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## Jesus before Pilate in *The Passion of the Christ*: A Film Essay Exploring Honour and Shame

Brock J. Vaughan<sup>1</sup>

In a film nearly solely focused on Jesus's suffering and his unwavering determination in the face of immense brutality, *The Passion of the Christ* (Gibson 2004) offers viewers a glimpse of Jesus's final twelve hours before and during his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Despite all the blood and gore, viewers are given a brief respite from these tough-to-watch scenes during the trial when Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate, the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judaea. As depicted in the film, Pilate cautiously traverses the murky waters of community judgment. Pilate is portrayed as an ambivalent man who faces a moral, ethical, and political dilemma: should he sentence Jesus to death and risk sparking unrest?

Informed by scenes in the film and a close examination of the four canonical gospels, this paper argues that, by depicting Pilate as a sympathetic character with virtue and as a relatable human being faced with a momentous decision, *The Passion of the Christ* successfully conveys the intricate relationship between the ancient Mediterranean values of honour and shame. Moreover, Pilate's decision-making throughout the film offers beginning New Testament scholars and theology students alike an accessible window into discussions of honour and shame. Providing viewers with a lively and engaging introduction to these dialectical concepts, the film reveals how Pilate successfully managed, defended, and carefully navigated his fear of dishonour. *The Passion of the Christ* thus provides a welcome perspective on Pilate in stark contrast to his often brutal, violent historical representations.

Central to sociopolitical life, religion and state in the ancient Mediterranean world were deeply interwoven into the fabric of everyday happenings. Due in part to the precarious nature of life during this period, religion offered stability, a sense of purpose, and to some extent mediated the many anxieties of an uncertain world gripped by a complex political, social, and religiously nuanced landscape informed by ancestral history and past-oriented cultural norms (LaFosse 2022). Although somewhat distinct from many contemporary Western understandings of these terms, embedded into the historical-cultural mosaic of ancient Greco-Roman life were principles of honour and shame. As Powell (2018) contends, honour was "[t]he pivotal value in the New Testament world" (33), a world "in which honor was to be prized above all else and shame was to be avoided at all costs" (33).

In the first-century Mediterranean world, honour—loosely referred to as one's public reputation, social status, and hierarchical, privilege-granting standing in the community—was directly tethered to shame because one's honour status impacted nearly every aspect of one's ancient life and contributed directly to one's life chances, way of being, and livelihood (Rohrbaugh 2010, 111). Rohrbaugh (2010, 112) and Powell (2018, 34) distinguish between the experience of being shamed and/or embarrassed and the larger notion of shame flowing from honour, the latter referring to the concern over one's honour status—a wise and

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commonsensical aspect of life to be concerned about if one wanted to protect one's family and community status. Powell (2018, 33) notes that honour could be ascribed through factors inside and outside of one's immediate control; for example, ethnicity, economic class, physical health, courage, virtuous behaviour, and charitable disposition, to name a few. Virtuous behaviour, i.e., one's sense of righteousness, moral capacity, and sound, ethical judgment, is especially relevant for our purposes here in analyzing the trial before Pilate and the broader Passion narrative. In this vein, let us now turn our attention to how governor Pilate successfully managed, defended, and carefully navigated his fear of dishonour and community judgement, both in the canonical gospels and in the film.

Consistent with the canonical gospels, in the film Jesus is seized by chief priests, elders (Matthew 27:1),<sup>2</sup> and scribes (Mark 15:1), and is delivered to Pilate by a "whole company" (Luke 23:1). Near the beginning of the film, he is first questioned by the High Priest, Caiaphas, who demands Jesus's crucifixion for the blasphemous activities he has allegedly engaged in and for claiming to be the Son of David, the Messiah (Gibson 2004, 27:47). Upon Jesus's deliverance to Pilate, the governor appears to be sympathetic, analytical, and sensitive to Jesus's plight—both in the canonical gospels and throughout the film. After being informed by Abenader late at night that there is trouble brewing "within the walls" (22:58), Pilate walks down a hallway with his wife, Claudia, who, upon taking his arm, pleads with him and says, "Don't condemn this Galilean. He's holy. You will only bring trouble on yourself" (38:05). Pilate responds, "Do you want to know my idea of trouble, Claudia? This stinking outpost, that filthy rabble out there" (38:13). Pilate demonstrates his concern for the possibility of riots breaking out, and this specific political problem he has on his hands is emphasized throughout the film.

Jesus, a popular teacher seized by the Jewish authorities on the eve of Passover—which celebrates God's deliverance of his people from Egyptian bondage—presents a tricky dilemma indeed. It is relatively easy for the viewer of the film to empathize with the delicate position Pilate is put in: must the governor satisfy the High Priest's demands and put to death a popular preacher who has come to celebrate the most holy holiday? As Pilate says in the film, he is backed into a corner: "If I don't condemn this man, I know Caiaphas will start a rebellion. If I do condemn him, then his followers may" (Gibson 2004, 47:27). Here, the governor is clearly concerned about his political future. The possibility of an uprising could have long-lasting social consequences, far-reaching political implications, and devastating effects on Pilate's honour status, community standing, and personal safety, including wide-ranging repercussions for his family. The film, whether intentionally or not, encourages the viewer to see Jesus as a sociocultural and political threat to Roman life.

However, it should be noted that the canonical gospels do not directly point to this—in fact, one could argue that in a close reading of the canonical gospels, it is not obvious to Pilate that Jesus is a threat, despite the scripture making it clear that Pilate is struggling with his decision and is a reasoned man who "wondered greatly" at Jesus's culpability (Matthew 27:14). Regardless, by accentuating Pilate's decision-making and highlighting his emotionally charged thought process, the film illuminates the concepts of honour and shame for a lay audience in ways that scripture alone may not do as effectively. But does the scripture effectively portray this struggle? An astute reader may very well make the claim

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<sup>2</sup> All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

that it is the people interpreting the scripture who struggle. Perhaps the gospel story is not a genre that explicitly states such things (i.e., themes of honour and shame).

At this juncture, it should be noted that there are two aspects of the film that are worth discussing in light of the concepts of honour and shame: Claudia's major role and Herod's brief appearance. Claudia, who appears nameless and only once in the Gospel of Matthew, tells her husband, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream" (Matthew 27:19). The film points viewers to this dream when we see Claudia stirring (Gibson 2004, 22:38) and jumping upright from bed (22:49). That is where the similarities end. In contrast to Claudia's brief and only mention in the Gospel of Matthew across all four canonical gospels, the film departs from the restrained scriptural depiction and instead gives Claudia a significant role in the Passion story. It is a role so substantial that we even see, at one point in the film, Claudia consoling Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as she hands them towels to assist them in their efforts to clean up Jesus's blood after his merciless beating (Gibson 2004, 1:00:13). Claudia appears to be a highly influential figure, one who actively supports her husband to strive to do the best he can under the circumstances and to behave in a noble, moral, and honourable manner. Pilate admits to Claudia that he is aware of Caesar's repeated warnings against bloodshed, is concerned about the possibility of a rebellion, and does not "want to cause an uprising" (48:04).

Perhaps the most powerful evidence concerning Claudia's influence on Pilate is when he is in front of the angry crowd that is demanding Jesus's punishment. Here, we witness Pilate's conflicting feelings when he turns his gaze toward Claudia on three separate occasions. Claudia appears in the doorway with a worried, concerned look on her face as her husband glances somberly in her direction (51:36). Later on, after the High Priest warns Pilate that he should crucify Jesus if he wants to stay in good company with Caesar (1:10:20), Pilate turns to Claudia once again with a look of concern (1:10:27). At this point, the people in the crowd begin to fight amongst each other (1:10:36), growing more restless each passing moment. Pilate turns back to Claudia yet again for guidance, comfort, and reassurance (1:12:14). Claudia's prominent role in the film succeeds in convincing the audience that Pilate is a man of integrity who does not want to personally pass judgment on or condemn Jesus. Despite this, Claudia ultimately fails in her efforts to convince her husband to spare Jesus's life.

Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and Perea, appears in the Gospel of Luke. As in the biblical account, in the film Pilate asks if Jesus is a Galilean (Gibson 2004, 43:41; Luke 23:6). To get out of this political mess and to avoid bringing shame to his family, Pilate passes responsibility over to Herod's jurisdiction (Gibson 2004, 43:49; Luke 23:7). Herod, not taking the situation seriously, mocks Jesus (Gibson 2004, 46:00; Luke 23:11) and returns him to Pilate. When viewed through the lens of honour and shame, Herod's brief appearance in the New Testament and in the film signifies the complex sociopolitical landscape of the Greco-Roman world. Perhaps "King" Herod, son of Herod the Great and grandson of Antipater the Idumaeon, does not have as much honour status and community standing to lose as Pilate does. Herod was born into a formal social position and inherited a high level of honour and social strata. However, this is also true of Pilate. As an elite political figure, Pilate was sent by Rome to enforce the presence of the Empire. However, this was still Herod's homeland. Pilate may be in a more vulnerable position whereby he is forced to take this

situation more seriously because the decision and resultant outcomes of the trial will directly impact his honour status, bring hazard to his political future, and risk his physical safety.

Pilate's virtuousness and good character is highlighted repeatedly in the film, something that the canonical gospels broadly convey but do not explicitly communicate. Pilate, as in the Gospel of Matthew, washes his hands and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood" (Gibson 2004, 1:12:02; Matthew 27:24). This phrase, found only in the Gospel of Matthew, is perhaps the most expressly stated form of rectitude one encounters in the scripture during the trial before Pilate. The film effectively utilizes this line from the Gospel of Matthew and gives the audience a clear sense of Pilate's honourable ideals. The film then departs from the scripture and takes Pilate's sense of righteousness to new heights, making obvious for the viewer where Pilate's mind is at. There are several instances in the film where Pilate shows a soft, caring side and is genuinely concerned for Jesus's physical well-being. For example, Pilate asks the High Priest, "Do you always punish your prisoners before they're judged?" (Gibson 2004, 39:04). Pilate seems truly surprised that the crowd wants Jesus to be sentenced to death, exclaiming, "Can any of you explain this madness to me?" (39:57). Pilate angrily turns to the crowd and shouts, "No! I will chastise him but then I will set him free" (51:40). The mob roars with displeasure. Pilate turns to his guard and says, "See to it that the punishment is severe, Abenader. But don't let them kill the man" (51:50).

After Jesus is taken to the courtyard and ruthlessly beaten and whipped, the guards bring him back to Pilate. Upon seeing Jesus's horrendous condition—bloodstained and battered beyond recognition—Pilate visibly winces and turns to Abenader in disbelief (1:08:28). Pilate proceeds to walk toward Jesus and takes him by the arm in a gesture of compassion (1:08:44). Pilate says, "Isn't this enough? Look at him" (1:09:14). The canonical gospels depict a logical and mindful Pilate who exercises sound, rational, and reasoned judgment—a Pilate who asks, "Why, what evil has he done?" (Luke 23:22; Mark 15:14). But the film seems to add an additional layer of empathic attitudes we do not clearly see in the scripture. Thus, one can argue that the film underscores ancient values of honour and shame by placing what appears to be an increasing emphasis on Pilate's purported morality and virtuousness. Still, since honour is about reputation, it must be visible virtue. The broader question of moral visibility is an interesting one to explore, albeit beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, when we critically examine Pilate's gestures, actions, demeanor, and spoken and unspoken mannerisms in the film, New Testament scholars are provided with an extra lens to flex their interpretive muscles.

In the film, Jesus is taken away from the roaring crowd, finds himself alone with Pilate, and is given a chance to explain himself (Gibson 2004, 41:21). Similar to the film, in all four canonical gospels Pilate asks Jesus a direction question: "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Gibson 2004, 41:42; John 18:33; Luke 23:3; Mark 15:2; Matthew 27:11). In the synoptic gospels, Jesus simply responds, "You have said so" (Luke 23:3; Mark 15:2; Matthew 27:11). However, in the film and in the Gospel of John, Jesus asks Pilate if this is an original question that he asks of his own accord or if this is a question he is asking because others have told him so (Gibson 2004, 41:48; John 18:34). It is particularly interesting that the film highlights this piece of dialogue in the Gospel of John.

When viewed through the lens of honour and shame, and in light of Claudia's prominent role in the film, it becomes apparent to the critical viewer that this oral exchange between Jesus and Pilate serves as a direct entry point into the central question the audience is left grappling with: Does Pilate have his suspicions that Jesus really is the Messiah? And if

so, will he act in good faith and behave virtuously towards this stranger he has just met minutes ago? Remarkably, when one closely examines the dialogue of the film, it becomes evident that Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of Jews on three separate occasions (Gibson 2004, 41:42, 42:17, 42:34). The viewer is left to wonder whether Pilate has been influenced by his wife's visions, and Jesus's probing response to Pilate's direct questioning highlights this tension. Underneath this exchange sits the wider cultural context and social landscape these two men find themselves in: an ancient Mediterranean world where honour and shame are dialectically interwoven at nearly every moment of one's life. For Pilate, this private encounter with Jesus proves to be a pivotal experience, one in which Pilate is nakedly exposed to the multi- and overdetermined nature of acting honourably. Here, Pilate is depicted as the vulnerable one, not Jesus. In this powerful scene, Pilate comes face to face—both literally and metaphorically—with his choice to pass or not to pass personal judgment on Jesus, regardless of what his politically oriented decision will be when pressured later by the crowd.

To conclude, the importance of honour cannot be overstated; it was a core value and a “prominent characteristic” in first-century Mediterranean life (Rohrbaugh 2010, 123). The positive side of shame, i.e., having ample concern for one's honour status, was a key facet of everyday life impacting for better or worse one's social, political, and economic clout. Distinct from many modern conceptualizations, the dialectical honour–shame relationship is something that many people are simply not as accustomed to today living in contemporary Western society. In sum, this critical film essay posits that *The Passion of the Christ*, when viewed through the lens of the ancient values of honour and shame, effectively introduces viewers to these foreign concepts. By drawing attention to the trial before Pilate, this paper, informed by a close reading of the canonical gospels, argues that Pilate's decision-making process throughout the film not only represents the inherent tensions of honour and shame, but also provides us a chance to better understand these highly nuanced ancient concepts. This essay suggests that reflective and reflexive analysis of *The Passion of the Christ* serves as an inviting, accessible pathway into these complex, multifaceted, and dynamic ideas for beginning New Testament scholars—an exploratory theological task that the scripture may struggle to offer at times for some audiences.

Of course, the focus on the trial before Pilate is just one aspect, as there are plenty of examples in the film one could explore further when looking at the overarching themes of honour and shame; other examples not investigated here include Judas's betrayal (Gibson 2004, 4:33), begging (32:00), and subsequent suicide (37:40); Peter's denial (29:25) and resting at the feet of Mary (31:15); as well as critical examination of Simon of Cyrene, the man who helped Jesus carry his cross (1:21:40). Furthermore, additional questions arise when we consider gender: since women embody shame, Claudia's behaviour both honours her husband and serves to maintain his honour, but, since Jesus dies such an awful death as an innocent man, is Pilate ultimately not honorable (in the film and/or in the Gospel of Matthew) despite her best efforts? Broadly speaking, the convoluted nature of the cultural background of the biblical text and the film could be contrasted more. Likewise, discussions surrounding Western individualistic thinking at odds with the collectivist thought of the gospel writers would also be worthwhile. Nevertheless, the trial before Pilate provides New Testament scholars with a fascinating point of entry, one which sheds light on how people living in ancient times worked hard to maintain their honour, wrestled with their fears of

dishonour, preserved and enhanced their social standing, and faced judgment from their communities with humility and courage.

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