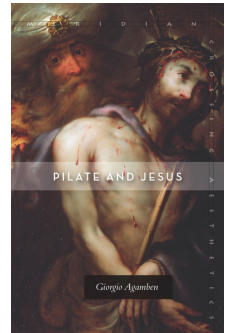


Pilate and Jesus, by Giorgio Agamben

Translated by Adam Kotsko | Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics | Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015 | 63 pages | ISBN: 978-0-804-79233-2 (hardback) \$50.00; ISBN: 978-0-804-79454-1 (softback) \$15.95; ISBN: 978-0-804-79458-9 (e-book) \$15.95

Giorgio Agamben's *Pilate and Jesus* is initially puzzling. It is not a monograph, as it is a mere 45 pages (63 pages with glosses and bibliography). Nor is it interested in probing the historical realities of the figures under question, as its bibliography is peppered with such thinkers as Barth, Kafka, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Rather, Agamben's goal is to explore the phenomena of judgment and justice in the passion narrative from a philosophical, often theological, perspective. Pilate, as the character in the most powerful legal position in the narrative, is an ideal site to explore this issue. Once the reader understands his aims, navigating this book (which is really a long essay) is easier.

Agamben takes as his starting point the curiosity that only "a single proper name" (1) occurs in one of the most common Christian creeds. In addition, the gospel authors seem to be particularly preoccupied with the character of Pilate, showing "perhaps for the first time something like the intention to construct a character, with his own psychology and idiosyncrasies" (3). Some extra-canonical accounts and testimony from church fathers show a similar fascination with Pilate. What, the author muses, can explain Pilate's appeal, besides the oft-proclaimed idea that Christians wanted to appease the Romans who may have been reading these stories about Jesus? There is an additional curiosity for Agamben. As one who explicitly believes in the historical reality of Christ's incarnation, he wonders why such a thing unfolded via a "*krisis*, that is, a juridical trial" (2), for it is here that he observes the



spiritual worlds and human worlds confronting one another: “the temporal kingdom... must pronounce a judgement on the eternal kingdom” (15). Whether or not one shares his theological proclivity, it is indeed intriguing that the phenomenon of judgment is so central in the narrative life of Jesus and in the sayings attributed to him.

Also intriguing is the Gospel of John’s extensive attention to Jesus’s interaction with Pilate, especially when compared to the Synoptic Gospels. In John, Jesus and Pilate speak at length about the accusation made against him. Agamben interprets Pilate’s famous question (“What is truth?”) to be an enquiry about the true spiritual reality that Jesus seems to know. Though Pilate is ultimately legally responsible for Jesus’s fate in all of the gospel accounts, he never makes a definitive pronouncement of his guilt. Even so, Pilate lacks the upper hand vis-à-vis the Jewish antagonists, and his actions, for Agamben, become “incoherent” (23). In opposition to Jesus’s accusers, Pilate seems to linger on Jesus’s kingship and eventually has the title “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” placed on the cross. Whereas some have viewed this as an attempt to mock Jesus’s claim, Agamben sees it as a deliberate affirmation of it.

That a deeper, theological meaning to the trial exists is supported by the realization that the narrated trial does not conform to ordinary Roman legal procedure, a problem many historians and other scholars have wrestled with. A formal trial never truly occurs, nor does a definitive judgment from Pilate. Moreover, Pilate and Jesus share a private conversation in the Gospel of John, which is also not part of the official legal procedure, but nevertheless serves to give Pilate the opportunity to consider the accusations against Jesus. For Agamben, the historical and procedural inaccuracies of the events are not insurmountable problems: the historical figure of Pilate contributes to his theological function: “only as a historical character does Pilate carry out his theological function, and vice versa... he is a historical character only insofar as he carries out his theological function” (35). As I understand this, his claim is that Pilate is included in the narrative as a historical figure precisely because of the consequences he was thought to bring to the story. Had he not contributed to this outcome, his historical visage would not be necessary in the gospel accounts.

Agamben notices, following Karl Barth among others, that the theme of “handing over” looms large in the passion narrative. Theologically, this dramatizes the exchange involved in salvation. What is handed over, moreover, is in direct opposition to the traditions passed down by other Jewish teach-

ers: “there is only one authentic Christian tradition: that of the ‘handing over’—first on the part of the Father, then of Judas and the Jews—of Jesus to the cross, which has abolished and realized all traditions” (29). As the most prominent legal functionary, Pilate must somehow factor into this process, too. Interestingly, Pilate, with his interrogation of Jesus and his subtle protests against the Jews, threatens to disrupt the structure of this “economy of salvation” (28); if Jesus’s “handing over” is cancelled, so also is its redeeming effect. Since the core of Jesus’s teachings seems to be non-judgment, it is ironic that his fate, whether it part of “God’s plan” or whether it be a tragic accident, should result from a situation of judgment. But Agamben, following Dante and others, sees the *necessity* in this situation; it cannot be a contrived event. If it gave the appearance of injustice, then the logic of Jesus’s death as a “ransom for many” would be ineffective. The Roman Empire’s compelling legal logic, paradoxically, must be affirmed for the theological framework to be convincing.

The “truth” that Jesus is required to testify to in his trial is also inherently paradoxical, according to Agamben, for it embodies the contradiction between human history and the divine kingdom. As he stresses, Jesus “must attest *in history and in time* to the presence of an extrahistorical and eternal reality. How can one testify to the presence of a kingdom that is not ‘from here?’” (42) In terms of the evidence required for the Roman courts, it is thus clear why his trial was not successful; in fact, it was *necessarily unsuccessful*. Salvation and justice, in this theological analysis, are thus different to reconcile. To accept earthly justice, salvation must be denied, and vice versa.

Agamben has uncovered some fascinating curiosities in his short study. Many people easily overlook the role of Pilate in the passion narrative or explain his characterization as a function of the gospel authors’ needs to appease a Roman audience. In this analysis, Pilate emerges as theologically indispensable. He is the “alter ego” (44) of Jesus, and their confrontation is a microcosm of the confrontation between human justice and divine salvation. This book will be of interest to those with a theological, even philosophical, interest in the salvific nature of Jesus’s death. As it is devoid of many socio-historical details about the figures under discussion, it is not ideal for historians of early Christianity.

Sarah E. Rollens
Rhodes College