Sofia Osorio

Prof. Emanuel

History of Israel

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Uncovering the Life of Pontius Pilate

"It is more than understandable that a man who condemned to the cross the founder of what became the world's largest religious faith would eventually rank as one of the great anti-heroes of the past" (Maier). Most of humanity has read about Pontius Pilate, or at least has heard of him. Those who recognize his name automatically correlate him to being the voice of command for Jesus Christ to be crucified. In the Holy Bible there is a detailed account into the deed he played a key role in: being in charge of mandating and having the final say on Christ Jesus being crucified. Unfortunately, not much else about him or his life is common knowledge. In order to establish a greater perspective on Pontius Pilate, here are the following noteworthy factors to uncover: his background, position in government, mandates in Judea, and course of death.

Pontius Pilate was the fifth governor (out of twelve) of the Roman province of Judea from 26 to 37 CE. He governed in a crucial time in history over an extremely diverse group of people within the region of Judea. "This city continued as a place of pilgrimage for Jews all over the Roman world, particularly during the three great festivals. It was cosmopolitan and trilingual" (Bond). The predominant groups residing in this province were the Judaean Jews and Idumaean Jews. Both groups looked to Jerusalem as a cultural and religious center, with the Judaean Jewish population at center, and the Idumaean Jewish people residing in the south. "To

the north were the Samaritans with Mount Gerizim as their religious center; feuds between the Samaritans and the Jews were frequently referred to by Josephus" (Bond). Furthermore, feuds and protests against Pontius Pilate by both Jews and Samaritans came along with some of the most prominent mandates he carried out in governance.

Unfortunately, much of Pontius Pilate's background and personal life is unknown. One of the only personal links found in historical and Biblical accounts is of his wife Procula. She appears once in the Gospel of Matthew, where she intercedes with Pilate on Jesus' behalf. Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve apostles wrote in Matthew 27:19, "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him'" (NIV). On the other hand, what is most accounted for historically is Pilate's role as the Roman prefect of Judea, of which portray him in a seemingly negative light.

Interestingly enough, there are opposing views of Pontius Pilate's character and who he was as a person in history. Accounts of Pilate in the four Gospels of the New Testament found in the Holy Bible portray him as reluctant to execute Jesus Christ. The Apostle Luke wrote in Luke 23:1-5, "Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man." But they were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place" (ESV). This reluctancy against Christ's crucifixion expressed his humanity and demonstrated a side of grace

that he had even as he mandated him to be crucified to appease the rioters. However, although his reluctance to crucify an innocent man expresses an aspect of humanity, his action of going through with this morally conflicting mandate could indicate his preference to making the decisions that would be most beneficial to him in the end, no matter the cost.

Furthermore, in historical accounts of Pontius Pilate's mandates as prefect, one can observe and interpret that he did whatever it took to make decisions based on establishing control and power over Judea, as well as establishing his solidarity to Rome. This is observed through some very violent decisions and threats made in governance which include commands in relation to Caesar's effigies, an aqueduct to Jerusalem, golden shield brought to his praetorium, and the oppressions of a Samaritan uprising.

One of Pilate's earliest recorded mandates, which opposed the Judean people, required that Caesar's effigies were to be placed in a temple in Jerusalem. Effigies, essentially sculptures or models of a person, represented idolatry to the Jews. In the Antiquities of the Jews found in section three of the complete works of Flavius Josephus, first-century Romano-Jewish historian writes, "The Jew's law forbade them very making of images; Pilate was the first who brought those images to Jerusalem, and set them up there; which was done without the knowledge of the people, and it was done in the night time; but as soon as they knew it, they came in multitudes to Cesarea, and interceded with Pilate many days that he would remove the images; and when he would not grant their requests, because it would tend to the injury of Caesar, while yet they persevered in their request, on the sixth day he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons privately, concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them; and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them routed, and threatened that their

punishment should be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home." Pilate threatened them with a very violent death unless they stopped their protesting. Nonetheless, the Jews pleaded they would take their death rather than witness their laws be transgressed. Josephus notes Pilate was "deeply affected" by this, which resulted in him then commanding for the effigies to be carried back from Jerusalem to Caesarea to appease them. In the next few historically noted mandates Pilate carried out, he was not as gracious.

The next mandate Pilate carried out was one to bring innovation to Jerusalem. With sacred money, he brought in a stream of water to the city through the construction of an aqueduct. However, this restructuring did not please the Jews. Tens of thousands of them got together and protested against Pontius Pilate insisting that he should abandon the construction of the aqueduct. Of these protestors, Josephus writes, "Some of them also used reproaches, and abused the man, as crowds of such people usually do" (Whiston). Pilate's response to this was to order a great number of his soldiers to take charge and bring daggers along with them. He signaled them to use force, and equally punished those who used reproached and abusive expressions and those who were not but were present at the clamor against him. A large number of them died at the hands of the soldiers by Pilate's command since the large majority of them came unarmed, while some managed to run away wounded. Pilate's violent force command put an end to their upheaval against the new Jerusalem aqueducts. However, this would not be the last case of Jewish reprimand against Pilate's actions in governance.

On another occasion, Pilate dedicated golden shields in his Jerusalem praetorium, which was an ancient Roman general's tent in a camp. The golden shields, differing from Caesar's effigies that he had brought into Jerusalem, did not have any images on them. Nonetheless, they

did have an inscription in dedication to Caesar. Because of this, the Jews protested once again and spoke out against the shields because they felt it inflicted upon their “no graven images” and idolatry commandment. This around, though, Pilate refused to remove them. Affected by Pilate’s indiscretion on disrespect towards their commandment, they took their protests straight to Caesar, who then ordered Pilate to transfer the shields from Jerusalem to the temple of Augustus in Caesarea. Although many issues while Pilate was in governance involved the Jewish population, he also came across complications with the Samaritans, as well.

Unfortunately, there was one more notable historical account of Pilate using violent force to control the masses. A false prophet arose in Judea, one whom Josephus writes off as a “heroic liar”, and promised he would uncover sacred temple utensils that Moses had supposedly buried to the Samaritans at the top of Mt. Gerizim. A large amount of Samaritans believed him and tried to see the spectacle. They went armed to the mountain and this alarmed Pontius Pilate. In order to prevent masses of people from being exploited and from the situation to get out of hand, he resorted to force and blocked the route of ascend. This caused violence to break out and a battle began. To finish the matter, the leaders of the uprising were mandated by Pilate to be executed. This violent approach to quiet the masses resulted in what was to come of Pilate’s suspension of his position as governor of Judea by the pro council of Syria and Caesar's special commission.

Pilate’s suspension as governor was one of the last historical accounts of information there is on his life. His cause of death is unknown, although there are many morbid legends about his death that are vivid on imagination. In Mors Pilati, an old Latin Legend, Pilate commits suicide and demons over take him. Although his death is a mystery, the tradition of it being by suicide has been so commonly brought up that in Encyclopedia Britannica includes that it is

likely that Pilate died by committing suicide. Overall, Pontius Pilate's life played a defining role in the course of mankind and in the history of Israel. Although what is most commonly known of him revolves around the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, his background, position in government, and mandates are noteworthy to grasp a fuller picture on who he was as a historic figure.

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