PILATE’S UNJUST CONDEMNATION OF JESUS IN MATTHEW 27:11-26: HOW GOD BRINGS TO LIGHT HIS STANDARD OF JUSTICE IN GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP AND OVERTURNS MAN’S CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTICE

JACQUELINE FAULHABER

Most accounts of Pontius Pilate associate the trial and crucifixion of Christ as an unjust act, and this author is in agreement with that assessment. Yet, when the act of Pontius Pilate is evaluated under its social–cultural context of the first-century, many fascinating aspects of the pressures Pilate faced beg the inquiry of whether leaders today might have done the same. The goal of this research is to shed light on what might be learned from Pilate’s ethical failure, of which is also recognized that God allowed to occur to bring salvation to all of mankind. This paper addresses the following areas: first, how justice is defined by Plato and Cicero in an effort to identify philosophical and political discourse on the topic of justice that could have influenced Pilate; second, Pilate’s decision in light of its first-century social–cultural context; third, Pilate’s personality and vice (lack of virtuousness) characterizations; fourth, the role of religion and the influence Claudia (Pilate’s wife) had on Pilate’s decision; fifth, God’s standard of justice interpreted through the trial and crucifixion of Christ; and sixth, some questions leaders can ask themselves to ascertain if they exemplify Christ’s character of holiness, or that of the world.
I. INTRODUCTION

In many instances, there is much more to the complex events of history than what is portrayed, as is the case with Pilate’s crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In these events, we try to make sense of why such an unjust act could occur. Yet, by exploring the context of these events, it might be possible to understand the dynamics injustice manifests itself in. By understanding these dynamics, a leader might be better equipped to understand whether or not their choices and decisions are just or not, recognizing that justice also plays an important role in authentic transformational leadership. Bass and Steidlmeier assert that justice, particularly distributive justice, is a foundational virtue necessary for authentic transformational leadership. ¹ Eberlin and Tatum further assert an intimate relationship between leadership style, decision making, and organizational justice. ² Not surprisingly, Aubrey Malphurs and others indicate various aspects of leadership activities result from values. ³ While research on values focuses on defining and living by core values, further work on the development of virtue necessary for good leadership is needed. The work of Lawrence Kohlberg and James Rest, a neo-Kohlbergian who based his four components of morality on Kohlberg’s post-conventional stage of moral development, are helpful in identifying how morality is developed and functions. ⁴ Greater value to this discussion, however, could be enhanced by gaining a clearer picture of the pressures of human weakness and viciousness—that is in the sense of lack of virtue—of the human flesh and spirit in the midst of its environmental context on making a morally sound decision. It is here an investigation of Scripture may shed light on the topic of justice in leadership, governing, and ruling. Namely, a study of Pilate’s condemnation of Jesus Christ in light of the political-social-cultural context of the first-century, with God revealing which barriers are necessary to overcome to uphold His justice, may prove beneficial to virtue in leadership discourse.

In Christianity, the Apostle Paul calls believers a new creation,⁵ and it is possible to be this new creation through reliance on the Holy Spirit, prayer, and keeping one’s mind focused on the right things in Christ.⁶ At the same time, however, the Apostle Paul provides a glimpse of how one’s flesh or sinful desires counter godliness.⁷ He goes on to say in 2 Corinthians 12:10 that in his own weakness he is made strong through Christ, thus communicating to believers in 2 Corinthians 15:57 that God has won victory over the sins of humankind. What the Apostle Paul suggests is that while Christ has won the victory, each day is marked by struggles of the flesh a Christian must learn to

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⁵ 2 Cor 5:17.
⁶ Phil 4:8.
⁷ 2 Cor 12:7.
overcome. One has to imagine the difficulty with which a Christian refrains from sinful acts and choices, and how much more difficult it is for someone without the Holy Spirit to make godly ethical and moral decisions. For even the Apostle Paul had been known to have persecuted Christians before his encounter with Christ.\(^8\) In every aspect, he acted unjustly. It is at this juncture that the leadership and governance of Pontius Pilate, procurator according to Josephus\(^9\) or prefect of equestrian rank,\(^10\) is discussed and analyzed in relationship to Jesus’ trial and crucifixion within the account of Matthew 27:11-26.

Most accounts of Pilate, having ruled Judea from 26 to 36 A.D.,\(^11\) associate the trial and crucifixion of Christ as an unjust act, and the author is in agreement with that assessment. Rather than focusing on what Jesus went through (understanding that most find this as God’s most significant act of grace), it is explored in Matthew 27:11-26 the dynamics surrounding Pilate’s unjust actions with the constant awareness that some today would do the same. Thus, this paper seeks to address the following areas: first, how justice is defined by Plato and Cicero in an effort to identify philosophical and political discourses on the topic of justice that could have influenced Pilate; second, Pilate’s decision in light of his first-century social-cultural context; third, Pilate’s personality and vice (lack of virtuousness) characterizations; fourth, the role of religion and the influence Claudia (Pilate’s wife) had on Pilate’s decision; fifth, God’s standard of justice interpreted through the trial and crucifixion of Christ; and sixth, some questions leaders can ask themselves to ascertain if they exemplifying Christ’s character of holiness or that of the world.

In interacting with these textual elements, one might find some principles that could guide ethical decision making for today’s public, administrative, and governing leaders. Or, it may assist other leaders who must make tough decisions regarding an employee or person brought before them for a determination, evaluation, or judgment. Exploring these potential causal influencers will further help leaders understand how human nature and its failings make the task of walking as Christ as one not of ease, but often as one of great internal struggle and potential suffering. For it is within this struggle, within the very act of resisting temptation, that one finds great strength when his or her reliance is upon Jesus Christ, who is not only one’s model but giver of the Holy Spirit who assists in resisting temptation. As Chryssavgis states:

If God is right there, in the middle of our struggle, then our aim is to stay there. We are to remain in the cell, to stay on the road, not to forego the journey or forget the darkness. It is all too easy for us to overlook the importance of struggle, preferring instead to secure peace and rest, or presuming to reach the stage of love prematurely. It is always easier to allow things to pass by, to go on

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\(^9\) Paul L. Maier, *Eusebius, the Church History: A New Translation with Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 63.
without examination and effort. Yet, struggling means living. It is a way of fully living life and not merely observing it.\footnote{John Chryssavgis, \textit{In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mother} (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003), 104.}

It is within this struggle with temptation that Jesus Christ Himself was able to overcome Satan’s temptation. Yet, for the Christian knowing that sin still seeks to rule body and soul, something positive may be learned through Pilate’s failed struggle to bring about godly justice. This cannot be accomplished, however, without investigating what justice meant in classical and New Testament times.

II. DEFINING JUSTICE IN CLASSIC AND NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

Since the time of Plato’s \textit{The Republic}, written in mid 300 B.C., the ideal of a just society and person has kept the attention of many philosophers. Definitions vary, but influencing many philosophers over time to include thinkers of the first-century is Plato’s definition of justice. He argued justice was accomplished in performing well one’s function, place, role, or job in society, and not delving into the business of other functions or roles. The function or role of a person’s life was established by the role or economic class one was born into. And this socio-economic status determined one’s capacity for virtuousness. Even by the first-century A.D., those living in the Roman Empire had already been influenced by Greek culture, and further believed that only the wealthy could afford to be virtuous, or honest, as the poor were more apt to lie, steal, or cheat in order to survive.\footnote{Jeffers, \textit{The Greco-Roman World}, 189.}

As well, it was considered that virtue was achieved with one’s high social–economic status, or was ascribed through building a reputation prized by the group,\footnote{David A. deSilva, \textit{Honor, Patronage, Kinship, \& Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture} (Dowers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 28.} which was not a status that the majority would have had the opportunity to progress toward. In Plato’s mind, the military leader (who belonged to the higher economic echelon) did justice when he performed his job well and did not interfere with the job of the politician, who typically was also from a higher socio-economic status. But once the military man interfered with the politician he had interfered with another man’s job, and thus would have been seen as acting unjustly. In other words, “justice is the principle which has in fact been followed throughout, the principle of one man one job, of ‘minding one’s own business,’ in the sense of doing the job for which one is naturally fitted and not interfering with other people.”\footnote{\textit{The Republic}, trans. Desmond Lee (Penguin Books: New York, 2003), 130.}

And justice at the individual level was “now defined analogously to justice in the state.”\footnote{Ibid., 149.} Collectively, justice manifests itself from each individual living out their proper role, function, or job. According to Plato, a man was just in virtue when there was harmony between the three elements of the mind (e.g., “spirit and appetite are in proper subordination to reason”).\footnote{Ibid.} Corresponding to these three elements in the collective, Bhandari writes that the philosopher or ruling class represented reason, the warriors and defenders represented spirit, and the
farmers and artisans as the lowest rung of the ladder represented appetite. Each one of these classes should perform their particular function to ensure harmony in the society; any crossing of these boundaries was unjust.\(^{18}\) This harmony also, however, would reinforce the strong cultural norms of honor toward rulers, the “reason” of the collective.

Today’s view on what is just and what determines a just act is quite different from that of the first-century. It is difficult to imagine that virtuousness was not found in persons from all socio-economic classes. When the modern person assesses Pilate’s crucifixion of Jesus Christ as unjust, it is difficult to understand how Pilate’s focus was not on our Biblical or current-day understanding of carrying justice out equally under the law, but instead was considered carried out when protecting the interests of Rome and the emperor. Thus, it was considered just to ensure these interests were protected. Jeffers writes, “Romans did not govern primarily for the welfare of the people of the provinces. Their system was not designed, even had it worked ideally, to promote justice among the provincials. It was designed to support the interests of the leaders back in Rome, whether that meant collecting the maximum amount of taxes possible or protecting the Empire from threats to its stability from within or without.”\(^{19}\)

Rulers of the Roman Empire had learned from past experience that local political turmoil and revolt could be minimized by allowing some self-governance within the provinces conquered so long as the province remained loyal to Rome.\(^{20}\) Rather than allowing itself to be conquered by Rome, by 140 B.C., Judea gave Roman overlordship a try and as a result became a semi-independent state.\(^{21}\) This allowed Judea’s elite to maintain some self-governance, but also required a strong relationship with Roman rule. These relationships, however, would become a stumbling block in ensuring Hebraic justice could thrive. Justice would be constrained by maintaining right relationships that promoted each party’s interests. Consideration must be given, however, to the fact that Pilate in Matthew 27:23 recognizes Jesus as a just man. It is possible, as well, that Pilate’s evaluated justice based on Cicero’s teachings.

Cicero (influenced by Plato and Zeno\(^{22}\)), a practicing Roman lawyer, experienced administrator, “fighting statesman,”\(^{23}\) and author of On Duties (written around 44 B.C.), may have influenced Roman students of the first-century. Cicero projects justice (known as justia) in two parts: (1) not doing harm to others, unless provoked by a wrongful act, and (2) “using common things as common, private possessions as one’s own.”\(^{24}\) He further “observes that the failure to prevent an injustice is itself an injustice,” that trickery must be avoided, and adversaries should be treated with honesty and respect, thus


\(^{19}\) Jeffers, The Greco-Roman World, 110.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 15. 306.


\(^{23}\) William Ebenstein and Alan O. Ebenstein, Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present, 5th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Hartcourt Brace College Publishers, 1991), 141.

placing a limit on vengeance and punishment. \textsuperscript{25} Imperial unity could then be attained only through liberty, self-government, and the \textit{rule of law} that sought not to equalize wealth and innate ability, as this was impossible, but to instead provide legal rights equally among its citizens. \textsuperscript{26} In Judea, the noncitizen thus may not necessarily experience justice under the rule of law as Cicero would have advocated. It would be assumed as well that Jesus who was not a Roman citizen would also not benefit from the protection a citizen would have received.

Regarding one’s position on the social order, Plato, and later Cicero along with other Roman aristocrats, looked down upon and held in contempt or “disgust” for the lower classes “because they had no money.” \textsuperscript{27} This attitude could have certainly influenced how justice was defined and who would receive justice. Because of the Roman social–cultural norm and belief that wealth was “an essential requirement of the virtuous life,” as well as its value of honesty, \textsuperscript{28} perplexity arises when considering how Pilate could have so quickly given up on ensuring this just man was not condemned.

The question remains then the extent to which both Plato and Cicero would have impacted Pontius Pilate’s philosophy on justice. In Plato’s perspective, Jesus the carpenter—an artisan belonging to the lower class—would have acted justly so long as He stayed within the boundaries of His appointed position or job. But being accused of or called “King of the Jews” would have looked unfavorably as others would have assumed He asserted Himself in another social function. This would have been frowned upon and considered unjust under a Platonic philosophy and understanding of justice. Pilate further might have viewed assuming this title as potentially seditious in terms of revolt against the emperor, and if guided by Platonic philosophy, would not have only considered this as usurping the emperor, but also unjustly taking on a role that was not in His social standing. However, if Pilate was influenced by Cicero’s philosophy, Pilate would have tried to ensure injustice did not prevail, as failing to prevent injustice from occurring was unjust in itself. \textsuperscript{29} In the end, however, Pilate recognized only one charge that would be of interest to Rome, whether or not Jesus was guilty as charged by the Jewish leaders of claiming kingship, and it was the attempt to overthrow Roman rule; it would be a charge that would not only be in Rome’s best interest, but in Pilate’s best interest as well to investigate. \textsuperscript{30} Pilate then goes on to say in Matthew 27:23, “Why, what \textit{kakos}, Greek for the word “evil,” may be defined as worthless, depraved, bad, injurious, or wicked. \textsuperscript{31} In the remaining verses 24-26, the crowd, chief priests, and elders provide no explanation or reasoning for the desired conviction of Christ. Furthermore, Pilate appears to inherently understand that Jesus is

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ebenstein, \textit{Great Political Thinkers}, 141.
\textsuperscript{27} Jeffers, \textit{Greco-Roman World}, 192.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 58, 189.
\textsuperscript{29} Nussbaum, “Duties of Justice.”
\textsuperscript{31} KJV Plus in e-Sword, ver. 9.8, http://www.e-sword.net/
\textsuperscript{32} Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionary in e-Sword, ver. 9.8, http://www.e-sword.net/
innocent, as he declares to the crowd that he is “innocent of this man’s blood” as noted in the New American Standard Bible version. In the New King James version, however, Pilate refers to Jesus as righteous, δικαίος or dikaios, meaning equitable, innocent, or holy. According to Matthew 27:24, because Pilate saw that a riot was starting to develop, he washed his hands clean of his verdict. Washing clean one’s hands was customary among Jews, Greeks, and Latins to indicate they were “pure from any imputed guilt.”

III. PILATE’S DECISION IN LIGHT OF THE FIRST-CENTURY SOCIAL—CULTURE CONTEXT

Also important to consider is the social intertexture of Matthew 27:11-26. Social intertexture, according to Robbins, accounts for social knowledge generally accessible to people through interaction in a particular culture, which manifests itself in social roles and identity, institutions, codes, and relationships. Social intertexture differs from cultural knowledge in that the latter is “taught with careful use of language and transmission of specific traditions,” which can interact with the way social codes and relationships are created and maintained. Knowing these codes in the text can help alleviate problems associated with interpreting twenty-first century guilt and individualistic cultural perspective rather than first-century honor–shame and collectivistic or group-oriented cultural perspective. It is with the later cultural framework that the following paragraphs seek to interpret the events in Matthew 27:11-26. For this paper, social role and identity, dyadic and individualistic personalities, patron–client, and challenge–riposte aspects are addressed next.

Social Role and Identity

Pilate’s role as prefect under the oversight of legate in Syria, drawn from the equestrian rank (.01 percent of the population) and normally sent out for one year at a time with imperium type power, “formed the middle rank of Roman nobility” and “provided suitable men for a variety of essential public offices ranging from military commands to the collection of taxes and jury work.” Power accorded to the prefect allowed Pilate to govern as he saw fit so long as he honored specific tax exemptions, and allegiance to Rome remained strong. His priority was first and foremost then to

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33 Mt 27:24, KJV Plus in e-Sword.
34 Mt 27:24, Strong’s Greek and Hebrew Dictionary in e-Sword.
35 Clarke’s Commentary in e-Sword, ver. 9.8, http://www.e-sword.net/
37 Ibid., 62.
38 Ibid., 72.
39 Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 128.
40 Ibid., 181.
42 Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 114.
promote Rome’s interest in ensuring that taxes were collected, the empire was protected, and stability within Judea was maintained; within these functions, however, many governors also sought to make as much money as possible, which might have included corruption. 43 Pilate’s concern then would not necessarily have been directed at how he could increase the welfare, just treatment, and predictable rule over Judean citizens. 44

All efforts to maintain order and stability were also mitigated by limited administrative staff 45 and military resources. For the latter and during the trial of Christ, Pilate would have been under significant pressure knowing that he would not have the support of the Roman legions in Syria, as Tiberius kept Syrian legate Aelius Lamia in Rome for the first six years of Pilate’s term in office. 46 To maintain order and prevent a riot or revolt, Tiberius would have expected Pilate to maintain order in Judea and minimize the risk of a riot. One can assume that authentic and godly justice in the Hebrew tradition would have been sold out in order to maintain order. It would be well within this historical context to suggest that national allegiance was paramount to any individual right to justice. Again, this is quite different from our present rights-based culture that does not allow the trampling of individual rights for the sake of national supremacy ruled by public leaders who govern at their own whim. And, this largely supports a thesis that Pilate’s personality is largely dyadic in nature that again hinders the carrying out of godly justice.

**Dyadic and Individualist Personalities**

In Mark 15, Pilate’s dyadic personality (one that perceives him or herself as embedded in other individuals) consistently checks his own status based on the crowd’s perception; 47 this seems to apply as well in Matthew 27. The historical context and situation of Judea in the first century also appears to demand close relationships between the Roman and local leaders. Also needing consideration, according to Jeffers, is that Judea may have caused enough trouble that direct Roman control was necessary. 48 Judea, having only a small number of non-Roman auxiliary troops, 49 would have been able to call upon the Roman army under the Syrian legates control if necessary (but these troops would not have been available in 33 A.D., as noted earlier). 50 Because Judea’s local Jewish Sanhedrin was given much political and self-governing power, Pilate had to ensure good relations were maintained in an effort to avoid uprisings, of which appears the Jewish leaders knew could work to their favor.

45 Bond, “Pontius Pilate.”
46 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 128.
50 Bond, “Pontius Pilate.”
The Jewish elite, functioning similar to a senate, came from leading families who traditionally arose to this level of power in the first-century. Thus, the combination of Roman practices of allowing local self-governance and having few resources to counter dissatisfaction could have resulted in revolts and uprisings. A fine balance then of supporting Rome and maintaining local peace would be a challenge. If Pilate was effective, it would support Rome’s experience that power and control could be maintained so long as the governed allowed it, and by convincing local upper classes to buy into their system (partly out of greed and a sense of self-preservation). It appears that both of these historical lessons were applicable to successfully controlling Judea until 70 A.D.

Within this context, Jewish leaders had much at stake, as they also did not want to jeopardize their status, honor, prestige, and power. This was evident in the jealous and envious power of the chief priests noted in Matthew 27:18. As Jeffers notes, if the Romans were able to keep Judea’s ruling elite (the Herodians) pacified, they could also keep the Jewish people pacified. Not mentioned in detail in this paper is the relationship of Herod Antipas to Pilate. What is known is that according to Luke 23:12, Antipas and Pilate became friends “that day” because Pilate referred Jesus’ case to Antipas for consideration. This was not necessarily because Herod believed he had the right to try the case, but could be because it would be perceived in public that he had political power. Neither making a decision nor by showing his unwillingness to support a person supposedly fomenting rebellion against Rome, Jeffers asserts Antipas’ actions were politically savvy. As well, local elites to include the priests and Sadducees appear to have been satisfied and collaborative in nature with Roman rule, as revolts (primarily from those of lower status) in Judea were the exception not the rule. Over time, it is quite possible that Pilate saw himself not so much as an individual elite in Judea, but came to see himself being integrated into the local non-Roman elite structure, thus envisioning his own status embedded in personality of the local elite. This might be a possible reason then for him seeking inquiry from the Jewish high priest and elders along with the crowd, as noted in Matthew 27:11-26, as to what to do with Jesus. One could only imagine what was going through Pilate’s mind when the ruling elite did not want Jesus to live. At this moment in time, Pilate might have realized the magnitude of the situation, which influenced him to wash clean his hands noted in Matthew 27:24, indicating his innocence of spilling Jesus’ blood. While Pilate’s personality exemplifies a dyadic personality nature that is embedded in the personality of other elites, Jesus does not exhibit this. Instead Jesus views Himself in relationship with God rather than humans; Jesus’ personality is embedded in God’s.

51 Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 128.
52 Ibid., 17.
53 Ibid., 301.
54 Ibid., 127.
55 Ibid., 127.
56 Ibid., 118.
57 Robbins, Exploring the Texture, 78.
58 Ibid.
Patron–Client

Far more important than modern Western culture was the first-century cultural element of "reciprocal ties of friendship," a patron–client relationship that ruled the Roman culture and aristocracy.59 The patron in many respects served as protector over the client in terms of "legal help and protection from powerful enemies," and it was in this culture that the term beneficia would establish the norm of the client owing the patron respect, deference, and support of patron–political action.60 Also, a patron's status in many instances was determined by the status and number of his clients.61 The status system in the first-century was not measured by the income level one belonged to where mobility between classes was possible; instead, a person was born into a social class that prescribed a order of who one could or could not marry, or who received or did not receive honor and privileges.62 Other indicators of higher status were also mediated by attainment of a good education rather than not being educated, Roman citizenship rather than noncitizenship, patron rather than client, ethnic Roman/Latin rather than not, voluntary ally rather than conquered enemy, and male rather than female.63

Regarding the emperor, from the time of Augustus on, the emperor functioned "as the single patron of the Empire," paying the "expenses of the governors in the imperial provinces," to include the soldiers' salaries.64 Not seeing himself as a philanthropist, the emperor used "revenues from taxation in the imperial provinces" and other sources to fund expenditures "as well as to pay for his building projects and personal needs back in Rome."65 Thus, Emperor Tiberius would have possibly served as a powerful patron to Pilate, allowing Pilate to advance to his position based on Tiberius' or his friend Sejanus' patronage.66 Pilate then would have been expected to support Tiberius' policies to maintain order. In terms of Pilate's worldview of justice regarding the trial of Jesus, Pilate could have also been biased by Jesus' lower social status, non-Roman citizenship, non-Roman–Latin ethnicity, and nonclient status. It is possible, as well, that not having a patron may have proven difficult to receive justice at court, noting that Jeffers subscribes that this was typical of the early Republican years (although this tendency weakened over the subsequent years with more powerful clients; yet still important to understand is that Jesus was not a client at all of Pilate).67

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59 Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 192.
60 Ibid., 192.
61 Ibid., 16-17.
62 Ibid., 192.
63 Ibid., 181.
64 Ibid., 182.
65 Ibid., 143.
66 Ibid., 143.
67 Bond, "Pontius Pilate."
68 Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 299.
Jesus’ Silence

To Pilate’s amazement, Jesus did not answer a single charge of the elders and chief priests. Clarke’s Commentary explains, “Silence under calumny manifests the utmost magnanimity. The chief priests did not admire this because it confounded them; but Pilate, who had no interest to serve by it, was deeply affected.” Why did not Jesus respond? Clarke’s Commentary goes on to comment that this was expected as Isaiah prophesied: He would be as a lamb led to the slaughter and a sheep before her shearsers He opened not His mouth. God, displaying retributive justice in His love and mercy, sends Jesus Christ as sacrifice for His innate inability to be indifferent to good and evil. Thus, justice in the Scriptures is conceived as the action of God’s mercy; justice and mercy are then joined together and is now redemptive in nature. Jesus in keeping silent not only fulfills Old Testament prophecy, but also embodies God’s character of justice and mercy, of which He further refuses to participate in the culture of the day that demands a response to preserve His own honor.

Jesus’ actions change the cultural paradigm from one that supported benefactor–patronage–client relationships from man honoring man to one by which the new benefactor would be God, refocusing Christ’s followers to follow the patron God. This new relationship would redefine how one living within a cultural milieu would now define justice. Justice would incorporate mercy, loving one’s enemies (referred to as an innovation in teaching ascribed to Jesus that opposes Jewish teachings on attitude toward evil people), and serving God rather than people or the culture. Because Christ died for the world and saves all regardless of social–economic class, justice would now not be limited to only the wealthy or as the situation demands. Instead, justice would now be based on the redemptive act of Christ’s death and resurrection prompted by God’s grace, which seeks to restore a correct relationship between God and humanity. God’s redemptive justice would, in essence, deal a “deathblow to the whole Judaistic scheme of merit and reward.” Jesus’ silence then would have been seen as very counter-cultural in Pilate’s eyes. Reflecting on Jesus’ actions may very well have influenced Pilate in Matthew 27:23 to ask, “Why, what evil has He done?” and in verse 24, to seek to wash his hands clean of Jesus’ innocent blood.

In addition, given the potential influence of Pilate’s amazement of Jesus in Matthew 27:14 along with his wife’s warning, Pilate’s character reveals another difficult area to address when Pilate’s character is compared to a Biblical definition of justice or righteousness. Noted in the Biblical Encyclopedia:

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69 Mt 27:14, KJV Plus, e-Sword.
70 Mt 27:12, KJV Plus, e-Sword.
71 Mt 27:14, Clarke’s Commentary, e-Sword.
72 Is 53:7, KJV Plus, e-Sword.
74 Ibid.
76 “Justice,” Bible Encyclopedia.
In Christian thought the idea of righteousness contains both a permanent and changing element. The fixed element is the will to do right; the changing factor is the conception of what may be right at different times and under different circumstances. Throughout the entire course of Christian revelation we discern the emphasis on the first factor. To be sure, in the days of later Pharisaism righteousness came to be so much a matter of externals that the inner intent was often lost sight of altogether (Matthew 23:23); but, on the whole and in the main, Christian thought in all ages has recognized as the central element in righteousness the intentions to be and do right. This common spirit binds together the first worshippers of God and the latest.\textsuperscript{77}

Pilate, given the opportunity to do and be right failed at this intent. God provided him a way out. While it appears that Pilate desires to do what is right and just by seeking to change the minds of the crowd, he fails in that he seeks to placate the crowd instead of judging appropriately under the law. One must remember, however, that because he failed to act justly, this failure does not necessarily constitute that he did not desire or will to do right. If one had to weigh the evidence, however, given his other decisions as ruler over Judea (discussed in the next section), one would probably garner greater support that his will was to serve the overall interests of Rome, the Emperor Tiberius, and further maintain his own political power. His commitment was toward his own nation and cultural tradition on delivering justice.

In no doubt, however, can one argue that he was not somehow impacted by Jesus’ behavior, and thus spiritually impacted. This spiritual impact then may have been very counter to even Pilate’s own cultural worldview of religion, as religion in the pagan world was very much about ensuring correct ritual practice to ensure the gods were pleased,\textsuperscript{78} rather than internal moral and spiritual development. This may have occurred with the Jewish leaders of the time by which they lost their focus on what God desires for His children: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”\textsuperscript{79}

Also, at work, however is the cultural practice of challenging one another socially to displace honor. While the conversation with Jesus does not reflect a social game typical of the first-century to dispose another of honor, the dialogue between Pilate, the chief priests, and the elders appears to engage in this game.

\textit{Honor Culture Mediated through Challenge—Riposte}

Place of honor, a claim to one’s worth, in the first-century determined one’s rightful place and was determined by one’s social standing.\textsuperscript{80} An honor culture also prescribes what is noble, right, wrong, and profitable, thus playing an important role in moral instruction, and sanctions through disgrace or defense of honor in all spheres of life.\textsuperscript{81} It either was ascribed passively in that one was born into it through, “birth, family

\textsuperscript{78} Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 90.
\textsuperscript{79} Mi 6:8, ESV, in e-Sword, ver. 9.8, http://www.e-sword.net/
\textsuperscript{80} Robbins, Exploring the Texture, 76.
\textsuperscript{81} deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity, 24.
connections, or endowment by notable persons of power, or it was acquired honor that could be attained by either persisting in virtuous behavior prized by their group or through actively seeking honor at the expense of one’s equal through a social contest of challenge and response. The acquiring of honor occurs between Pilate and the chief priest and elders. In this dialogue, one seeks to usurp the power of another, thus depriving another of his reputation, thus losing credibility and reputation in the crowd. In Matthew 27:20-23, Pilate appears to lose honor among the crowd as the crowd is persuaded by the chief priests and elders to release Barabbas rather than Jesus; the crowds did not support the decision of Pilate (as ruling governor), but were instead emboldened by the influence of the Jewish leaders. The loss of honor results in this event in the release of Barabbas and the scourging of Jesus. It is interesting to note that Jewish beliefs, as annotated in Proverbs 21:21, gives value to pursuing justice in dealing with others, as it would lead to honor. This does not occur, however, in the pursuit of Jesus’ condemnation. Jesus instead is disgraced and dishonored by His own people. The Jewish leaders act more in accord with their cultural system than within their own faith system. A critical piece that is worth considering is how these leaders seek to potentially shame those who follow Christ back into group norms by using Christ as an example of what happens to people who thwart their social status. As deSilva notes, strategies that seek to bring “wayward” people back into the fold include using shame to dissuade others from activities or attitudes that could hinder the group’s survival.

The end result, and as one might infer, is that the social game of challenge—riposte also heavily influences the ethical form a decision takes. In this instance, Pilate’s decision that should have been based on a legal basis, exemplifying retributive justice, bears more resemblance however to a utilitarian focus that bases its decision on achieving the greatest good for the greatest number and self-preservation or egoistic ethics rather than virtuous-based ethics, one that focuses on doing good regardless of the consequences. Likewise, the Jewish leaders’ behavior does not result in the virtuous behavior based on its own Hebrew Scriptures. Regarding Pilate’s decision, it should not be completely surprising given Pilate’s typical pattern of behavior, as noted his other decisions documented by Josephus and Philo.

IV. PILATE’S PERSONALITY AND VICE (LACK OF VIRTUOUSNESS) CHARACTERIZATIONS

Some researchers argue that Pilate was not the “weak” ruler that the Gospels portray. Deffinbaugh writes, “Concerning Jesus’ executioner, Pontius Pilate, we have a considerable body of data that contradicts the largely sympathetic portrayal of him in the

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82 Robbins, Exploring the Texture, 76; deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity, 28.
83 deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity, 28.
84 Robbins, Exploring the Texture, 76.
85 Ibid., 81.
86 deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity, 25.
87 Ibid., 50.
88 Bond, “Pontius Pilate.”
New Testament. Even among the long line of cruel procurators who ruled Judea, Pilate stood out as a notoriously vicious man. He eventually was replaced after murdering a group of Samaritans. The Romans realized that keeping him in power would only provoke continual rebellions.89 One should remember, however, that the points of view offered on Pilate’s character were influenced by the Jewish historian Josephus and Jewish philosopher Philo and were subject to some bias. Maier notes Josephus as having written with some prejudice, as most historians write, in that his Jewish culture had a proud culture of having a highest form of belief; he is also known to have exaggerated, particularly with numbers.90 And Philo, who lived in Alexandria at the time, was related to the Herodian family (of which it is noted that at least one prince disliked Pilate as noted in Lk 23:12) and would have heard about Pilate from a Herodian,91 thus potentially lending greater bias to his account. Yet, their perspectives cannot be entirely dismissed either or construed as false on account of these points, as Maier points out on the writings of Josephus.92

Lendering asserts that in telling essentially a Jewish story,93 Pilate may not be deliberately provoking the Jewish when he brings into the holy city Jerusalem (soon after his transfer to Judea) “busts of the emperor attached to military standards.”94 According to Josephus in Jewish Antiquities,95 Pilate is instead deeply affected that the Jewish were willing to die for their beliefs, thus he removed the standards.96 In this instance, it appears that Pilate shows extreme insensitivity and lack of common sense to the Jewish faith, and appears to be in a catch-22 between pride of not removing what he set up and realizing that the Jewish leaders would complain about Tiberius’ views on respecting Jewish beliefs.97 In the other events that Pilate blundered on, as recorded by Josephus—building an aqueduct using temple funds (keeping in mind that use for civic needs was permitted according to Skekalim), repression of a Samaritan uprising of potentially armed persons of which leaders were executed, and refusal to remove golden shields that had no images but a inscription dedicated to Tiberius of which the people protested—Maier notes Pilate has been faulted for his performance as governor in most histories, and yet close investigation of each account reflects Pilate attempting to make the best of these most difficult administrative situations.98 In the golden shields incidence, Philo refers to Pilate as inflexible, of a cruel disposition, and stubborn.99 If one wishes to learn anything from Pilate’s unjust acts, evaluating the conditions and contexts within which all people experience these temptations will hopefully reveal conditions the leader must discern and avoid.

89 Deffinbaugh, “Jesus Before Pilate.”
90 Jewish Antiquities, 13.
92 Jewish Antiquities, 13.
93 Lendering, “Pontius Pilate.”
95 Jewish Antiquities, book 18, ch 3, para 59.
97 Lendering, “Pontius Pilate.”
V. RELIGION OF FIRST-CENTURY AND CLAUDIA’S DREAM HAVING LITTLE INFLUENCE ON DECISION

Matthew 27:19 records the following warning of Claudia, Pilate’s wife, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of him.”

Claudia recognizes Jesus as righteous, already defined earlier as one who is equitable or holy. It is uncertain as to what form this dream came in, if it was while she was sleeping or a vision provided while she was awake, as expressed by ὀναρ, or onar, meaning “of uncertain derivation.” Gill’s commentary notes that this dream was not necessarily inspired by Satan in an attempt to thwart God’s plans because it may have been more effective to choose the chief priest or an elder; instead it is argued that the dream was from God. Interesting, however, is that she “suffered” in the dream; her πάσχω or pascho serves as a verb to indicate that she experienced a typically painful sensation, or experienced passion. The experience was enough to indicate action was necessary.

One might ask why this dream was not given to Pilate rather than Claudia. One can only speculate about the influence of religion in her life; there are no available substantial historical records that indicate her following Christ’s ideals, only tradition that indicates she became a Christian. The dream, however, seems to reveal to us God’s just character. In this passage, one can see how the death of Jesus was necessary to save humanity from its sins, yet it also indicates God by virtue of His own holiness and goodness would warn someone to have nothing to do with a man who is right, just, and holy. God still in His goodness warns a person who might have influence, namely Pilate’s wife. It reveals how open she was to spiritual concerns. It also reveals that Pilate may not have been able to be reached or open to this divine knowledge. While it appears that Pilate does try to heed his wife’s warning, why does he fail? As mentioned already, the political pressure to maintain order and the social–cultural reliance upon maintaining strong relations with the elite in Judea, of course, including the Jewish leaders, could have impacted his decision to allow Christ’s crucifixion. However, Matthew 27:24 reveals that the former had greater impact in that a riot was starting. But why is it that all of the gospel accounts except Matthew mention this warning? Is there another nuance one could investigate? It is possible that it reveals how a strong social culture can prevent one from doing what God asks, such as when political considerations outweigh God’s direction?

100 Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionary, e-Sword.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Gill’s Commentary in e-Sword, ver. 9.8, http://www.e-sword.net/
104 Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionary, e-Sword.
106 Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 132.
Role of Religion

In the first-century, Roman culture took the role of religion very seriously; religion was not viewed as separate from the state, but played an important role in public affairs or politics.\(^ {107}\) It would not have been unusual then for politicians or statesman to have considered the gods in the decisions they made. Important to remember, however, was that rules established by religion were not focused on any code of behavior, but instead governed how a person carried out a ritual such as blessing or sacrificing an animal so that could remain in good standing with the gods.\(^ {108}\) Thus, Pilate may not have overly concerned himself with any feelings he might have experienced in condemning Jesus. Interesting enough, again, is the idea that Pilate refers to Jesus as “innocent” in Matthew 27:24 and is aware of his wife’s reference to Jesus as “righteous” in verse 19. But because religion in this first century did not necessarily establish codes of behavior, it would not have played a role in this decision except for the fact that Claudia had a dream to have nothing to do with this man.

As Jeffers notes, however, eventually political leaders, even priests of the gods, were “motivated more by social and political goals than by religious belief.”\(^ {109}\) In fact, the wealthy increasingly started to doubt the existence of the gods.\(^ {110}\) It also appears that emperor cult worship, while a method to garner control over the provinces, may not have played a large part in this case in that Judea was granted special exemption to emperor worship so long as they “revered” the emperor; yet, because Jesus was charged with taking on role of “king” it may have antagonized Pilate a bit knowing it could be a seditious act.\(^ {111}\) Taylor, however, notes that Pilate was engaged in the promotion of the emperor cult in Roman Judea, as evidenced in the numismatic coins issued by Pilate.\(^ {112}\) It is known, however, that Cicero who called Judaism a “barbarous superstition” in the work Against Flaccus, reveals a general attitude toward Judaism that Pilate might have also shared.\(^ {113}\) Yet again, Pilate’s determination is that Jesus is “innocent.” Pilate’s assertion that Jesus is innocent is very powerful in that it really indicates an intuitive assessment, and most likely spiritual assessment, that Jesus is just. Even given this conclusion, Jesus is crucified. While Pilate strongly believed Jesus was innocent and the outcome was very different poses difficulty in assessing Pilate’s values, character, and thought process. Jesus was crucified for a crime not well argued, for a crime he did not commit, and by a crowd who served as judge and jury with no compelling and supporting arguments. A culture based on a false sense of who is the patron and who is the client, glued together through a false idea of who a person’s personality is embedded in, and a false sense of what determines honor and who is given honor, and finally the incapacity to listen and heed God’s warning, won out that

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{108}\) Ibid.

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 92.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 100.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., 102, 122.


\(^{113}\) Jeffers, Greco-Roman World, 106.
day. In the midst of this very unjust situation, however, God redefine these social–
cultural aspects through the death and resurrection of Christ so that those who believe
in Him will find the ability to lead justly as God does.

VI. GOD’S STANDARD OF JUSTICE INTEPRETED THROUGH THE TRIAL AND
CRUCIFCTION OF CHRIST

In Christ’s death, humanity experiences the moral justice of God at work in that
sin (deemed a moral debt now for those who believe in Christ) and the death of Christ a
ransom or atonement for that debt.\(^{114}\) What now is the new obligation that is very
consistent with the cultural context of the first century? It is for the receiver of that
payment of debt to give their self to the payer of that debt, thus in a first-century social–
cultural context, the patron is now God, to include Jesus Christ, and the client is each
person receiving that gift. In terms of the honor–shame culture, in Jesus’ response to
Pilate, Jesus overturns Pilate’s and the world’s system of honor to one that instead
gives Jesus honor. Jesus thus redefines culture in that as a believer the patron and
recipient of honor is God, transacted by God’s morally just act of Christ payment of the
penalty or debt for sin. No longer does man in a patron role serve as the protector of the
client, but God is seen as the protector. As deSilva notes:

No member of the Jewish community or the Greco-Roman society would
have come to faith or joined the Christian movement without first accepting
that God’s perspective on what kind of behavior merits honor differs
exceedingly from the perspective of human beings, since the message about
Jesus is that both the Jewish and Gentile leaders of Jerusalem evaluated
Jesus, his convictions and his deeds as meriting a shameful death, but God
overturned their evaluation of Jesus by raising him from the dead and seating
him at God’s own right hand as Lord.\(^{115}\)

What does this mean? While historical interpretation has proven time and time
again that Jesus’ crucifixion was not just, it might be said that in the eyes of God, Jesus
paying the debt for mankind was morally just. Although, God would not have had to do
this and could have allowed divine retributive justice to place its mark on humanity
where the eternal consequence would be eternal death, instead His divine love and
mercy found a creative place in God’s act of moral justice to redeem humanity. Whether
or not one supports Pilate as a cruel or just a weak ruler, one cannot dismiss the
requirement placed upon the believer of Christ to contemplate how this one act by our
patron God now requires us to understand and live out just lives as persons or leaders.
Our new understanding of justice then cannot be established solely on traditional
retributive justice based on retaliation or equity for wrongful actions, but instead is
mediated by redemptive mercy and grace that seeks to restore a person to a rightful
relationship with God. And, by this one act incorporated into social justice, structural

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\(^{114}\) “Andrew Fuller on Pecuniary on Pecuniary and Penal Satisfaction and the Role of the Metaphor,”
http://calvinand Calvinism.com

\(^{115}\) deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity, 51.
justice, or retributive justice, leaders, rulers, or those in positions of power ought to find room for integrating a redemptive quality into that decision. In this age, however, it might prove quite difficult to do given our inherent nature to want revenge for wrongs committed and punishment based on reciprocity for wrongs done (e.g., the “eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth” approach). While justice cannot neatly fit into one category or definition of justice, each form of justice (retributive, utilitarian, restorative, and distributive) should be mediated and infused with love and mercy. This requires creative leadership that integrates structurally into legislation, policies, procedures, reward and punitive systems, and other aspects of leadership decision-making redemptive qualities that focus on restoring individuals. As history reveals, the “will to do right, and on the other, the difficulty of determining in a particular circumstance just what the right is” is not always clear.  

As exemplified in the trial of Christ, making the right choices with ample guidance from God is a challenge for every person to live out in social-cultural systems that at its very heart seeks to work against God rather than for God. Yet, to consider God’s ways and will to do so is living righteously before God. Awareness of these particulars, although not in direct reference to a religious context, assists reaching Rest’s fourth stage of moral character of implementation that includes the ability to overcome “opposition, fatigue, distractions, and other factors” formidable barriers to ethical action, which takes persistence, strong will, and a strong internal locus of control.

VII. CONCLUSION

Righteousness is not an elusive idea, but is deeply embedded in one’s walk with Jesus Christ. It is the basis for one’s moral spirit, and to walk without it within the depths of heart leaves a person quite vulnerable to accepting a worldly view of righteousness. In describing righteousness, the Bible Encyclopedia notes:

In Christian development increasing place is given for certain swift insights of the moral spirit. We believe that some things are righteous because they at once appeal to us as righteous. Again, some other things seem righteous because their consequences are beneficial, both for society and for the individual. Whatever makes for the largest life is in the direction of righteousness. In interpreting life, however, we must remember the essentially Christian conception that man does not live through outer consequences alone. In all thought of consequences the chief place to be given to our inner consequences. By the surrender of outward happiness and outward success a man may attain inner success. The spirit of the cross is still the path to the highest righteousness.

For Christian leadership that involves the frequent consideration of justice. To ensure that the leader leads justly, he or she must consider the barriers presented in his or her

116 “Justice,” Bible Encyclopedia.
social context that prevents him or her from leading justly. Furthermore, a leader might want to consider the following questions in his or her leadership to ensure justice is carried out in his or her leadership.

**View of myself in relationship to God:**
1. Is my benefactor or patron God, thus making our patronage to Him our priority?
2. Do I listen to His voice and His means of communication to guide and direct my actions and decisions?
3. Is merely willing to do right enough when God provides the Christian leader the means to resist temptation enough to bring about the righteousness God expects?

**View of myself in relationship to others:**
1. When do I exhibit injustice based on socio-economic status (e.g., paying patronage to the wealthy, poor, or middle class)?
2. Do I see my identity through the ideas, concerns, and others rather than as an individual distributor of justice based on being a follower of Christ?
3. How have I allowed myself to feel obligated to reciprocate and depend on those who hold over me certain benefits, honors, and necessities of life? What may I do differently to break free from those bonds so that I may serve justly in God’s eyes?
4. Are my decisions of carrying out justice ever fully mediated or influenced by what might lose as a result of not serving the benefactors, those we depend on financially and socially in our lives?

**Views on justice:**
1. Do I incorporate mercy into justice, or do we merely focus on justice as equity for what a person has done or not done? In other words, do I view justice as a spiritual and ethical matter, rather than intellectual exercise over what someone deserves or has a right to?
2. Do I take for granted that all will be rendered according to his deeds in God’s eyes?
3. Do I see in my decisions, policies, and actions justness integrated with mercy that bears a redemptive quality?

**Views on human nature:**
1. Do I recognize how human nature will desire to protect one’s own social status, esteem, privilege, and honor at the sake of someone else’s due justice?

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120. Ibid.
My behavioral tendencies:
1. Do I ever sacrifice justice for the individual to serve the nation, community, society, or organization?
2. Systemically, do I reinforce injustice in our organizations or society though establishing policies, procedures, and strategies counter to carrying out godly justice?

It is when a leader has answered these questions in light of Scripture, and has practiced the virtue of justice, that he or she is better able to withstand the pressure of culture. In doing so, one can then confidently say they have done justice, loves kindness, and walks humbly with God. Always remembering, however, that it is within the struggles of doing good that a leader learns to examine his or herself and is better able and equipped to lead in greatness where God is the guide and not the world. It is further within these struggles that one finds God and an opportunity to grow in holiness and righteousness. Ultimately, what a leader could encounter in the midst of practicing justness and justice is living as a model for others to follow.

About the Author

Jacqueline A. Faulhaber, DSL, is an adjunct professor at the University of South Dakota, Mid-America Christian University, and Black Hills State University within their graduate programs. She also has several years of experience helping organizations in nonprofit, for profit, government, and church sectors become more effective in reaching their vision, mission, and goals. Her research interests include character, virtuousness in public leadership, citizenship, and global leadership from a Christian worldview. She also serves on a local city character council that works with many different sectors of society to not only celebrate character, but to facilitate the development of character. Email: jfauL33@gmail.com

121 Mc 6:8, ESV, e-Sword.