

Mrs. Pilate: A Postcolonial Exploration

I. Introduction

Thesis: Warren Carter has argued that Pontius Pilate is a cold, calculating prefect in Matthew's Gospel, manipulating the trial of Jesus so as to enhance his control of the Jewish population. But postcolonial feminist theory suggests a different perspective, that the author of Matthew is mocking the Roman prefect by emphasizing his inability to decide, contrasting him to his wife who knows clearly what to do. This literary maneuver effectively reverses the emasculation the subaltern male experiences at the hands of a controlling empire, by making the controlling Roman male over into a weak, indecisive (and therefore "feminine") foe.

II. Theoretical Concept

Main point of this section: The central insight from postcolonial feminist theory that I will use in this paper is that, in the colonial encounter, patriarchy and other indigenous hierarchies are not mitigated but rather strengthened as a new hegemonic layer is added at the top. Those who were "beneath" others before, those over whom others exercised power, now find themselves even further down. Indigenous men often inscribe their new inferiority on those over whom they exercise authority, as Michael Taussig illustrated in his article on the Cuna women. This means that indigenous women are often in a more vulnerable position than before, viewed as representing the colonial in a more fixed and controlled way. In the literature written by subaltern men, one often sees an imaginary attempt to reverse the colonial encounter and remedy the emasculation they feel. This is often articulated by personifying the colonizer as a woman, or better yet a transgressive woman (a whore). By rendering the colonizing power as effeminate, the subaltern male author can at least imagine that he has subdued those who control him, for at least the gender hierarchy places him on top. I'm going to use this concept as the central insight to understand why Matthew, alone of all the gospels, introduces Mrs. Pilate.

III. The Historical Pilate and Carter's Pilate

Main point of this section: The historical record indicates that Pontius Pilate was a brutal and effective Roman prefect. Recalled twice to Rome for excess brutality, he was ultimately removed from power for that reason. Warren Carter chooses to blend this historical Pilate with Matthew's representation of Pilate. Carter thinks that Matthew's Pilate is a strong, shrewd leader who manipulates the Jewish crowd into a false sense of ownership for an end that Pilate wants. However, as I will argue in the next section, I don't think that Matthew's Pilate is being portrayed as a strong leader, nor would I expect the subaltern Matthew to present him in this way.

A. The Historical Pilate

1. General historical background

- Years of rule
- Base of operations
- What the duration of his rule tells us about his effectiveness

2. Pilate's reputation

- Assertions of Roman hegemony that cause riots
 - The introduction of standards into Jerusalem (Josephus, Jewish War 2.9.2-3; Jewish Antiquities 18.3.1)
 - The inscribed shields in Herod's Jerusalem Palace (Philo, Embassy to Gaius 38)
 - Theft of temple treasury to pay for Temple aqueduct (Josephus, Jewish War 2.9.4; Jewish Antiquities 18.3.2)
- Violent behavior
 - Incidents during his reign
 - First recall to Rome
 - The Samaritan incident and the final recall

B. Carter's Pilate

1. Why Carter wants a Political Pilate

- The conventional depoliticized reading of Pilate
 - Matthew exonerates Pilate and blames the Jews (146)
 - Pilate as weak, indecisive, without conscience, expedient, coerced (146)
 - Presumes that the Jesus' trial is due to a religious dispute; that the issue is theological
- Another view: Pilate as political animal
 - Pilate embodies Rome's ruthlessness and injustice (147)
 - Scene is political, not theological; about Rome, not Jews

2. Carter's View of Matthew's Pilate

- Pilate's collaboration with the ruling elites
- Bias and the execution of Roman justice
- The reputation of Roman governors of Judea in general
- Matthew's "strong" presentation of Pilate
 - Introduced as governor (162)
 - Center of the action
 - Power to determine life and death, though disguised as benign patronage (at least vis-à-vis the crowd)
 - Jesus and Barabbas are totally dependent on him
 - Power not threatened by crowd's choice

3. The Pilate/Jesus contrast

- Jesus as *hegemon*
- Two rulers, two empires
- Political titles: "Jesus" (God saves) and "King of the Jews"

IV. Mrs. Pilate as Colonial Emasculator

Main point of this section: In contrast to Carter, I will argue that Matthew does not present Pilate as a strong character, but rather as a weak and emasculated one. This is what one might expect on analogy to subaltern literature that compensates for male emasculation by feminizing the colonial aggressor. Matthew achieves this through several emphases, but most obviously through the introduction of Mrs. Pilate.

A. A weak Pilate is not a depoliticized Pilate

Carter thinks that a depoliticized Pilate implies that Matthew ignores history and blames the Jews unduly, but this is not necessarily true.

1. It's common for the subaltern to imagine a reversal of fortune and write it into their literature of the past (add some examples/analogies)
2. In the colonial encounter, there is not simply Rome and the subaltern; Rome works with the local elites, and they work with Rome, while others conform or rebel depending on the situation.
3. Thus the equation: if Pilate is blamed, the Jews are not or, vice versa, if the Jews are blamed then Rome is not, do not hold. Rome and its allies may both incur blame, but those allies are not "all" the Jewish people.

B. Now that there is no need for a ruthless Pilate acting alone, we can examine the story for evidence of an emasculated Rome

1. Matthew's "weak" presentation of Pilate
 - Can't decide, even while sitting on the judgment seat (27:11-26)
 - The Jewish elites, not Pilate, are the center of agency (if not action; 27:1-2, 12-13, 17-18, 21-24)
 - Pilate relinquished power to determine life and death to the crowd (he saw that he could do nothing; text even makes it sound like he *has* no power; 27:24)
 - His knowledge that the Jewish leaders turn Jesus over because of jealousy (27:18) and his claim to be innocent of Jesus' blood (27:24) point to knowledge of Jesus' innocence rather than intentional manipulation of the crowd
 - He executes the man who is not a danger to Rome and frees the one who is, thus making Rome vulnerable (27:15-23)
 - His wife is right; she's privy to revelation and has a firm conviction, while he has no access to "omens" and waffles (27:19)
 -
2. Almost all the other Gentiles in Matthew know more than the governor (magi – Matthew 2, centurion – Matthew 8:5-13, Canaanite woman – Matthew 15:21-28)
3. Why we would expect this in a subaltern text
 - Bhabha on the mockery inherent in colonial ambivalence
 - Kim on the anxieties of the subaltern male
 - Biblical precedents and analogies
 - Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2-4
 - King Belshazzar in Daniel 5
 - Haman in Esther
 - "Whore Babylon" (Rome) in Revelation

V. Conclusion