# *Pontius Pilate as an Embodiment of State Power*

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**Abstract**
This paper examines several places in Karl Barth's writings where the meaning of Pontius Pilate's encounter with Jesus is discussed; the purpose is to examine the way in which Barth's study of Pilate and the trial of Jesus may help to explicate the nature of political power from a theological perspective.
Pontius Pilate is a well-known biblical figure with many faces. Historical reconstructions of Pontius Pilate are numerous and diverse, depictions of him range from a cowardly bureaucrat to a seasoned governor who succeeded in dissipating an impending riot. Early Christians saw the need for Jesus' Passion to anchor itself in history, and decided to include Pilate's name in their creedal formula. There were Christians, including St. Augustine, who believed that Pilate and his wife Claudia Procula eventually converted to Christianity. The couple is revered as saints in the tradition of Orthodox Christianity. After the Second World War, and through the confession of Adolf Eichmann, the biblical figure came to symbolize a self-absolved conscience, with suspended judgment and relaxed moral responsibility, an inner state reached through misplaced trust in the idealized political power.[1]
Reconstructions of the personality of Pilate are commonly built upon historical materials, and informed also by analyses of the first century socio-cultural context where Jesus' trial happened. In contrast, Barth offers a theological interpretation of the trial by pinpointing directly the nature of power, as manifested in the life of Jesus, and also as state power that operated behind Pilate. Barth's decision to subsume political power under divine providence and soteriology will be discussed at the end of this paper.

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[1] Arendt 1977.

## Introduction

### Pilate and Jesus – Political Power in conflict with the Power of Truth

Pilate is probably the most well-known Roman governor of the first century Judea, there probably had been numerous Roman officials with status and power comparable to that of Pilate,[2] yet none of them seem to capture the memory and imagination of common people the way he does. Is it that because of Pilate's involvement in Jesus' trial that he became well-known? If so, how are we to make of Herod and members of the Sanhedrin, who had played specific roles in the trial, and their acts and speech recorded in details in the biblical narrative, and yet they slipped away from the memory of later generations?

Is it that because the Church included Pilate in the Christian creed, that he becomes a significant figure in the Christian imagination? But if the inclusion of his name serves only the purpose to provide Jesus' earthly existence, particularly His Passion, with a historical marker, then it seems out of proportion the amount of attention Pilate received subsequently from both within and outside Christian communities.

Perhaps what makes this biblical figure interesting is that between he and the man Jesus there had been a contest of power, which is of ultimate significance. Pilate as the embodiment of state power, and Jesus stood for the absolute sovereignty and dominion of the Kingdom of God. What captures the imagination of later generations is how the struggle between earthly political power and divine power played out; and what conclusions concerning human existence can be drawn from the result of this confrontation.

The trial concluded with Jesus receiving judgment and being put to death, and Pilate's words "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" (Jn. 19.10) was materialized, demonstrating the reality of state power and what it is capable of. It seems that divine power and authority has been compromised, or at least in this particular event, for some reasons God made concession to earthly political power. One may imagine that this is the way in which God carry out His plan for the salvation of the humankind. But what remains unresolved is how God could make this concession without violating His claim to absolute power. How the divine could for one moment allows His absolute will and sovereignty to be overshadowed by another claim to power?

Even though sociological and psychological reconstructions of Pilate could give us multi-angle understanding of this historical figure, a theological account of Pilate's encounter with Jesus is still desirable and necessary. Such inquiry investigates what it would be like if we take into consideration a dimension of power that transcends human political institutions. A theological understanding of the manifestation of power in Jesus' trial also helps the Church to articulate in a coherent and systematic manner how the notion of power is understood within the Christian faith. In this

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[2] Pilate was the fifth Roman governor of Judaea. Flavius Josephus mentioned that Pilate's appointment happened in the year 26AD, under the rule of Tiberius. Pilate served as governor until around 36AD. From the first Roman governor of Judaea appointed around 6AD to the year 135AD when the province became joined to Galilee as Syria Palaestina, there were altogether 30 governors. See Schwartz 2007: 126; and Messner 2008: 47–57.

connection, Karl Barth's analysis of what happened in the trial offers an example of how theological reflection engages with the essence of political power.

**Pilate an Instrument of God**

Considering that God made no concession to state power during the trial, and his sovereign rule extended freely to every single moment of the trial, Pilate's role must then be interpreted as instrumental in God's redemptive plan, in accordance to the divine will. The assumption upon which this claim is made is actually twofold, first, it assumes that Pilate qualified as the representative of state power,[3] and secondly, it takes Jesus' presence and action in the trial as evidence of the sovereign power of God.

The first part of the assumption is less controversial, from the surface of the text one can conclude that Pilate actually represented and exercised authority of the Roman political order. The narrator introduces him as Pilate the governor; the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to him asking for a sentence according to the Roman laws; Pilate's own words indicated his power over the life and death of his subjects.[4] Pilate was the person to order how Jesus' offence should be written and nailed to the cross; how Jesus' body should be disposed and his tomb guarded.

Things are less clear with the second part of the assumption; can one conclude given Jesus' conduct during the trial and the outcome of it, that religious truth has won over the truth of brute political power? Karl Barth seems to be unconcerned and with full confidence he comments in an essay titled "Church and State", that "[even] at the moment when Pilate… allowed injustice to run its course, he was the human created instrument of that justification of sinful man that was completed once for all time through that very crucifixion [of Jesus]."[5] A few pages later, Barth concludes, "we cannot say that the legal administration of the State 'has nothing to do with the order of Redemption'; that here we have been moving in the realm of the first and not of the second article of the Creed. No, Pontius Pilate now belongs not only to the Creed but to the second article in particular!"[6] Clearly, Barth understands Pilate's role as instrumental in the divine work of reconciliation, the power of the state has no alternative other than to serve the purpose of human salvation.

But can we grant such assumption based on the evidence of the biblical text? If not, theologians cannot legitimately build a case arguing for the supremacy of divine power in the trial of Jesus. Analyzing Jesus' dialogue with Pilate in the Gospel of John, Chapters 18 and 19, biblical scholars observe that on the surface of the text, there is strong evidence of Jesus being in control of himself throughout the trial. Although Jesus' replies, such as Jn. 18.34 (and 19.11) might appear ambivalent and

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[3] According to Bultmann, the "Roman State" has a role to play in the Johannine narrative of Jesus' Passion, he writes, "[t]he world brings its case against the Revealer to the forum of the state." While it may appear anachronistic to use the modern notion of state in describing what happened in the trial, it is not unsound to conceive of Pilate as an agent of the Roman government, and through his conduct it is possible to explore the nature of political power, which is the common denominator of empires in the past and states in the modern sense. See Bultmann 1971: 633, 662. Cf. Haenchen 1984: 182.

[4] Weaver 1992: 463.

[5] Barth 2004: 110.

[6] Barth 2004: 114.

tentative at a first glance, a closer reading leads to the conclusion that Jesus was an eloquent spokesman, and was not intimidated by Pilate. Even after the flogging, which weakened him physically, he did not yield to Pilate but calmly told him where the true source of authority lies. A number of ancient interpreters[7] and modern scholars suggest that in the Johannine text of Jesus' trial, it is actually not about Jesus being judged but someone else. According to Haenchen, it was the Jews who delivered Jesus to the empire were being judged in the narrative.[8] Metzger, Boice and Brown think that it was Pilate being put on trial, the narrative is about determining if the governor is of the truth.[9]

It was the Roman governor who wavered under pressure and expressed fear, not Jesus. Jesus did not speak to defend himself, for he was resolute in the pathway he had chosen, to die on the cross. Rather, it was Pilate who wanted to defend himself and wanted out as an innocent person, who has nothing to do with Jesus' death.[10] And if the execution of Jesus seems to be the strongest evidence that the power of human injustice has won, the narrator reminds readers that the outcome of the trial is not the end of it, the conclusion of the confrontation between worldly and heavenly power in the narrative was postponed until the moment of the Resurrection three days later.

**Karl Barth's portrayal of Pilate in *Church Dogmatics***

Given the above discussion, one may venture to say that in both Pilate and Jesus, we witness the embodiment of two remarkable powers. Between them was a unique confrontation of earthly political power and the power of divine truth, a situation unparallel by other conflicts.

Unlike many biblical scholars and theologians, Karl Barth's reading of the trial stands out as a non-psychological depiction of Pilate. Barth's characterization of Pilate is thin and shows little interest in the ulterior motives of the governor. This is rather unusual, for example, comparing the thoughts of John Calvin with that of Barth, it is evident that both theologians consider divine sovereignty unobstructed by the trial, and that capricious political power actually served God's plan and guided by providence. Yet Calvin in the process describes Pilate's integrity, approving his quality as a good judge for reason that he tried to bring the crowd to a sound mind. Calvin also thinks that Pilate's act of hand washing was not a sign of cowardice, but rather a solemn warning to the Jewish leaders.[11] Such interest is absent from Barth's analysis.

The name of Pilate appears mainly in three places in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*,[12] and his thoughts could be summarized with four points:

First, the significance of Pilate's name, similar to that of Augustus (Lk. 2.1), Herod

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[7] For instance, According to Augustine Jesus was eloquent in his replies to Pilate; Aquinas sees arrangements of God's providence in the unfolding of the trial. Aquinas 2010: 218, 231.
[8] Haenchen 1984: 188.
[9] Brown 1975: 126–134; Boice 1975–1979; and Metzger 2010.
[10] Hinkle 2005: 81.
[11] Calvin 1981a: 277, 284; 1981b: 207, 286–287.
[12] Barth 1947–1968. The three sections are respectively: volume II, part 2, §35; volume IV, part 2, §64; and volume IV, part 4, The Foundation of the Christian Life.

and other leaders at the time of Jesus, was mainly to "fix His time",[13] to offer a time marker for the suffering of Christ, which happened at a specific time in history, traceable through recorded historical memories. The time of Pilate is also unique as the moment in history that human antagonism against God manifested in its fullest scale, by rejecting the Incarnate One. Also in his discussion of the Apostles' Creed, Barth refers to this matter of time and date as a polemic against Gnostic heresy.[14]

Second, Pilate was blind to the truth of Jesus, and Jesus' suffering and being slain under him was allowed to happen in accordance to God's will.[15] Pilate did not comprehend the identity of the man brought to him, and his confirmation of Jesus as the king of the Jews during the crucifixion was necessary and could not be altered,[16] in Barth's words, Pilate "bore unconscious witness to the truth with his famous dictum: 'What I have written I have written'."[17]

Third, although Pilate appeared to be the key-player in the trial, Barth suggests that it was Judas Iscariot who set into motion the sequence of delivering Jesus unto death. Judas handed Jesus over to the priests, and in turn they delivered him to Pilate, and Pilate handed him over to be crucified.[18] In this sequence of events Pilate was relatively passive and without a lot of room to maneuver. Comparing Judas and Pilate, Barth thinks the former was actually the "*executor Novi Testamenti*."[19] What must be noted is that this work of darkness which Judas started "does not mean an overpowering (a καταλαμβάνειν) of the light",[20] and in every moment of the drama of Jesus' Passion, nothing that happen was beyond the will and work of God.

Lastly, Barth observes that in the trial and in fact the entire gospel narrative of Jesus' work, there is never direct confrontation of Jesus with economic relationships and civil obligations of his time. More importantly, Jesus expressed neither antagonism nor negative attitudes in respect of political relationships and orders he faced.[21] The man Jesus bearing divine Truth did not in his suffering and death regard the power of the state as demonic and thus to be condemned. Pilate unwillingly and unwittingly being dragged into the passion of Christ, Pilate was responsible only as the representative of the government. Barth clearly rejects the idea that it was the state that condemned Jesus and destroyed him as a criminal. Rather, he stresses the role of Judas who kicked start the delivery process, and Israel the elected people of God, who rejected Jesus as a blasphemer.[22] In Barth's words, "Pilate and his officers were only co-agents who had been forced to co-operate…It was by the unwillingness of Israel that Jesus was brought to the cross."[23]

**Pilate as symbol of state power in Barth's early writings**

[13] Barth 1947–1968: IV/2, 161.
[14] Barth 2005: 79.
[15] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 389.
[16] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 391; IV/2, 156.
[17] Barth 1947–1968: IV/2, 257.
[18] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 461.
[19] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 503.
[20] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 462.
[21] Barth 1947–1968: IV/2, 175–176.
[22] Barth 1947–1968: IV/2, 260.
[23] Barth 1947–1968: IV/2, 264.

Barth offers a very minimal description of the governor, his decision to keep to a theological rendering of Pilate instead of a psychological profile is evidence in his earlier writings. Barth's discussion of Pilate in *Church Dogmatics* is consistent with that in an essay of his written in 1938, titled "Church and State".[24] Early on, Pilate's motives and psychology was less a concern for Barth than his role as an embodiment of state power, which God commandeers in the redemptive work of Jesus.

Concisely, what Barth sees in Pilate can be summarized with two points: First, Barth examines how the divine action of justification of the humankind is related to human action of justice, the former being the realm of the church; the latter belongs to the political realm of the state. Barth sees this relationship between Church and state revealed in the exchange between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate held no hatred against Jesus, nor rejected him as the bearer of Truth. Pilate simply had no understanding of the identity of Jesus. The state is simply neutral to truth and is capable of no knowledge with respect to justification. Bultmann is right to say that "He [Pilate] takes the point of view that the state is not interested in the question about the "truth" (ἀλήθεια) – about the reality of God…"[25] Second, the power of the state theologically understood, originates in God and belongs to Christ. So even though it was used in an unjust manner during the trial, Pilate was not held as committed a sin of gravity identical to that of Judas or the chief priests, who delivered Jesus to the state with false accusations. Pilate yielded to politics and pronounced a death sentence against his better judgment, yet this abuse of authority did not alter the ontology of state power.

With reference to biblical passages such as Col. 1.16 and 2.10, Barth wants to affirm Christ's rule as extending to the utmost points of the created order. Haddorff rightly comments, for Barth, "[a] theological analysis of the state belongs to the 'Christological sphere'".[26] It is Barth's belief that all authorities, including state power that can become perverted and demonic, will eventually be bent to serve and glorify Christ.

Barth's ideas of human justice (the realm of the state) in relation to justification of the humankind (the realm of the church), which he sees in the exchange of Pilate and Jesus, was further developed in another essay written in 1946, titled "The Christian Community and the Civil Community".[27] Here, both the church and the state are referred to as human communities, and are related to each other as concentric circles. The state occupies the outer ring, and the church being the inner circle, at the centre is Christ and his coming Kingdom. Both communities are situated on the same plane, with different mandates. The church does not stand in opposition to the state, nor is it a heavenly option. Both realms reflect the light of Christ, one in terms of justification, the other in terms of human justice. For Barth, the New Testament is not interested in retrospection of the origin of the state, but to look towards the eschaton when the destiny of humankind is realized as a heavenly polis. The meaning of the state and its power at present is to be articulated based on the reality that is to come.

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[24] Barth 2004: 31.
[25] As quoted in Haenchen 1984: 180.
[26] Barth 2004: 32.
[27] Barth 2004: 149–189.

**Misgivings about state power**

It is commonly understood that Pilate is just a time marker in the Creed. It is therefore unsettling for Barth to suggest state power embodied in the personal agency of Pilate is something that belongs to soteriology. If state power is a neutral instrument in God's redemption plan, even in moments when injustice is done, should we then endorse just any form of regime?

At least two responses could be made in this regard. First, Pilate and the state power that he represented was not the only form of human agency in the order of Redemption. We notice another name – Mary, the bearer of God – in the second article of the Creed. God freely commandeers human agents to fulfill his plan of reconciliation, and in this providential arrangement there can be obedience as in the case of Mary, where human agents positively witness and partake in divine actions. There is also the possibility that human agents being passively and unwittingly taken up in the movement of the divine, as in the case of Pilate. The fact that human actors with all kinds of motives being carried along in the movement of God's plan does not mechanically mean that individual acts are justified indiscriminately. Rather, the point is that sin and injustice does not change the course of God's purpose to reconcile the world to Himself.

In "Church and State" Barth says, "…there is clearly no cause for the Church to act as though it lived, in relation to the State, in a night which all cats are grey. It is much more a question of continual decisions, and therefore of distinctions between one State and another…"[28] As Haddroff comments on this, it is a fact of life that there are just and unjust states, and Christians must act responsibly in each of these situations.[29]

**Pilate's role in the light of "Delivery"**

It is debatable whether the above answer is sufficient to settle worries about unjust state power operating in the doctrine of salvation. I intend to offer an alternative response to this problem. I do not pretend to have a better way to describe how state power in a perverted form is actually guided by providence. Rather, I want to point to the concept of "delivery" in the Johannine narrative of the trial, as a key to Barth's analysis of Pilate. We notice Barth's minimalist approach to the characterization of Pilate, and also that he focuses sharply on the theological meaning of Pilate's role. What we tend to overlook is why and how he justifies this choice. I suggest that what lies behind Barth's theological rendering of Pilate is the biblical term of "delivery". With this concept it is possible to speak of modes of human agency in relation to divine acts, without being limited to a narrow dualistic perspective. Between the humble and praiseworthy obedience of Mary, and the furious opposition of the chief priests, there is the relatively neutral and passive mode of agency, the state as represented by Pilate.

Different forms of the verb "to deliver" or "to hand over" (παραδίδωμι) occurred five times in the narrative.[30] In the context of the trial, delivery is the 'transfer of a free or

[28] Barth 2004: 119–120.
[29] Barth 2004: 33.
[30] Jn. 18.30, 35–36; 19.11, 16.

relatively free person to the confining power of those who wish him harm, and from whom he must expect harm.'[31] Judas delivered Jesus into the hands of enemies, who in turn delivered him to the power of the state. Jesus was tossed around by Pilate and Herod, who both found no value in him and eventually Jesus' life was handed over to be wasted.

Barth thinks that this notion of delivery should be theologically interpreted. He argues that before these human acts of delivery, there is always and already a more fundamental kind of delivery, namely, God's prototypical act of delivering and the 'handing over' of His Son into the world.[32] In a fundamental sense, God's act of delivery is nothing other than the reality of the incarnation of the Word, and a proper way to understand divine omnipotence.[33]

That is to say, the antagonistic kind of delivery of the Judas and the chief priests, which meant to ignore, set aside and nullify the Word of God, is to be understood in the light of God's 'handing over' of His Son into the world. Judas' act was not original. What Judas took from Jesus, or the freedom he stole, is but a distorted reflection of the divine power and freedom in which God denied Jesus Christ. In here we begin to see why Barth can connect the conduct of Pilate back into the redemptive work of God. Barth attaches soteriological significance to the concept of delivery. The content and meaning of divine self-delivery is precisely the creation of condition for the removal of our trespasses.[34] Thus, even when it became distorted in the hands of enemies, it is still possible to articulate its relationship with God's redemptive purpose.

**Delivery and a passive mode of witness**

With the divine act of Incarnation, a necessity arises in the human realm, those confronted by Jesus' truth are to come forward with response. God acts and the created order must answers. It can be an act of obedient acknowledgment, resulting in witness that we see in the prophets and apostles, or it can be a distorted type of delivery, as with the plot of Jesus' enemies, targeted only to eliminate the divine Word. Barth continues, the word "delivery" shares the same semantic meaning with the concept of "witness", it is because the act of witness consists in the faithful and complete transmission, into a second set of hands, of the message of Jesus.[35] Thus, both the act of giving witness by the apostolate and the delivery of the betrayer are reproductions of the same divine prototypical delivery.[36]

Between the two opposite responses to the divine act of self-delivery, there is yet a

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[31] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 481, 490.

[32] Doubt may arise whether Barth entertains a positive correspondence between Judas' betrayal and apostleship. See Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 484, 505.

[33] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 490.

[34] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 489.

[35] Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 482. Connecting Judas' delivery with that of the apostles, the latter has the judgment of the former as its background and context, and while being judged, its form is taken up again as 'the delivery which calls the Church into life.' Ibid. p. 483.

[36] Cautiously Barth thinks that the negative models of Judas, Saul and the Jews are 'active participation in the positive task of the apostolate,' yet such participatory correspondence in negative human delivery must be understood in terms of delivery of humans in divine wrath, see Barth 1947–1968: II/2, 488 for elaborated arguments.

third form, which is the neutral response of the state. It is not to say that human agents like Pilate can occupy a neutral ground confronted by the Truth of Jesus, one take heed of what Jesus told Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (Jn. 19.11). Jesus did not absolve him from his unjust act through conceding to politics, yet where the power of the state is concerned, and since it is capable neither of acknowledging nor judging the Truth of Jesus, it has only the possibility to react unreceptively and neutrally towards the reality of Incarnation.

In addition, Barth thinks that to witness is not about doing something new or creating an independent reality, but to plainly repeat and transmit what has been divinely given, For instance, in his discussion of John the Baptist as the human exemplar of witness, he speaks figuratively of John as a 'rock face' and as such a reflector of divine speech.[37] If the act of delivery must arise in the human realm, and it overlaps with the act of witnessing, then one can begin to make sense of Pilate's passive manner during the trial. The power of the state has its source from above, and in its incapacity to acknowledge the Truth of Jesus, it can only respond passively as a reflector of this light that came into the world. Though this reflection was distorted by Pilate's insecurity and political agenda, it was still based on the same ontology of political power. It is possible for this reason that Barth wasted no time probing into the psychology and subjectivity of Pilate, but to think of him as an embodiment of state power, a power that is given from above that will eventually be bent into submission to Christ.

[37] Barth also considers Jesus 'Himself is primarily, originally, immediately and directly the Witness who introduces the voice of the friend [John] and makes him His witness by His own attestation.' Barth 1947–1968: IV/3, 612. See also, IV/3, 232.

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