

The Inclusion of Pilate in the Nicene Creed as Political and Theological Memory

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Abstract

This paper reconsiders the inclusion of Pontius Pilate in the Nicene Creed, arguing that his naming functions not merely as a historical marker but as a theological indictment of imperial violence and systemic injustice. Drawing on historical theology, creedal studies, and contemporary political hermeneutics, the study reveals how Pilate symbolises the enduring complicity of political power in the suffering of the innocent. The paper calls for renewed ethical engagement with this creedal confession, considering present-day structures of authority and injustice.

Contribution: This paper contributes to contemporary theological discourse by reframing Pontius Pilate's inclusion in the Nicene Creed as a critique of imperial complicity rather than mere historical reference. It advances creedal interpretation by linking ancient confessional theology to modern ethical and political concerns about systemic injustice and the misuse of power.

Keywords: Pontius Pilate, Nicene Creed, Imperial Violence, Political Theology, Christology, Theological Memory, Systemic Injustice

Introduction

The Nicene Creed, formalised at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and revised at Constantinople in 381 CE, was a pivotal development in early Christian doctrinal identity. It was composed in response to Christological controversies—most notably Arianismⁱ—which questioned the full divinity of Jesus Christ. The creed aimed to provide doctrinal unity for a rapidly expanding and diversely interpreted faith under the patronage of Emperor Constantineⁱⁱ. Its precise theological language and structural formulations became foundational to orthodoxy in both Eastern and Western traditionsⁱⁱⁱ (Pelikan, 1971; see Kelly, 1972). Within this creedal statement, the phrase "suffered under Pontius Pilate" stands out, not only as a historical reference but as the only mention of a specific human individual outside the Trinitarian framework. This inclusion is striking given the economy of the creed's language and its focus on divine persons and redemptive acts. Unlike other figures in the gospel narrative—such as Paul,

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Peter, Mary Magdalene, or Caiaphas—Pilate alone is named. The problem thus arises: why did the early church choose to name this Roman governor in its central confession of faith? (Wainwright, 1980; see also O'Collins, 2009).

This paper argues that the naming of Pontius Pilate is not merely an act of chronological anchoring—i.e., situating Jesus' crucifixion within Roman imperial time—but a theological judgment on imperial violence, legal injustice, and the human structures complicit in the suffering of the innocent. Pilate, as a Roman prefect^{iv}, represents the mechanisms of state-sanctioned power which, while appearing procedural, ultimately succumb to political convenience over moral truth (Wright, 1996; Rowe, 2009). His role in Jesus' trial and crucifixion is emblematic of the entwinement between religious unrest and imperial order, a dynamic still relevant in modern sociopolitical contexts. Methodologically, this study engages historical theology to trace the development and intent of creedal formulations; creedal studies to assess how confessional language encodes theological and ethical meaning; and political hermeneutics to interpret how figures like Pilate function symbolically within broader narratives of power, justice, and suffering (Moltmann, 1993; Tanner, 2001).

The Naming of Pilate in Creedal Tradition

The inclusion of Pontius Pilate's name in the Nicene Creed carries significant weight, serving not only as a historical locator for Christ's suffering but also as a theological and confessional statement that grounds the Passion narrative within a specific political and imperial framework.

Historical Function: Locating Christ's Suffering in Time

The naming of Pontius Pilate in the Nicene Creed serves a crucial historical function: it anchors the Passion of Christ within a specific moment in human history. In an age where mythology and theological abstraction frequently blurred the boundaries between historical events and symbolic meaning, the early Christian creeds aimed to assert the real, incarnate, and temporal nature of Christ's life and death. Naming Pilate identifies Jesus' crucifixion not as a mythological event but as an occurrence situated within the Roman imperial order.

References to Pontius Pilate in external historical sources such as Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) and Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.3)^v corroborate the existence of the Roman prefect of Judea who played a role in Jesus' trial and execution. Tacitus notes that "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius^{vi} at the hands of ... Pontius Pilatus, procurator of Judea" (Tacitus, 1971, p. 286). Such documentation affirms the historical veracity of Pilate's governorship and thus provides a fixed point in time through which the Passion narrative could be credibly located.

Early Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr (*First Apology* 35)^{vii}, even claimed that records of Jesus' crucifixion under Pilate could be found in Roman archives, further emphasising their concern to

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portray Christian claims as historically grounded. This was vital not only for defending against pagan critiques but also for differentiating the Christian message from mythological traditions that lacked historical rootedness.

Creedal Development: From Baptismal Confession to Ecumenical Creed

The early Christian communities developed various creedal formulations—initially simple and oral—that found expression in baptismal rites and catechetical instruction. These confessions often focused on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, central to the kerygma (apostolic proclamation). One of the earliest such formulas appears in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, where Paul relays a tradition, he “received”: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... he was buried ... he was raised on the third day.” Though Pilate is not mentioned, this text reflects the early impulse toward crystallising the salvific events of Jesus’ life into confessional language.

By the second century, more developed baptismal creeds emerged, notably the Old Roman Symbol and eventually the Apostles’ Creed, which includes the phrase “*suffered under Pontius Pilate.*” This formula predates the Nicene Creed and demonstrates the liturgical and theological traction the naming of Pilate had already gained. Scholars like J.N.D. Kelly (1972) notes that the Old Roman Creed likely served as a basis for the Nicene formulation, suggesting continuity in the confessional tradition.

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 CE represents the maturation of this trajectory. Here, the reference to Pilate is maintained: “... *he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried.*” This creed, forged in the crucible of theological disputes over Christ’s nature, retains the Pilate clause, underscoring its integral role in articulating both the historicity and redemptive purpose of Christ’s suffering. The phrase, placed immediately before the affirmation of Christ’s death and resurrection, forms a hinge between the incarnation and the atonement, situating the Passion within historical, theological, and salvific frameworks (Pelikan, 1971, pp. 175–176).

Theological Rationale: Combating Docetism and Affirming the Incarnation

The theological rationale for naming Pilate in the Creed is deeply connected to early Christian responses to Docetism, the belief that Christ’s physical body was merely an illusion and that his suffering was not genuine. This view, associated with certain strands of Gnosticism, threatened the foundational Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. If Christ did not truly suffer and die, the salvific efficacy of his Passion would be void. Against such tendencies, the early church emphasised the reality of Christ’s bodily existence and suffering. Naming Pilate served this purpose by locating Christ’s suffering in the real, political world. The crucifixion becomes not an abstract spiritual drama, but a judicial and political execution carried out by a Roman official. As Irenaeus contends in *Against Heresies* (3.19.3,

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see also 3.4.2), ^{viii}Christ must be fully human and fully divine to redeem humanity; his suffering must be real and public, not phantom-like or esoteric.

Thus, Pilate's name operates as a theological anchor, a marker of bodiliness, temporality, and visibility. It affirms that the Passion occurred under the authority of Roman law, in front of public witnesses, in a particular geopolitical setting. This insistence upon historicity confronts not only heretical views but also offers a pastoral assurance: the one who suffered for humanity entered fully into its condition, including its subjection to political violence and injustice (O'Collins, 2009).

The Christological debates of the fourth century, especially those surrounding Arianism, further illuminated the need to ground Jesus' identity and mission in his dual nature. The Pilate clause reminds the confessing community that Christ's death was not an accident of history or an unfortunate end to a moral teacher, but a willed entry into human suffering through structures of political power. As Moltmann (1993) observes, the crucifixion under Pilate signifies not just Jesus' death but his identification with the victims of history. In this light, Pilate is not merely a chronological signpost, but an emblem of empire, injustice, and the enduring question of how religious truth confronts political power.

Pilate as Confessional Witness

In sum, the naming of Pontius Pilate in the Nicene Creed carries profound significance across historical, theological, and hermeneutical dimensions. Historically, it provides a fixed point in Roman administration, corroborated by both biblical and extra-biblical sources such as Tacitus and Josephus (Kelly, 1972, p. 82; see Borgen, 1977, p. 89). Creedally, it links early baptismal formulas with the more developed ecumenical affirmations of the fourth century, tracing continuity from the *Old Roman Symbol* to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (Kelly, 1972, pp. 76–98). Theologically, it rebuffs heresies such as Docetism and affirms the incarnational depth of Christ's redemptive suffering, underscoring the historicity and reality of the Passion (Pelikan, 1971, pp. 112–115; see Moltmann, 1993, pp. 82–84). Far from being an incidental historical detail, the reference to Pilate serves as a confessional witness to the gospel's entanglement with real-world injustice (Wink, 1992, p. 48; Cavanaugh, 2009, pp. 45–46). It challenges the church not only to remember that Jesus suffered but to recall under whom he suffered—and what that means for Christian engagement with systems of power today (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 21–22; see Tanner, 2001, p. 57).

Pontius Pilate and the Politics of Power in the Gospels

The portrayal of Pontius Pilate across the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John offers a complex and multifaceted image of Roman imperial authority, judicial ambiguity, and moral failure. These narratives collectively frame Pilate as a political agent who embodies the tensions inherent in the Roman occupation of Judea and the exercise of imperial power over subject populations (Young, 2021,

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pp. 1-19). In the Synoptic tradition, particularly Mark 15, Pilate appears as a pragmatic yet conflicted official. Mark emphasises Pilate's reluctance to condemn Jesus, highlighting his attempts to absolve himself of responsibility through the symbolic washing of hands (Mark 15:15-16). This act, alongside his questioning of Jesus, underscores Pilate's internal conflict between the demands of Roman governance—maintaining order—and a sense of personal unease with the charges against Jesus (Evans, 2001, p. 234). Yet, despite his hesitation, Pilate ultimately capitulates to the crowd's pressure, illustrating the precarious balance between exercising authority and appeasing local political forces.

The Gospel of John presents a more philosophically nuanced Pilate, who engages Jesus in a series of dialogues that expose the political and existential dimensions of power. In John 18–19, Pilate interrogates Jesus about kingship and truth, moments that reveal the governor's awareness of his own limited sovereignty under the Roman imperial hierarchy and the performative nature of political power (Moloney, 1998, p. 181). This Pilate embodies a conflicted figure who recognises Jesus' innocence yet prioritises political expediency and the preservation of imperial peace over justice (Bauckham, 2008, p. 156). The ambiguity of Pilate's character—both weak and authoritative—reflects the complexity of Roman provincial governance. As a prefect, Pilate wielded considerable power but was ultimately accountable to the emperor and tasked with managing volatile local situations without provoking rebellion (Borgen, 1977, p. 89). This duality manifests in his vacillation and eventual submission to the crowd's demand, revealing how imperial officials often negotiated their authority through compromise and coercion rather than moral clarity.

Moreover, Pilate's political symbolism extends beyond his individual role to represent the broader structural injustices embedded within imperial rule. He functions as a cipher for the systemic abdication of moral responsibility by state power, where legality and justice become subordinate to the maintenance of control and order (Rowe, 2009, p. 112). The Gospels present Pilate as a tragic emblem of this system—his personal indecision and failure to act justly encapsulate the cruelty inherent in bureaucratic power structures that sacrifice the innocent to preserve the status quo. This depiction resonates with contemporary political theology, which sees Pilate as an archetype of state complicity in injustice, embodying how political systems legitimise violence under the guise of legality (Moltmann, 1993, p. 87). His role in the Passion narrative challenges readers to consider how political power can be both oppressive and complicit, implicating not only ancient Rome but also modern institutions in patterns of injustice and moral failure.

Imperial Violence and Theological Memory

The figure of Pontius Pilate in Christian theological reflection transcends his historical role as Roman prefect to become a profound symbol of imperial violence and the church's ongoing ethical and memorial engagement with political power. This section explores Pilate through the lens of political

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theology, examines the Christological significance of Jesus' suffering as a confrontation with imperial sovereignty, and considers how the church's memory of Pilate shapes its ecclesial witness.

Political Theology: Pilate as a Case Study of Empire and Moral Failure in Political Office

Political theology offers critical insights into the dynamic between religious belief and political authority, especially in contexts marked by systemic injustice and violence. Pilate emerges in this discourse as a paradigmatic figure embodying the moral failures and contradictions of empire. His governorship, or rather *praefectus*, is not merely an administrative role but a position fraught with ethical tensions between upholding justice and maintaining imperial control. As Jürgen Moltmann articulates in *The Crucified God*, Pilate's participation in Jesus' condemnation epitomises the tragic complicity of political agents who, despite moments of hesitation or personal doubt, ultimately enact or enable oppressive power structures (Moltmann, 1993, p. 82). Pilate's governance reflects an empire that prioritises stability and authority over justice and humanity, a systemic violence that renders the innocent vulnerable to legal and physical execution (Moltmann, 1993, pp. 83-84).

This interpretation aligns with Walter Benjamin's reflections on law and violence, where state power is often legitimised through the paradox of "law-making" and "law-preserving" violence, both mechanisms that maintain the existing order at the expense of justice (Benjamin, 1999, pp. 276–278). Pilate personifies this paradox: he wields the power to execute but lacks the courage or conviction to apply justice rightly, choosing instead to preserve the fragile peace of Roman rule. Contemporary political theologians extend this paradigm to critique modern political offices and bureaucracies, emphasising the recurrent risk of moral abdication when officials become instruments of state violence rather than guardians of justice (Cavanaugh, 2009, pp. 45-46). Pilate's story thus remains a cautionary exemplar of how imperial systems co-opt human agents, constraining their moral agency within institutional imperatives.

Christological Implications: Jesus' Suffering as a Confrontation with Imperial Sovereignty

The theological significance of Jesus' suffering under Pilate goes beyond the event's historicity; it encapsulates a radical confrontation between divine mission and imperial power. In this light, the Passion narrative reveals the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, symbolised most starkly in the figure of Pilate, the earthly representative of imperial sovereignty. N.T. Wright emphasises that Jesus' trial and crucifixion under Pilate are not mere historical contingencies but deliberate acts revealing the nature of Jesus' kingship and the violent resistance it provoked from imperial authorities (Wright, 1996, pp. 586–587). Jesus' refusal to acquiesce to the political expectations

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of Rome positions him as the subversive claimant to authority, exposing the fragility and illegitimacy of imperial domination. This Christological tension is further illuminated in John's Gospel, where Jesus' dialogue with Pilate explicitly frames the crucifixion as a judgment on competing sovereignties (John 18:36). Jesus states, "My kingdom is not of this world," thereby refusing the parameters of imperial power and instead revealing a transcendent reign rooted in truth and justice (Moloney, 1998, p. 185). Pilate's failure to understand this alternative kingship reflects the limitations of imperial logic.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his foundational work on liberation theology, insists that Jesus' Passion embodies God's solidarity with the oppressed, making the crucifixion a theological locus where divine justice confronts political violence (Gutiérrez, 1973, p. 74). Thus, Jesus' suffering under Pilate is not a passive acceptance of injustice but an active resistance that redefines power through self-giving love and redemptive sacrifice. This confrontation also invites reflection on the theology of the cross as a symbol of divine identification with victims of political and structural violence. As Moltmann argues, the crucifixion under Pilate exposes God's presence in suffering and challenges the church to recognise and oppose the violent structures that perpetuate injustice (Moltmann, 1993, pp. 90-91).

Theological Memory: How the Church's Memory of Pilate Implicates Ongoing Ecclesial Witness

The church's memory of Pontius Pilate is not merely a recall of historical fact but a living theological tradition that shapes ecclesial identity and moral responsibility. This memory functions as a form of theological witness, continually calling the church to confront and critique systems of power that mirror the imperial violence Pilate represents. Paul Ricoeur's concept of "memory and forgetting" highlights the importance of remembering events like Pilate's judgment as acts that shape communal identity and ethical consciousness (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 21-22). Remembering Pilate within the creedal confession thus becomes a call to vigilance against the temptations of complicity and silence in the face of injustice. Early Christian liturgy and creeds embed this memory in worship, ensuring that the narrative of Jesus' suffering "under Pontius Pilate" remains central to Christian confession and communal self-understanding (Wainwright, 1980, p. 99). This liturgical remembrance functions as a continual ethical summons, inviting believers to recognise the presence of imperial-like powers in their own contexts and to embody resistance through faithful witness.

Contemporary ecclesiological reflections build on this tradition, emphasising how the church's remembrance of Pilate challenges it to engage critically with political authorities and social structures that perpetuate injustice (Sobrinho, 2004, p. 56). For instance, liberation theologians interpret Pilate's role as a metaphor for state violence that the church must denounce and resist, grounding its mission in solidarity with the oppressed (Gutiérrez, 1973, p. 85). Moreover, this theological memory fosters an eschatological hope, reminding the church that while the empire may wield temporal power, ultimate

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justice and restoration belong to God (Tanner, 2001, pp. 45-46). The church's witness, informed by the memory of Pilate, is thus both prophetic and redemptive, calling for transformation while living in hopeful anticipation of God's final victory over injustice.

Contemporary Hermeneutical Reflections

Pilate's ambiguous role in the Gospels as both an agent and a reluctant victim of imperial power invites nuanced hermeneutical reflection on governance, ethical responsibility, and complicity within political systems. His portrayal exposes enduring tensions between law, authority, and moral conscience, challenging contemporary readers to critically engage with the dynamics of justice and power in modern states. Exploring Pilate's figure thus offers a vital lens through which to analyse the ethical dilemmas inherent in the exercise of state authority and the responsibilities of political actors today.

Relevance Today: Pilate and the Modern State

The figure of Pontius Pilate continues to resonate in contemporary theological discourse, serving as a potent symbol of bureaucratic violence and legal injustice that permeate modern states. Pilate's role in the Passion narrative—executing an innocent man under pressure from local authorities and crowds—mirrors the mechanisms through which state institutions today enforce systemic oppression, often under the guise of legality and order. Political theologian William Cavanaugh highlights that Pilate's bureaucratic authority typifies how modern states deploy legal systems to perpetuate violence while maintaining a veneer of legitimacy (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 74). This "banality of evil," a term popularised by Hannah Arendt, refers to how ordinary officials, caught in institutional webs, participate in oppression through administrative compliance rather than overt malice (Arendt, 1963, p. 279). In this light, Pilate symbolises the impersonal and depersonalised nature of state violence—a violence made possible by the silence and abdication of moral responsibility by those who serve it.

Similarly, Walter Wink interprets Pilate as an archetype of the "powers and principalities" in society, representing systemic evil that masks itself as neutral governance but enacts injustice and death (Wink, 1992, p. 48). The modern state, with its complex bureaucracies, legal codes, and enforcement apparatus, often perpetuates injustices through mechanisms that obscure the human cost behind procedures and policies. Thus, Pilate's question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38), can be read today as an indictment of legal and political systems that claim impartiality but often disregard justice and truth in practice. The failure to stand against oppressive structures constitutes a contemporary "washing of hands," reflecting ethical silence in the face of injustice (Moloney, 1998, p. 189).

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Ethical Implications: Re-Engaging the Creed as a Call to Resist Political Complicity and Moral Apathy

Re-engagement with the Nicene Creed's mention of Pilate calls for a renewed ethical vigilance against complicity with unjust political systems. The creed is not merely a doctrinal statement but an invitation to confront the political realities under which Christians live and bear witness. As Kevin Vanhoozer argues, creeds function as "communicative memory," preserving not only theological truths but also ethical imperatives that shape Christian praxis (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 62). The remembrance of Pilate in the creed thus implicates the Christian community in the ongoing struggle against political systems that perpetuate injustice and suffering.

This ethical imperative resonates strongly with Johann Baptist Metz's concept of "dangerous memory," which insists that Christian memory must recall not only salvific events but also the realities of human suffering and oppression, thereby motivating resistance (Metz, 1985, p. 40). The creed's naming of Pilate embodies such dangerous memory, refusing to sanitise the Passion narrative and compelling believers to recognise their own potential complicity in systems that "crucify" the innocent today.

Moreover, contemporary ethicists like Stanley Hauerwas emphasise the church's role as a countercultural community that must reject the logic of empire and refuse to participate in its violence, a call directly linked to the memory of Pilate's betrayal (Hauerwas, 2001, p. 94). The ethical implications of the creed thus extend beyond private belief to public witness, challenging Christians to act courageously against injustice and to refuse moral apathy.

Creeds as Moral Catalysts: Moving Beyond Doctrinal Repetition to Ethical Responsiveness

Traditionally, creeds have been perceived as doctrinal formulas, repeated in worship to affirm orthodox belief. However, recent theological scholarship advocates for understanding creeds as active moral catalysts that provoke ethical reflection and transformation. The work of Gordon Lathrop, for example, reclaims the creedal confession as a dynamic "performative utterance" that shapes identity and action within Christian communities (Lathrop, 1993, p. 108). The mention of Pilate within the creed is not an inert historical detail but a summons to embody resistance against imperial and systemic injustice in the present.

This approach aligns with practical theology's emphasis on the embodied nature of faith, where doctrinal affirmations compel ethical behaviour and social engagement (Gustafson, 1994, p. 157). The creed, therefore, functions as a hermeneutical and ethical lens through which believers discern and confront the powers that perpetuate suffering. Reclaiming the creed's ethical force is essential for counteracting tendencies toward rote repetition that can dull its prophetic edge. By remembering "who" Pilate was and

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the injustice he represented, the creed challenges communities to refuse complicity and to live faithfully in the tension between worldly power and divine justice (Tanner, 2001, p. 57).

Moreover, this ethical reclaiming of the creed reflects the shift from static orthodoxy to lived orthopraxis. Kathryn Tanner rightly insists that theological claims must never exist in abstraction but must be embedded within systems of moral accountability and public witness (Tanner, 2010, p. 92). This means that confessing “suffered under Pontius Pilate” becomes a moral indictment of structures that mirror Pilate’s indifference to justice—whether in apartheid regimes, neoliberal economies, or carceral states. In this light, the creed does not merely convey belief; it communicates responsibility.

Further, when the creeds are located within the liturgical and communal life of the church, their ethical weight becomes even more pronounced. As James Cone argued, theology is always accountable to suffering bodies; thus, creedal statements must also be measured by their capacity to inspire concrete solidarity with the marginalised (Cone, 1975, p. 132). Creeds then serve not only as theological memory but also as moral imagination, inviting believers to reenact their confession through ethical responsiveness in their contexts.

Consequently, the recitation of the creed ought to function not as a passive affirmation, but as a subversive act, forming communities that challenge oppressive systems rather than accommodate them. This transformative reading invites a retrieval of the creeds not only for doctrinal fidelity but for prophetic witness. As Volf (2011) suggests, doctrinal language must serve the purposes of reconciliation and justice, or it risks betraying the very gospel it seeks to proclaim (p. 66). To that end, ethical responsiveness must not be seen as an optional application of doctrine but as its very fulfilment.

Final Remarks

This study has traced the multifaceted significance of naming Pontius Pilate in the Nicene Creed, demonstrating that this reference transcends mere historical anchoring to embody a profound theological indictment of imperial violence and systemic injustice. Historically, the naming situates the Passion narrative within a concrete political reality, corroborated by both biblical and extrabiblical sources, thereby affirming the historicity of Christ’s suffering. Creedally, it reflects the evolution of early Christian confession, maintaining continuity from baptismal formulas to ecumenical creeds while safeguarding orthodox Christology against heresies like Docetism. Theologically, Pilate functions as a symbol of imperial power’s moral failure—an archetype of political complicity in injustice whose ambivalence and abdication reveal the pervasive cruelty of empire. Christ’s suffering under Pilate constitutes a radical confrontation with imperial sovereignty, exposing the limitations of worldly power and unveiling an alternative kingdom rooted in truth, justice, and self-giving love. Furthermore, the church’s ongoing memory of Pilate, embedded within liturgical confession and creedal repetition, serves as a vital ethical summons. It challenges contemporary believers to resist political complicity, silence,

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and moral apathy, urging active engagement with structures of injustice in light of the cross. The creedal mention of Pilate, far from being an inert historical detail, thus functions as a moral catalyst, calling the church to faithful witness and prophetic resistance. In reiteration, naming Pilate in the Nicene Creed is a deliberate theological act of protest. It bears witness to the suffering of the innocent under imperial domination and refuses to separate the gospel from the realities of political violence and systemic injustice. This confessional inclusion invites the church to remember not only what happened to Christ but under whose authority it happened—and to respond accordingly in both word and deed.

Appendices / Additions

Appendix A: Timeline of Creedal Developments

Date	Event / Creed	Significance
c. 150 CE	<i>Old Roman Symbol</i> (early baptismal formula)	(early Mentions Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate"; affirms historicity of Christ's Passion.
c. 180 CE	Irenaeus' <i>Rule of Faith</i>	Includes references to Pilate; emphasizes apostolic continuity and anti-Gnostic polemic.
325 CE	<i>Nicene Creed</i> (Council of Nicaea)	First ecumenical creed; focuses on divinity of Christ but does not yet include Pilate.
381 CE	<i>Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed</i> (Council of Constantinople)	Expands the Nicene Creed; explicitly states: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate," integrating historical and theological dimensions.
5th–6th c.	<i>Apostles' Creed</i> (Latin West)	Consolidates earlier formulas; Pilate's name retained as theological constant.
Post-8th c.	Creedal usage in Liturgy	Creed recited in Eucharistic liturgy; Pilate's name embedded in weekly worship, reinforcing theological memory.

(Kelly, J.N.D., 1972. *Early Christian Creeds*. London: Longman, pp. 76–98).

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Appendix B: Chart of Pilate's Portrayal Across the Gospels

Gospel	Characterization of Pilate	Key Themes / Verses
Mark	Hesitant but ultimately pragmatic, releases Barabbas under pressure.	he Mark 15:1–15 – Pilate marvels at Jesus' silence; gives in to the crowd.
Matthew	Publicly washes his hands, influenced by his wife's dream.	Matt 27:11–26 – Attempts to exonerate himself from guilt.
Luke	Declares Jesus innocent three times; tries to delegate to Herod.	Luke 23:1-25 emphasizes Pilate's legal hesitation and pressure from leaders.
John	Engages Jesus in philosophical dialogue; cynically asks "What is truth?"	John 18:28–19:16 – Portrays deeper tension between Jesus' authority and Roman power.

(**Note:** Across all four Gospels, Pilate is portrayed as ambivalent, torn between conscience and political expediency.)

Appendix C: Short Excursus – Pilate in Later Christian Memory

While Pilate's role in the New Testament is central to the Passion narratives, later Christian traditions greatly expanded his legacy—often in contradictory ways.

- **The Acts of Pilate (c. 4th century):** Part of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, this text presents Pilate more sympathetically, with some versions portraying him as a convert or as recognizing Jesus' divine status.
- **Coptic and Ethiopian Traditions:** In the *Coptic Pilate Cycle*, Pilate and his wife (often named Procla or Claudia) are venerated as saints. The *Ethiopian Synaxarium* commemorates them on June 25.
- **Medieval Western Christianity:** Pilate became a cautionary figure in medieval passion plays and sermons—symbolizing judicial cowardice and moral compromise. He is often depicted as tormented or doomed in medieval Christian imagination.
- **Modern Rehabilitations:** In some 19th and 20th-century literature and theology, Pilate is reinterpreted as a tragic figure caught in the machinery of power—an interpretive trend that reflects growing interest in bureaucratic ethics.

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ⁱ Arianism was a fourth-century Christological controversy initiated by Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria, who argued that the Son was a created being, not co-eternal with the Father, and therefore ontologically subordinate (Williams, 2001; Anatolios, 2011). Rejecting the doctrine of *homoousios* ("of the same substance") affirmed by emerging orthodoxy, Arius maintained that "there was a time when the Son was not," thus challenging the eternal divinity of Christ (Pelikan, 1971). This theological divergence prompted the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, where bishops, under imperial patronage, condemned Arianism and established the Nicene Creed, affirming the full divinity and eternal generation of the Son (Ayres, 2004; Kelly, 1972). Despite its condemnation, Arian theology persisted through various imperial and ecclesiastical support, particularly under Emperor Constantius II and among Germanic tribes who adopted it through missionary activity (Frend, 1984). The controversy not only revealed deep philosophical tensions in early Trinitarian theology but also reflected the complex interplay between ecclesiastical doctrine and imperial politics in Late Antiquity.

ⁱⁱ Emperor Constantine I (c. 272–337 CE), also known as Constantine the Great, was a pivotal figure in both Roman imperial history and the development of Christianity. The son of Constantius Chlorus and Helena, Constantine rose to power during the Tetrarchic period, eventually becoming sole emperor by 324 CE after defeating rivals including Maxentius and Licinius (Barnes, 1981; Odahl, 2004). His reign marked a significant transformation in the religious landscape of the empire, most notably through the **Edict of Milan** in 313 CE, which granted religious tolerance to Christians and effectively ended state-sponsored persecution (Drake, 2000). Constantine's involvement in ecclesiastical matters, particularly the **Council of Nicaea in 325 CE**, revealed his vision of a unified empire under a unified Church, blending imperial authority with Christian orthodoxy (Leithart, 2010; see, Roldanus, 2006). While debates persist over the sincerity of his conversion, Constantine's patronage of Christianity—including the construction of major basilicas and granting privileges to clergy—fundamentally reshaped the relationship between Church and state, laying the groundwork for Christendom (MacCulloch, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Orthodoxy, rooted in the early ecumenical councils (notably Nicaea 325 and Chalcedon 451), refers to the correct or "right" belief in Christian doctrine as upheld by the historic church. Both Eastern and Western traditions claim apostolic continuity and adherence to these creeds but have developed distinctive theological emphases and ecclesial expressions over time. The Eastern Orthodox Church emphasizes theosis (deification), mystical theology, and continuity of Holy Tradition, including the liturgy, icons, and the consensus of the Church Fathers. It often employs a more apophatic approach to theology, stressing the mystery of God beyond human comprehension (Lossky, 1976, pp. 45–47). The Western (Roman Catholic) tradition historically stresses juridical and systematic formulations, focusing on the legal status of the Church, original sin, and the role of the papacy as a central authority. The West tends toward a more cataphatic (positive) theology, emphasizing clear doctrinal definitions and scholastic reasoning (Pelikan, 1971, pp. 210–213). While sharing core Christological and Trinitarian doctrines, the two traditions diverge in ecclesiology, liturgical praxis, and theological methodology, reflecting their unique historical and cultural trajectories.

^{iv} The distinction between a Roman prefect (*praefectus*) and a Roman governor lies primarily in their rank, scope of authority, and administrative context. Prefects, such as Pontius Pilate in Judaea, were typically of the equestrian class and appointed directly by the emperor to oversee strategically sensitive or militarized provinces with limited autonomy, often combining military, judicial, and fiscal responsibilities (Millar, 1993; Goodman, 2007). In contrast, Roman governors—whether titled *proconsul*, *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, or *praeses*—were usually from the senatorial class and held broader civil, judicial, and administrative authority over Roman provinces (Richardson, 1992; Lendon, 1997). Governors of senatorial provinces, such as Gallio in Achaia (Acts 18:12), were appointed by the Senate, while those of imperial provinces with legions were appointed by the emperor. Egypt, though a major province, was an exception, governed by a prefect due to its strategic

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importance and status as the emperor's personal domain (Bowman, 1986). These administrative distinctions reflected broader imperial priorities and class hierarchies in the Roman world, with prefects typically serving in regions requiring direct imperial oversight and governors presiding over more established territories.

^v In *Annals* 15.44, the Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the early 2nd century CE, refers to Christus, who "suffered the extreme penalty" under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius, providing one of the earliest non-Christian attestations of Jesus' execution (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Woodman, 2004). In *Antiquities* 18.3, the Jewish historian Josephus, writing around 93/94 CE, briefly mentions Jesus, "a wise man" who was crucified under Pilate, though scholarly debate continues regarding later Christian interpolations in this so-called *Testimonium Flavianum* (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3; Feldman, 1980; Meier, 1991).

^{vi} Tiberius Julius Caesar (42 BCE – 37 CE) was the second Roman emperor, succeeding Augustus as the ruler of the Roman Empire from 14 CE until his death in 37 CE. As stepson and heir of Augustus, Tiberius consolidated the imperial system established by his predecessor, overseeing a relatively stable but increasingly autocratic regime marked by a cautious and sometimes repressive style of governance (Shotter, 1997; Syme, 1939). His reign saw significant military campaigns along the empire's frontiers and the continuation of centralized imperial administration. Notably, Tiberius was the emperor during the historical period of Jesus' public ministry and crucifixion, making his rule an essential chronological marker in New Testament studies (Bird, 2005).

^{vii} Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 CE) was an early Christian apologist and philosopher who sought to defend Christianity against pagan criticisms and to explain Christian beliefs to Roman authorities. His *First Apology*, addressed to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons, is one of the earliest Christian apologies. In chapter 35 of the *First Apology*, Justin provides a detailed explanation of Christian worship practices. He emphasizes the community's gathering on "the day of the sun" (Sunday) for prayer, reading of the memoirs of the apostles or the prophets, and the Eucharist. Justin describes the Eucharist as a thanksgiving meal, in which the bread and wine are believed to be the "flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh," affirming an early Christian belief in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. This chapter is significant for illustrating early Christian liturgical life and theology, reflecting continuity with apostolic traditions, and distinguishing Christian worship from pagan rites. Justin's detailed account also serves to counter Roman misconceptions about Christian practices and to argue for their moral and spiritual value.

^{viii} As Irenaeus argued against Gnostic and Docetic views, redemption depends on the real, incarnate, and public suffering of Christ, not a phantom-like appearance (cf. *Against Heresies* 3.19.3), since "what is not assumed is not healed" (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101). A merely apparent or esoteric suffering undermines both the justice of God and the possibility of true human restoration (Kelly, 1972; O'Collins, 2009). Therefore, the full divinity and humanity of Christ, and the historical reality of the crucifixion, are essential to early Christian understandings of atonement and incarnation. In *Against Heresies* 3.4.2, Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the late 2nd century CE, defends the apostolic tradition against Gnostic interpretations by asserting the continuity of Christian teaching from the apostles to the bishops, particularly highlighting the authority of the Roman Church, which he describes as possessing "preeminent authority" (*principalitas*) due to its apostolic foundation by Peter and Paul (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.4.2; Grant, 1997). This passage is central to early ecclesiological and episcopal claims, later informing Catholic doctrines of apostolic succession and Roman primacy (Osborn, 2001).

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