with the psalmist's suffering (Ps 21:1 LXX). The themes of mockery and public

humiliation present in Psalm 21:7–8 LXX – 'All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads' – find direct and intentional echoes in the narrative of Jesus' trial and crucifixion (Mk 15:29–32). Scholars such as Moloney (2012:295) argue that Mark purposefully weaves these psalmic allusions into his Passion narrative to present Jesus as an isolated martyr and as the fulfilment of the righteous sufferer depicted in the Scriptures. Similarly, Hooker (1991:361) emphasises that Mark's portrayal aligns Jesus with the tradition of the afflicted righteous one, highlighting the theological necessity of suffering for divine vindication. Furthermore, France (2002:652) points out that the crowd's derision in Mark mirrors the language and tone of Psalm 22, reinforcing the motif of public scorn faced by the innocent. Thus, Mark's Gospel consciously integrates Psalm 22's imagery to theologically frame Jesus' death as a divinely ordained act within the broader tapestry of Israel's sacred writings (Evans 2001:499).

The title 'King of the Jews' and Jewish messianic expectations

The designation of Jesus as 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26) plays a central role in both the trial and crucifixion narratives. Jewish messianic hopes, particularly those influenced by Psalm 2 and Zechariah 9:9, envisioned a Davidic king who would restore Israel's sovereignty (Marcus 2009:120). However, in Mark's account, Jesus' opponents co-opted and manipulated this title. The trial and crucifixion of Jesus in Mark 15 present a complex interplay of political and theological motifs, particularly concerning the title 'King of the Jews'. The Jewish leaders' accusation that Jesus claimed kingship strategically aligns him with anti-Roman insurgents, framing him as a political threat to Roman authority. This charge, aimed at drawing Pilate's attention, reflects the Jewish authorities' desire to neutralise Jesus by positioning him as challenging Roman rule (Carter 2019:275). The Roman soldiers further mock Jesus by dressing him in a purple robe, placing a crown of thorns on his head, and hailing him as 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15:16–20). This mockery subverts Jewish messianic hopes and underscores Romans' contempt for Jewish self-rule aspirations (Wessel et al. 2010:678). Finally, the inscription placed on Jesus' cross, declaring him 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15:26), serves as an ironic declaration of his identity. Though intended as a mockery by Roman authorities, the inscription aligns with Mark's portrayal of Jesus as the misunderstood yet legitimate messianic king, emphasising the discrepancy between human perception and divine truth (Black 2010:255).

The politics of representation: Shifting culpability in the trial of Jesus

Mark's narrative subtly shifts blame away from the Roman authorities, particularly Pilate, and onto the Jewish leaders and the crowd. This shift serves theological, political and historical purposes, particularly early Christian engagement with Roman power and Jewish–Christian relations.

Roman vs. Jewish responsibility in Mark's narrative

Mark's portrayal of the trial highlights the agency of Jewish authorities while downplaying Pilate's role in Jesus' execution. This strategy has been widely discussed in scholarly literature, particularly regarding its implications for later Christian views on Jewish culpability (Evans 2001:765). In Mark 14:55–65 and 15:1, the Jewish leadership is portrayed as the driving force behind Jesus' death. The chief priests, elders and scribes frame Jesus as a political threat by presenting him to Pilate with the charge of being the 'King of the Jews' (15:2). This accusation not only moves beyond theological disputes, but also directly challenges Roman authority, making the demand for execution more politically viable (Marcus 2009:111). Pilate's portrayal in Mark 15:9–14 contrasts with harsher Roman legal practices, as he appears hesitant and influenced by external pressures, repeatedly questioning the crowd's demand for crucifixion: 'Why? What crime has he committed?' (Mk 15:14). This suggests that Pilate is not the primary driver of Jesus' death, but rather, he is reluctant to decide (Carter 2019:274). The crowd's choice to release Barabbas instead of Jesus (Mk 15:6–15) shifts the culpability for Jesus' death. Barabbas, identified as an insurrectionist (Mk 15:7), represents violent resistance against Rome. The chief priests manipulate the crowd, reinforcing those Jewish authorities, and the crowd bears responsibility for the death of Jesus, while Pilate and Rome are exonerated to some extent. This moment reflects the concept of substitutionary atonement, with Jesus, the innocent one, dying in place of a guilty rebel (Wright 1996:543).

Pilate's portrayal in Mark 15

Apocryphal texts, such as the Gospel of Peter (2nd century), further develop Pilate's portrayal, exonerating him while blaming Herod and the Jewish authorities. This text also includes supernatural elements, such as Jesus' body mysteriously growing out of the tomb. In addition to literary sources, archaeological evidence confirms Pilate's historical existence. The Pilate Stone, discovered in Caesarea Maritima, is the only physical artefact mentioning Pilate by name, confirming his title as 'Prefect of Judea', aligning with both Gospel accounts and Roman historical sources. Early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr (First Apology 35.9, 48.3), suggest that official Roman records documented Jesus' execution under Pilate. Tertullian (Apology 21) even implies that Pilate developed sympathy towards Jesus after the trial.

Pilate in Mark vs. other gospels

The positive portrayal of Pilate in Mark and Matthew: Historical or theological construction?

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew present Pontius Pilate in a surprisingly sympathetic or distanced manner concerning the death of Jesus. In Mark 15:6–15, Pilate offers to release a prisoner, hoping the crowd would choose Jesus rather than Barabbas. Similarly, in Matthew 27:24, Pilate symbolically washes his hands to absolve himself of responsibility for Jesus' execution. Such portrayals prompt critical inquiry: Are they historically reliable reflections of Pilate's actions, or are

they theological reconstructions by the evangelists to serve specific narrative and ecclesial needs?

From a historical-critical standpoint, it is doubtful that Pilate was deeply concerned with Jewish religious sensibilities. Sources external to the New Testament, such as Philo (Embassy to Gaius 38 §§299–305) and Josephus (Jewish Antiquities 18.55–62), characterise Pilate as a harsh and provocative ruler who regularly offended Jewish customs without hesitation (Bond 1998:70; Evans 2001:465). These accounts contrast sharply with the gospel image of a hesitant and almost sympathetic Pilate. Furthermore, the practice of releasing a prisoner at Passover, a key element in the Gospel narratives, lacks corroboration in any known Roman or Jewish legal practices of the time (Brown 1994:838). Consequently, scholars argue that this tradition and Pilate's handwashing scene in Matthew likely reflect literary and theological creativity rather than historical reportage (Carter 2003:276).

Mark and Matthew seem to have had theological motivations for portraying Pilate in this way. Firstly, they sought to mitigate Roman responsibility for Jesus' death. Living under Roman rule, early Christian communities had incentives to depict the Roman authorities in a less antagonistic light, thereby presenting Christianity as a non-threatening movement (Carter 2005:105; Crossan 1995:172). By shifting the blame for Jesus' death towards Jewish authorities and the hostile crowd, the evangelists aimed to protect their communities from political suspicion and persecution. Secondly, especially in Matthew, there is an intensification of Jewish responsibility. In Matthew 27:25, the crowd's declaration, 'His blood be on our children and on us', underscores a theological polemic likely reflecting post-70 CE tensions between the Matthean community and Jewish synagogues (Davies & Allison 1988:574). Thirdly, the portrayal of a reluctant Pilate highlights Jesus' innocence. The evangelists use Pilate's hesitation as a rhetorical device to emphasise that Jesus was condemned unjustly by corrupt and manipulative forces (Hooker 1991:364).

Given the external evidence of Pilate's known cruelty and the absence of independent verification for the customs described, it is reasonable to conclude that the portrayal of Pilate in Mark and Matthew is primarily a theological construction rather than a precise historical account. This theological shaping does not necessarily render the trial scene wholly unhistorical; instead, it shows how historical memory was interpreted and adapted to address the pastoral, theological and apologetic needs of early Christian communities (Wright 1996:600). Understanding this dynamic highlights the need for critical hermeneutical awareness when reading these passion narratives in historical and theological contexts.

Pilate as a figure of ambivalence and Roman power

Pilate's decision to sentence Jesus to death reflects a delicate balance between maintaining order and appeasing local elites. As the prefect of Judea (26–36 CE), Pilate had a reputation for brutally suppressing dissent (Philo, Legatio ad Gaium 38), yet in Mark, he avoids unnecessary conflict by yielding to the crowd's demands (Evans 2001:770). Despite recognising Jesus' innocence (Mk 15:10), Pilate's reluctance to act decisively underscores his political pragmatism rather than moral concerns (Carter 2019:276). His final act – handing Jesus over after having him flogged (Mk 15:15) – highlights Rome's coercive power while allowing Jewish leaders to appear as the instigators of the execution. The soldiers' mockery of Jesus as 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15:16–20) further reflects Roman contempt for Jewish messianic aspirations. While Pilate formally distances himself from the decision, the soldiers' actions underscore the paradox of Jesus' kingship – a kingship characterised not by military conquest but by suffering (Marcus 2009:125). This irony of kingship highlights the contrast between Roman imperial power and the messianic mission of Jesus.

The irony of Jesus' suffering

Mark's Gospel employs irony to reveal Jesus' identity, particularly in the trial and crucifixion narrative. While Jesus is mocked as 'King of the Jews' by Roman soldiers and rejected by the Jewish leaders, Mark affirms his kingship through suffering. His enthronement paradoxically occurs on the cross, an ultimate act of humiliation that becomes the moment of his true exaltation in Mark's theological vision. This irony aligns with the theme of the Messianic Secret, where Jesus' identity remains concealed until his suffering and death fully reveal his role as the Messiah (Wright 1996:553).

Though framed as a political and legal proceeding, the trial before Pilate unfolds as a theological drama. As Rome's representative, Pilate unwittingly declares that Jesus is the King. However, his statement is made in a context of mockery and condemnation, exposing the blindness of human authorities to divine reality. Mark thus critiques both Roman and Jewish leadership, portraying them as unable to recognise Jesus' true nature. The irony is heightened by Jesus' silence before Pilate (Mk 15:5), which echoes the suffering servant motif in Isaiah 53, reinforcing the notion that Jesus' kingship is defined not by worldly power but by redemptive suffering (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:275).

Early Christian socio-political tensions and identity formation in Mark 15

Mark's Gospel was written during a period of intense socio-political tension for early Christians, shaped by Roman persecution and Jewish opposition. The trial narrative in Mark 15 reflects these struggles and functions rhetorically to shape Christian identity. By portraying Jesus as an innocent sufferer condemned by both Roman and Jewish authorities, Mark provides a theological framework for understanding Christian suffering and the believers' allegiance to a higher kingdom.

The Gospel of Mark was likely composed around 66–70 CE, a time marked by significant turmoil, including the Jewish–Roman War and growing hostilities towards Christian communities. Under the rule of Nero (54–68 CE), Christians were blamed for societal disruptions, including the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE, as recorded by Tacitus (Annals 15.44). Simultaneously, tensions between Jewish authorities and Christian groups resulted in the exclusion of believers from synagogues and accusations of blasphemy, much like those levelled against Jesus before the Sanhedrin in Mark 14:61–64. Additionally, after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, Christians faced the challenge of navigating their relationship with Rome while asserting their distinct identity.

Mark 15 mirrors these historical realities by illustrating how Jesus was condemned through the interplay of political and religious forces. While hesitant, the Roman governor, Pilate, ultimately acts out of political expediency rather than a commitment to justice, demonstrating the precarious position of early Christians under Roman rule (Carter 2019:270). The Jewish leaders, depicted as driving the accusations against Jesus, reflect the tension between the early Christian movement and Jewish religious authorities (Evans 2001:776). The fickleness of the crowd, which demands Jesus' crucifixion while calling for the release of Barabbas, illustrates the dangers of public opinion – a concern for early Christians facing social rejection and persecution (Marcus 2009:145).

Mark's depiction of Roman power is particularly striking. Pilate, rather than acting decisively, is portrayed as a pragmatic figure, reluctant yet willing to condemn Jesus to maintain stability. His hesitancy reflects the experience of early Christians who saw Roman justice as inconsistent – sometimes indifferent to their movement, at other times harshly repressive (Carter 2019:278). Jesus' designation as 'King of the Jews' introduces a subversive political element, challenging both Jewish messianic expectations and Roman imperial ideology. Unlike earthly rulers who exercise power through domination, Jesus' kingship is characterised by suffering and sacrifice, embodying an alternative vision of authority (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:272).

By depicting Jesus as an innocent yet condemned figure, Mark reassures persecuted Christians that suffering is not a sign of divine abandonment but a means of identifying with Christ. The silence of Jesus before Pilate (Mk 15:5) becomes an ethical model for Christian endurance, aligning with early Christian teachings that encourage steadfastness in the face of trials (Wright 1996:549). Furthermore, the contrast between earthly power – represented by Pilate, the Jewish leaders and the crowd – and divine power, embodied in Jesus, reinforces the idea that ultimate authority rests with God rather than human rulers.

Mark's trial narrative also serves as an implicit critique of Roman rule. The mockery of Jesus by Roman soldiers, who sarcastically hail him as 'King of the Jews' (Mk 15:16–20), ironically affirms his identity, exposing the blindness of imperial power (Marcus 2009:150). Mark challenges imperial ideology by depicting Jesus as the true ruler despite his suffering, suggesting that the kingdom of God operates according to different principles than those of Rome (Carter 2019:283).

Ultimately, Mark's trial narrative functions as both a historical reflection of early Christian struggles and a rhetorical tool to shape identity. By presenting Jesus as an innocent sufferer falsely accused and condemned, Mark offers a theological framework for Christian endurance under persecution. The Gospel challenges Roman authority while simultaneously distancing Christians from revolutionary violence, reinforcing their identity as followers of a suffering yet victorious king.

Theological implications of the trial

Mark 15 highlights a stark contrast between human and divine power, particularly through the portrayal of Pilate and Jesus. Pilate, as the symbol of earthly authority, is shown to be weak and easily swayed by the crowd's demands for Jesus' crucifixion (Mk 15:15). Despite his position of power, Pilate's inability to recognise the true kingship of Jesus exposes the limitations of earthly power, which is often shaped by political pragmatism and popular opinion rather than justice or truth (Carter 2019:280). In contrast, Jesus' silence and refusal to defend himself before Pilate (Mk 15:5) aligns with the suffering servant motif found in Isaiah 53:7, which says, 'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth'. This act of submission demonstrates that divine kingship, as portrayed in Mark's narrative, is not defined by coercion or force but by sacrificial love and humility. Jesus' willingness to endure suffering without resistance emphasises that his authority is rooted in divine purpose, not the oppressive structures of earthly power (Marcus 2009:140).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical-critical analysis of Mark 15:1–15 reveals significant insights into the political and theological dimensions of Jesus' trial before Pilate. The passage serves as a critical moment in the narrative, where Mark constructs a complex portrayal of Roman and Jewish political dynamics. Pilate's reluctance and the role of the crowd, particularly in the release of Barabbas, underscore the tension between Roman authority and Jewish expectations of the Messiah. This trial, framed as a legal process, becomes a moment of theological reflection, where Jesus' identity as the 'King of the Jews' is both mocked and affirmed, demonstrating the irony of human power in the face of divine kingship. Mark's narrative also emphasises the irony of Jesus' suffering, juxtaposing his mockery as king with the ultimate revelation of his true kingship through the cross. The inscription on the cross, 'The King of the Jews', further highlights the irony of the political charge against Jesus, which is a theological affirmation of his messianic role. Through these

narrative techniques, Mark critiques Roman and Jewish authorities, exposing their failure to recognise the true nature of Jesus' mission. The passage not only reflects the socio-political tensions of the time, but also functions as a theological commentary on power, authority and divine kingship. Considering these findings, Mark uses the trial and crucifixion to communicate deeper messages about the nature of Jesus' kingship and the unfolding of God's redemptive plan.

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