

Sunday, November 26, 2000 (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1:4b-8; Psalm 93; John 18:33-37)

by [John C. Morris](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

Go to Harvard Square in Cambridge or Washington Square in New York City or any public place where chess players have gathered to watch or challenge each other. If you stand in the midst of the crowd long enough, you will eventually hear someone say, "That's it!" It might be a soft whisper or a matter-of-fact statement or even an enthusiastic exclamation, but it will be the announcement of a spectator who realizes that the game is over. Even if the soon-to-be-loser doesn't realize it, the spectator and the soon-to-be-winner know that the decisive move has been made and the outcome assured. No matter how long the loser prolongs the game and thinks there is hope of winning, he hasn't a chance in the world. Those who know what is happening see who the victor is.

John the Evangelist gives us a chance to watch and learn from another kind of encounter: the one between Pilate and Jesus. There is Pilate, the wily and cynical old-timer who has consistently knocked off all challengers. He is definitely someone you don't fool around with. He'll toy with you and then swoop in for the kill. But then here comes Jesus, the young upstart from the boondocks who has been raising eyebrows with his persistence and skill and surprising strategies. No matter how good he is, however, or how many people are rooting for him, the odds are very much against his displacing that crafty old pro Pilate.

What a match it turns out to be. At first, Pilate is curious and a bit annoyed. He wants to know if Jesus really is a threat because he's heard stories about how clever this fellow is. Now he wants to find out for himself. "Are you the champ?" he asks. "Are you the new gunslinger who is supposed to be really fast on the draw? Are you the new kid with the never-before-seen offensive moves who can also play terrific defense? Are you the one who is going to take over my place of honor?" As the conversation continues, we get the feeling that if cigarettes had been invented at that time, Pilate would be chain-smoking them intensely as his curiosity and discomfort turn to agonized puzzlement and dejection. This Jesus is no ordinary player. Jesus' strategy is brand new. Because Pilate lives in a world of intimidation

and cruelty and mercilessness, he cannot comprehend what Jesus is bringing to the table. It's a different reality, unlike anything Pilate has seen before. Pilate is out of his league as he faces Jesus' strong resistance, mysterious mercifulness and unrelenting compassion. He doesn't know how to deal with it, so he can't wait for the match to end.

As we watch Pilate squirm and take another deep drag on his cigarette, we say, "That's it!" The game is over, even though there are still a few more moves to be made by the ultimate loser. As the faithful have internalized the reality of this revelation, they have chosen many different ways to express their confidence and joy. Like observers at a chess game, some of the faithful quietly whisper their affirmations in their centering prayers and their daily mantras. Can we hear the second and fifth verses of Psalm 93 as this type of quiet acclamation?

God has made the whole world so sure, that it cannot be moved. . . .

Your testimonies are very sure and holiness adorns your house, O Lord, for ever and for evermore.

Other portions of the Psalm, however, are more like loud exclamations from those kibitzers in the park who suddenly see that the game is in the bag. Even the ocean joins in with loud crashing percussion to the psalmist's shouts.

The waters have lifted up, O Lord, . . . the waters have lifted their pounding waves.

Alongside these whispers and shouts from the psalmist are the apocalyptic choruses from Daniel and the Book of Revelation. The writers of these texts are not calm and careful analysts. They are exuberant recipients of the kind of truth that Pilate could not comprehend. They are so overcome by the turn of events that they can barely find words to express themselves, and they move quickly into Hallelujahs and Amens and bountiful praise. When Handel was composing his *Messiah*, which was his glorious way of saying, "That's it!" he understandably turned to the Book of Revelation to find support. How sad it is to see some believers turning to that same book to find support for their own narrow interpretations of current events, instead of appreciating the book as a joyous outburst of confidence in God.

Their response to the book seems to be similar to what happens when observers at a chess match become obsessed by the details of the hand-carved chess pieces instead of by the game. In the match between Pilate and Jesus, we know who the

ultimate victor will be. Pilate and all the other tyrants who have come after him for 20 centuries and more will challenge Jesus and his way of living and dying. Some of the challengers will think that they have come up with a new move to get the best of the champion. But they never will.