

Meeting Pilate

by [S. Mark Heim](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

Pontius Pilate, by Ann Wroe

A short story by Anatole France recounts a Roman gentleman's encounter with the elderly Pontius Pilate at a spa where they are both taking the waters. Personally acquainted with Judea, the man asks if Pilate has any recollection of an event during his governorship, the crucifixion for some crime or other of a Galilean from Nazareth named Jesus. After thinking hard for a moment, Pilate responds, "Jesus--of Nazareth? I cannot call him to mind."

But as Ann Wroe's quirky book demonstrates, Pilate continues to be called to the minds of millions across the centuries by the thread of circumstance that links him to that execution. Wroe has combed the Gospels, classical authors, mystery plays, Coptic liturgies, Roman law, later Christian forgeries of Pilate's reports to Rome and much more for every trace of history (they are few) and every variant embellishment of his story (they are legion). The result is a biography not of an actual historical figure but of a character invented and reinvented in the psychodramas of Christian history.

Various sections of the book look at Pilate through different lenses. One, for example, considers what the job of a provincial Roman governor was like. Another focuses on Pilate as an instrument of God's design; yet another sees him as the archetypal political equivocator. There is no argument or narrative drive in the book. It is allusive and elliptical. At times Wroe waxes poetic in retelling florid apocryphal tales like the life story of Judas Iscariot and how he came to be Pilate's servant and boon companion, sent to infiltrate Jesus' band because of Pilate's mixture of fear and near-belief. At others she offers us textbook summaries of ancient trial law or snippets of information about Roman clothing and food. This alteration in style and perspective can be exasperating at times. But in the end it is fascinating, as Pilate's figure swirls before us, a wraith of smoke whose shape shifts with each new attempt to grasp it.

In many ways the contradictions of Christ are focused in Pilate. Was it necessary for Christ to die or not? If it was, Pilate is in some measure an agent of providence. If not, he is an enemy of God. Could he be both? The partially favorable pictures of Pilate as one who sought a way to save Jesus, whose wife warned him of foreboding dreams, and who washed his hands of Jesus's blood were often foils for a condemnation of the Jews for the crucifixion, or perhaps veiled messages to later Roman rulers that Christians harbored no seditious aims. And yet Pilate also was an irresistible villain, one whose cruelty and vices many legends delighted to expand. With the Council of Constantinople in 381, Pilate gained his immortality by insertion into the Christian creed ("crucified under Pontius Pilate") as the seal of Roman authority in Jesus's death and the marker of his place in earthly history. A sardonic Pilate could with justice say of the Christian Eucharist "as often as you do this, you are remembering *me* as well."

There is much that is fantastic and curious in the Pilate legends. Those in which he wanders the world until the return of Christ or dwells as a demonic presence in an alpine lake offer excellent material for an enterprising X-files screenwriter. But there is also much that is richly human, particularly in the tendency of so many not to vilify Pilate but to identify with him--with his uncertainty, his despair at being trapped by events larger than himself, his wish to escape responsibility.

For Anatole France's Pilate, Jesus was a forgotten number on a long-ago trial docket. But Christians were convinced that no one could have come face to face with Jesus and played such a key role in the drama of redemption without having his life transformed as well. Surely some calamity must have befallen him. Or, in the preferred scenario, surely Pilate himself became a believer in Christ after the resurrection, perhaps even being crucified in his turn (as the text *The Martyrdom of Pilate* had it).

So it was for the Coptic Church, where Pilate was made a saint. An apocryphal letter from Pilate to Herod told how after Easter Pilate's wife Procula had traveled to Galilee where from far off she saw Jesus talking to the disciples. When she returned with Pilate, both fell on their faces before Jesus, but he took their hands to help them up, and their fingers felt the wounds of the nails. "All generations and families shall call you blessed," Jesus said, "because in your days the Son of Man died and rose again." The Christian imagination could go this far to close the circle of forgiveness and remove the curse from one who was judge and executioner. How different history might have been if it had been able to extend the same grace to Jesus' own

people, the Jews, who instead have long carried the burden Pilate was allowed to put down.