



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Poor Pilate

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Pilate didn't want to be in Palestine in the first place. It was an obscure little province peopled by those fanatical Jews. He had to contain and control them if he expected ever to get out of Palestine and be in a more favored position with Rome. But they were a slippery bunch. His years in Palestine had been marked by constant unrest. Rome was beginning to wonder if he could actually keep the peace. And sometimes he wondered, himself, if he would be able to do so.

This week, the Jews were observing their Passover Celebration, and it was the worst time of the year for Pilate. It was a time of high excitement and those Jews were so volatile that anything could happen. Each year, he was glad when this week was over. To complicate things, Pilate's spies had told him about Jesus of Nazareth, and of the increased unrest of the priests and leaders of the people concerning him. He didn't really know what all the fuss was about. Insofar as he could tell, Jesus was harmless. He was said to have healed some people, and he had a reputation for the wisdom of his teachings. That shouldn't be threatening to anybody, and certainly not to the Jewish leaders. All the reports that came in, however, said that Jesus was a troublemaker. It didn't seem possible.

To complicate things further, the reports indicated that Jesus was planning to come to Jerusalem for the Passover. If he did, there would be trouble for sure. Pilate desperately wished that he didn't have to face this Passover week. If Jesus was in the city, Pilate feared that he would be unable to keep things under control.

Pilate had an attitude about the Jews. They weren't worth the trouble they caused. He would just ignore them until they forced him to do something, and then he would turn his soldiers loose on them to settle them down. With that in mind, he had ordered all the troops in Palestine to come to Jerusalem to give a show of power in the city during the Passover. He could only hope that nothing serious broke out somewhere else in Palestine while the soldiers were in the city. But the possibility of upheaval in Jerusalem was too great. He had to take the chance.

Pilate acknowledged to himself that he was afraid. He hated the Jewish leaders. If they got out of hand, he would be finished as the governor of Palestine – or of any other Roman province. He would be called back to Rome in disgrace. He would be severely punished, maybe even killed. He had good reason to be fearful.

The Jewish leaders had no respect for Rome, nor Roman Law, nor any person who represented Rome – unless it served their purposes to act as if they did. Pilate didn't understand them, and he couldn't trust them. They caused more trouble than any other people under the authority of Rome, and it was up to him to keep them in line. He didn't know if he could do it. He felt helpless and angry with them for causing him so much trouble.

Pilate was in the praetorium early that Friday morning. The throngs in the streets of Jerusalem had kept him awake the night before – that and the premonitions of disaster that plagued even his dreams. His heart skipped a beat when he heard the voice of a

guard at the door, "Caiaphas. The High Priest, and a crowd of people are here to see you. They have a prisoner with them, Jesus of Nazareth."

Pilate sat, head in hand, for several minutes. "If I make it alive through this day, I'll be lucky," he thought, sure now that his worst fears would be realized. He didn't want to be called back to Rome in disgrace. He liked the status, the power, the position, and the luxury that accompanied his being governor. He hated having to yield in any way to the arrogant power of Caiaphas and the other despised Jewish leaders.

But he had no choice – not if he expected to continue as governor of Palestine, or to be moved to a more desirable position.

With a profound sigh, Pilate got up and went out to talk to Caiaphas and the others. Inside himself, he sneered at their hypocrisy. They couldn't enter the praetorium because they might defile themselves and not be able to eat the Passover Feast, but that didn't stop them from arresting Jesus. They kept the letter of the Law, but bent it to their own purposes, ignoring the spirit of it. Their attitude and behavior affronted him. After all, the Law was the Law. Even the Jewish Law should be observed without exception, and without favoritism, but that didn't mean anything to them. He didn't trust this bunch of fanatics.

"What accusation do you bring against this man?" It was all Pilate could do to keep his voice even and controlled.

"If this man were not an evil doer, we would not have handed him over," they said. Pilate knew that they were trying to trap him into doing their dirty work.

"Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." he replied. It was their grievance. They had no right to try to make him responsible. He would turn it back to them.

"It is not lawful for us to put any man to death" was their sanctimonious reply.

" ---put any man to death?" They wanted Jesus to die, and they were going to try to make Pilate pronounce the death sentence so they would not be responsible. He could see the trap beginning to close on him. He had to find a way to avoid it, or he was finished.

He would talk to Jesus. Maybe he could find a cause to put him to death. Maybe he was a rebel, or an insurrectionist. If he could find a reason, his own conscience would be clear, and, much as he hated to yield to them, he would be able to assuage the Jews.

But it was not to be.

Pilate was puzzled by Jesus' answers when he interviewed him. Jesus talked philosophy, not rebellion. Although Pilate didn't really understand what Jesus said to him, he found him rather appealing, and certainly sincere. Nothing about him suggested that he was a dangerous person. "I came into the world to bear witness to the truth." Jesus said.

"Truth? What is truth?" Pilate asked. As much as he wanted an answer to his dilemma, it didn't look like he was going to get it from Jesus that day.

Pilate's apprehension grew as he returned to Caiaphas and the other Jews. It was clear that Jesus was no insurrectionist. He wasn't even a rabble-rouser. But Pilate knew the Jews weren't going to accept what he said. Nevertheless, he tried "I find no crime in him," he told them. He felt sick but didn't know anything else to say.

Pilate was right. The Jews didn't accept what he said.

And then Pilate had a brilliant idea. If it worked, he would have a solution to his problem. "You have a custom," he said, "that I should release one man for you at the Passover; will you have me release for you the King of the Jews?" The words were hardly out of his mouth when he realized he had made a serious mistake. Why hadn't he just said, "Jesus", instead of "King of the Jews"? But it was too late.

"No way," the mob screamed, "Give us Barabbas. Give us Barabbas."

How could they want Barabbas released to them, and not Jesus? Barabbas was a common thief and a rabble-rouser. Surely they knew that, if he were released, he would stir up trouble again, and soon be back in prison. Pilate was appalled by the turn of events, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had made the offer and had to abide by their expressed wishes. Despite all his efforts to avoid the trap the Jews had set for him, he was caught in it. So he released Barabbas to them.

Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. He could not condemn an innocent man, but, if he did not, he would have a riot on his hands and Rome would banish him. He reasoned with himself, "It is better that this man die than that I be banished. I couldn't stand the disgrace. I can't live if I lose my power." He was more troubled than he had ever been. He didn't understand his distress over Jesus. Nor did he realize that he was using the same arguments to justify himself that the Jews had used to justify what they were doing.

Pilate made yet another attempt to salvage something from the debacle. He took Jesus and scourged him, hoping the Jews would be satisfied by the punishment of an innocent man. They were not. Nor were they when he allowed soldiers to abuse and torture Jesus. Things were going from bad to worse.

He took Jesus, still wearing the crown of thorns and the ragged purple robe the soldiers had put on him, out to the multitude, and said to them, "Here is the man." He

wanted them to see the misery this man had already suffered. He still hoped they would relent in their demands.

It was not to be. The multitude screamed even more insistently, "Crucify him. Crucify him."

Pilate was becoming frantic. Jesus was innocent. He should not be condemned to die, but, if he didn't authorize his crucifixion, he, Pilate, might as well be dead. He hated those bloodthirsty Jews. For a moment he even entertained the thought of refusing their demands, and taking his own punishment, rather than yield to them. But he knew he couldn't allow himself the luxury of that sacrifice. He had no choice. Jesus would have to be sent to the cross.

Pilate made one last desperate appeal, "Shall I crucify your King?" This time calling Jesus their King was no slip of the tongue. He wanted to lash out at those despised Jews.

"We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered.

"---no King but Caesar?" They had never claimed, or accepted any allegiance to Caesar. They would go that far to see to it that Jesus was killed. It was the ultimate irony after all the trouble they had caused him since he first became governor of Palestine.

Pilate didn't really understand any of it, but he saw no way out. Troubled though he was, and wrong though he knew it to be, he had to hand Jesus over to them to be crucified. There was no peace within him. At that moment, he hated himself almost as much as he hated the Jews.

Poor Pilate. Poor troubled Pilate. He had always been ambitious. He had worked hard to get where he was, and had even pulled some political strings. He hadn't really wanted to be governor of Palestine, but he knew that, if he were successful in that position (no one else had been), all the wealth and power of Rome could be at his disposal. His past wasn't too savory, but, at the core, he was a just man – hard and unfeeling and rigid – but just. He knew he should not condemn Jesus to be crucified, but the price of resisting those despicable Jews was too high. So, in the end, he relented and turned Jesus over to them to be crucified.

Pilate retired to his quarters. He refused to see anyone, or to conduct any other business of state. But he couldn't shut the noise of the city out. Nor could he block out of his mind a picture of Jesus dragging his cross through the streets of the city all the way to Golgotha.

Later in the day, one of the guards came to tell him that Jesus had been nailed to the cross. Pilate could almost feel the nails in his own hands and feet. In a last bitter gesture, he ordered that a sign be placed on the cross and for it to read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." He got some grim satisfaction from the stir the sign

caused, and from being able to say to the Jews, "What I have written I have written", when they protested the wording on the sign. They wanted him to change it to read, "This man said, 'I am King of the Jews'". At least he could refuse this demand, but it didn't reduce his misery by much. He had sent an innocent man to his death on a cross.

Poor Pilate. Poor troubled Pilate.