JURNAL JAFFRAY
Vol. 20, No. 1 (April 2022): 1-16
pISSN: 1829-9474; eISSN: 2407-4047

Available Online at
http://ojs.sttjaffray.ac.id/index.php/JJV71/index
DOI: 10.25278/jj.v20i1.644

The Functional Characterization of Pilate and The Kingship of Jesus in John 18-19

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Received: 24 January 2022/ Accepted: 26 March 2022/ Published: 07 April 2022

Citation (APA Styles): Christopher, D. (2022). The Functional Characterization of Pilate and The Kingship of Jesus in John 18-19. *Jurnal Jaffray*, *20*(1), 1-16. http://doi.org/10.25278/jj.v20i1.644

Abstract

Scholars generally interpret the character of Pilate (John 18-19) in terms of his personality traits. He is seen either as having a strong character or a weak one. This article seeks to understand his character differently by seeing his function within the narrative of John 18-19. This article argues that John employs Pilate as his narrative medium to ironically and gradually depict Jesus's kingship over the Jews and show his kingship as superior to the Roman emperor.

Keywords: Authority, Characterization, Irony, Kingship, Pilate.

Abstrak

Para ahli umumnya menafsir karakter Pilatus (Yoh. 18-19) berdasarkan ciri-ciri kepribadiannya. Ada yang melihat Pilatus sebagai sosok yang memiliki karakter yang kuat, namun ada pula yang melihatnya sebagai karakter yang lemah. Artikel ini mencoba untuk memahami karakter Pilatus secara berbeda: dengan melihat fungsi Pilatus dalam naratif Yohanes 18-19. Argumen dari artikel ini adalah Yohanes menggunakan Pilatus sebagai medium naratifnya untuk menjelaskan secara ironis dan gradual status raja dari Yesus atas orang-orang Yahudi dan superioritas status raja tersebut atas kaisar Romawi.

Kata-kata Kunci: Otoritas, Karakterisasi, Ironi, Kerajaan, Pilatus

Introduction

How can we study the character of Pilate in the Gospel of John? In his commentary, Francis Moloney says that the seemingly contradicting facts and actions of Pilate in the end, "may not make much sense of Pilate's

psychological coherence."[1] A brief survey of opinions may explain Moloney's statement.[2] Some see Pilate as someone who is a bit weak, or gradually becomes weak while facing the Jews.[3] He is a neutral and honest person who, unfortunately, has to stand between Jesus and the Jews, and reluctantly makes a decision he dislikes. Others have argued that Pilate's character is strong.[4] He has little or no interest in releasing Jesus. His exchanged conversations with the Jews are full of mocking and ridicules. Jesus then, is more or less Pilate's tool of the mockery game. And even within each camp, differing suggestions regarding the mental state of Pilate exist.

In response to this problem, others have argued that a more fruitful approach is to understand Pilate's character in terms of his function within the narrative and theology of John.[5] In other words, a coherent

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[1] Francis J. Moloney, *Glory Not Dishonor: Reading John 13-21* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 141.

[2] See also, Arthur M. Wright, "What Is Truth? The Complicated Characterization of Pontius Pilate in the Fourth Gospel," *Review and Expositor* 114, no. 2 (2017): 211–214.

[3] E.g., Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 864; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John* (London: SPCK, 1955), 448; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 143; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 110; D. Francois Tolmie, "Pontius Pilate: Failing in More Ways Than One," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 595, 596; Mavis M. Leung, "Language and Characterization in the Roman Trial Narrative: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Pilate's Dialogues with the Jewish Leaders and Jesus in John 18:28-19:16a," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 29, no. 4 (2019): 533–534.

[4] E.g., David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1989), 92; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (Edinburgh: T&T CLark, 2005), 464; Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 174–175; Christopher Tuckett, "Pilate in John 18-19: A Narrative Approach," in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Text*, ed. G. J. Brooke and Jean-Daniel Kaestli (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 132; Cornelis Bennema, "The Character of Pilate in the Gospel of John," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 250–251; Gilberto A. Ruiz, "Why Is Pilate So Afraid in John 19:8? Pilate's Fear and the Dynamics of Power in John 18:28-19:16," in *Narrative Mode and Theological Claim in Johannine Literature: Essays in Honor of Gail R. O'Day*, ed. Lynn R. Huber, Susan E. Hylen, and William M. Wright (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 40.

[5] Martinus C. de Boer, "The Narrative Function of Pilate in John," in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Text*, ed. G. J. Brooke and Jean-Daniel Kaestli (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 141–158.

description of Pilate's mental state will not be found since it is not the author's concern. His major concern is how to shape Pilate's story, hence achieving a certain theological message. So how can we study the character of Pilate in the Gospel of John?

In this article, I will follow one of the alternatives to read the character of Pilate, that is, by focusing on his narrative function to decipher the theological theme of John 18-19. My thesis is that John uses Pilate as his narrative medium to ironically and gradually depict (1) Jesus's kingship over the Jews who reject their king; and (2) Jesus's kingship as far more superior than the Roman emperor.

Theory: On Character and Characterization

Basically, there are a number of opinions regarding the nature of the character in narrative literature.[6] First, a more traditional view sees the character as subordinate to a story plot. Character is functional in its nature. It has certain commissions and tasks to be done within the story. Since the storyline is the main feature, everything else should be understood in terms of the building of the storyline. In other words, the question to be answered is "what is the function of the character within a certain plot?"

Second, others argue that a character is more than just functionary. It is not subordinate to the plot in the story. A character has its own being, with certain traits and personalities, similar to the person in reality.[7] The question then from this perspective is "what is the trait(s) of the character? How do we describe his or her mental state?"

The brief survey above exemplifies the two types of character study. Studies that conclude that Pilate is either strong or weak are basically an autonomous approach. They try to describe Pilate's mental state or

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[6] See the discussion in F. W. Burnett, "Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospel," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 4–19; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 31–36; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 108–119.

[7] Even here, scholars are divided whether a literary character is referential/mimetic (existing in some way outside the text) or nonmimetic (existing only within the text) in nature (See, for example, Michal Beth Dinkler, "Building Character on the Road to Emmaus: Lukan Characterization in Contemporary Literary Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 3 (2017): 694–696).

psychological trait(s). But others argue that this approach is less fruitful. As quoted above, Moloney thinks one cannot find a psychological coherent in the characterization of Pilate.[8] R. Alan Culpepper also argues within a similar line, stating that besides Jesus and God as the main characters, other characters mainly appear to depict Jesus and to respond to him. Thus, it seems better to understand them with regard to their function within the plot.[9]

For this camp, the question is "what is the narrative function of the Johannine portrayal of Pilate?" Though more traditional, such an approach is helpful in unlocking the theological message which John intends to convey in his narrative.[10] Thus, this article will follow the latter line of inquiry.

Method

The basic approach in this paper is narrative criticism. In narrative criticism, one will focus mainly on the text itself, on how the story is told. Thus, it is a synchronic approach, focusing on the final, given text. It also assumes the text as a coherent whole and is crafted skillfully in terms of its literary features.[11] One specific area of narrative criticism is the study of character and characterization (how a character is described and constructed within the story).[12] In the case of Pilate, I will analyze his speeches, acts, and any references to his mental state. It is through this approach that I will evaluate the character of Pilate and hopefully gain a fruitful result.

In John, as in any narrative, each character has a certain function/role within a certain narrative. Hence a functional approach is necessary. One of the basic functions of the characters in John is to depict

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[8] This explains why Moloney is hesitant to describe Pilate's personality traits (whether Pilate is strong or weak). The downfall is that his Pilate seems to be mechanic, without any real personality qualities which the reader can relate to. This is quite ironic since the approach of his commentary is narrative, which includes answering the question of how the reader might respond to the Gospel.

[9] Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 102.

[10] de Boer, "The Narrative Function of Pilate in John," 142.

[11] Mark A. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 1–10; Armand Barus, "Analisis Naratif: Apa Dan Bagaimana?," *Forum Biblika* 9 (1999): 48–60; James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 17–21.

[12] James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 121–132.

their response to Jesus. Any inquiries to a functional approach should analyze the response of the character to Jesus.

Although functional, each character has its own dynamic and context in their response to Jesus, hence opening a room for autonomy. Although there are only two kinds of responses, receiving Jesus or rejecting him, each response is unique and arrived from a different dynamic within the story. Pilate's rejection of Jesus is different from Judas's. Likewise, Nicodemus's allegiance to Jesus is different from the healed blind man, and the disciples.

In John, the character of Pilate appears in four episodes. All happens in the context of Jesus' passion narrative from the trial, crucifixion, until burial (John 18:28-19:16a; 19:16b-22; 19: 31, 38). In this article, I will only analyze the first two narratives where Pilate is present: Pilate's trial of Jesus (18:28-19a) and the crucifixion of Jesus, in particular the incident regarding the inscription on the cross (19:16b-22). It is in these two pericopes that the theme of kingship appears.[13] I will observe the outline, structure, and context of Pilate's role. Then, I will analyze Pilate's character. The goal is to understand John's depiction of Pilate in terms of its function within the gospel's narrative. Special attention will be given to the theme of kingship within the narrative dynamics. Finally, I will evaluate Pilate's functional characterization within the larger context of the whole gospel of John and its theology. This will help us understand the part within the whole as well as validate our interpretation of Pilate and his role in John 18-19.

Result and Discussion

The Pilate Story as Narrated in John

The first bulk, and the most extensive one, is the story of Jesus' trial (John 18:28-19:16a). It is common among commentators to divide this episode into seven scenes, with the outside/inside setting (Pilate-the

[13] While the character of Pilate also appears in 19:31 and 38, there is no reference to the theme of kingship in both texts. In John 19:31, Pilate is a passive character being asked by the Jews to break the legs of Jesus and others who were crucified with him. In John 19:38, he is mentioned as the one who gave permission to Nicodemus to take down the body of Jesus from the cross.

Jews/Pilate-Jesus) as the general marker.[14] An outline will help us see the context better.

Table 1. Jesus's Trial Before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16)

Scene 1 (18:28-32)	Outside: The Jews demand Jesus's death from Pilate
Scene 2 (18:33-38a)	Inside: Pilate questions Jesus's about his kingship
Scene 3 (18:38b-40)	Outside: Pilate declares Jesus's innocence; the Jews opt for Barabbas
Scene 4 (19:1-3)	Inside: Pilate orders Jesus to be flogged
Scene 5 (19:4-8)	Outside: Pilate declares Jesus' innocence; the Jews declare a second motif
Scene 6 (19:9-11)	Inside: Pilate questions Jesus again, seek to release him
Scene 7 (19:12-16a)	Outside: the Jews 'blackmail' and question Pilate's loyalty Pilate accepts the demand of the Jews to execute Jesus

In scene 1, Pilate begins the trial formally ("What accusation do you bring..."-18:29).[15] In reply, the Jews try to convince Pilate that Jesus is really a criminal, without stating his crime specifically. Pilate then suggests the Jews to judge Jesus according to their own law since he has no interest in their problem. But Pilate changes his mind when he realizes that it involves a death sentence, which can only be authorized by him.[16] Scene one seems to function as the setting for the narrative. Here, the theme of kingship has not emerged yet.

In scene 2, the theme of kingship immediately appears in the first speech of Pilate. He asks whether Jesus is the king of the Jews (18:33). While Pilate is searching for facts about the accusation, Jesus searches for Pilate's personal response (18:34). Pilate, however, refuses to take a personal involvement. Instead, he takes a distance from the Jewish issue

[14] Tolmie, "Pontius Pilate," 582; Bennema, "The Character of Pilate," 241; Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 458; Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, 105–106; Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI*, 859.

[15] Unless stated otherwise, Scripture quotations are taken from NRSV.

[16] Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1972), 559–560.

("I am not a Jew, am I?" – 18:35).[17] Pilate is only concerned about political security. When Pilate asks a different question, concerning Jesus's activity, Jesus refuses to answer. Instead, Jesus returns to the first topic (his kingship) and declares that his kingdom is not originated from the world (18:36). Pilate searches for political kingship and threat, while Jesus explains about his kingship, which is of a different origin (heavenly kingship).[18] Since Pilate still focuses on the basic accusation, he concludes that Jesus is indeed claiming to be a king ("so you are a king?" – 18:37). For Jesus, he is truly a king, but not in the sense of what Pilate understands. Jesus then explains in a different category about his rule and purpose: to testify for the truth. In the Gospel of John, we learn that this truth is about Jesus himself, that he is from the Father, and that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. One must choose whether he is with the truth or not, and Pilate is not excluded from Jesus' invitation ("everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" – 18:37). Yet Pilate regards this as the least important information. His most important question ("what is truth?") is asked with the least interest.

In scene 3, Pilate then concludes that Jesus is politically harmless (18:38b). He uses the custom to grant freedom for a prisoner, thus settling both sides. When attempting to release Jesus, Pilate somehow uses the phrase "king of the Jews" to refer to Jesus (18:39). The only problem is that his plan backfires.[19] Upon hearing the phrase, the Jews demand the crucifixion of Jesus. They prefer to free Barabbas, a bandit, instead of Jesus, the king of the Jews.

After the failed attempt, Pilate orders Jesus to be flogged as an act of compromise (scene 4). During the torment, the theme of kingship continues to be present and gradually becomes stronger. First, the soldiers place a mock crown on Jesus, and they clothe him with a purple robe, both of which symbolize kingship (19:2-3). Later they perform a faux salutation

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[17] Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 461; Edward W. Klink, *John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), chap. 39, Epub. Tolmie suggests that Pilate's response is due to his dislike of the Jews ("Pontius Pilate: Failing in More Ways Than One," 586). This is less likely, since in John's Gospel all other characters are evaluated in light of their response to Jesus.

[18] Klink, *John*, chap. 39; Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 462.

[19] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word, 1987), 332–333; Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, 107.

("Hail, the king of the Jews"). What started as a question about Jesus's kingship by Pilate is now being acted out, albeit mockingly.[20]

In his third hearing with the Jews (scene 5), Pilate decides to bring Jesus along, perhaps attempting to appease them by showing a tortured Jesus in his inglorious 'kingly' appearance (19:5). However, the Jews react in a more violent manner, insisting Jesus be crucified. Such a 'kingly' depiction of Jesus somehow intensifies the hate that they amass toward him. When Pilate refuses, they try another strategy. They accuse Jesus of offending their belief and law, by claiming himself to be the son of God (19:7).

Upon hearing the last statement, Pilate grows in fear (19:8). In general, there are two ways of interpreting the reason behind his fear. The first is that as a pagan, Pilate believes that the gods could visit the human world in human form, hence the phrase "son of god". Moreover, if this was true, then he had just flogged a divine man.[21] However, this interpretation seems odd with the overall theme and focus on Jesus's kingship. The second interpretation, which is more likely, is to read "son of god" in a political sense. By referencing Jesus as a son of god, Jesus is now not only being depicted as a king, but a divine king on par with Caesar since Caesar himself, as the Roman emperor, receives the title "son of god" (*divi filius*).[22] In the Greco-Roman milieu, the notion "son of god" mainly refers not to pagan deity but to Roman emperors. There are numerous ancient records that address Caesar as a son of god (whether in Latin *divi filius*, or in Greek *huios theou*).[23] In fact, Michael Peppard pushes further by arguing that the context of Roman emperors should be the "foreground" for understanding

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[20] Sehyun Kim, *The Kingship of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), 154; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 336–337; Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 598; Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 465.

[21] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 600; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 338–339; Klink, *John*, chap. 40.

[22] Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 46–47; Kim, *The Kingship of Jesus*, 153; Laura J. Hunt, *Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of the Johannine Trial Narrative* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2019), 180.

[23] Bruce W. Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians' Responses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 167–170; Michael Peppard, "Son of God in Gentile Contexts (That Is, Almost Everywhere)," in *Son of God: Divine Sonship in Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, ed. Garrick V. Allen et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2019), 135–157.

the meaning of "son of god" in the New Testament.[24] By using the title, the Roman emperor would claim his divine origin and authority.

Pilates comes again to Jesus for another interrogation (scene 6). While the purpose of the first hearing is to search for any fact for accusation, the second hearing is more on Pilate's personal interest and safety. His first question ("Where are you from?") is one of the major themes in John's gospel. Jesus is from the Father above (John 5:23, 36; 10:18; 13:1, 3; 16:18). Yet Jesus refuses to answer. Agitated, Pilate now demands an answer, reminding Jesus of Pilate's authority over his life (19:10). Jesus's answer must have pushed Pilate more to the edge. Even if Pilate has such authority, it is actually given from above, that is, from the one with the highest authority (19:11). In the context of the Roman empire, Pilate receives his authority from the emperor, who in turn, receives his from the Roman god Jupiter.[25] Pilate, therefore, is supposed to represent the Roman Empire and its emperor in judging Jesus. However, Jesus's startling statement in 19:11 depicts a different picture. Unbeknownst to Pilate, his "authority" over Jesus derives from God the Father and his death sentence over Jesus follows the plan of the Father (cf. 18:32). Standing before Pilate is the true "son of God," (King Jesus, not the roman emperor) and the highest authority (God the Father, not Jupiter).[26]

It is at this point (scene 7) that Pilate is shown to seek to release Jesus (19:12a). Doubtless, his last interaction with Jesus causes his change of heart. While previously he tried to release Jesus without any personal involvement, now the situation differs. It is likely that Pilate now perceives Jesus as someone special and any wrong decision will affect Pilate's life. The Jews, though, also refuse to back down. Instead of focusing on Jesus, they now aim at Pilate's own life and political career. They question his faithfulness to Rome. If Pilate releases Jesus, a self-proclaimed king, he cannot be said to be a friend of Caesar, since he has just freed a rival to Caesar (19:12b). This is the second time that the statement of the Jews strikes the core of Pilate's heart. It begins to be clear

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[24] Peppard, "Son of God in Gentile Contexts," 137. He still thinks that the book of Psalms is the main context for the phrase, but the context of the Roman emperor is not far behind.

[25] Hunt, *Jesus Caesar: A Roman Reading of the Johannine Trial Narrative*, 184.

[26] Cf. Gilberto A. Ruiz, "Why Is Pilate So Afraid," 40; Kim, *The Kingship of Jesus*, 155; Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 289–290.

that Pilate places a higher value on his political safety and position than the "truth". Herein lies the dilemma. Pilate needs to choose whether to release or crucify Jesus.

Pilate once again brings Jesus out. When we compare Pilate's hearing with the previous one, we can see the drama intensifies around the theme of kingship.

Table 2. The Comparison between Scene 5 and Scene 7

Scene 5 (19:5-6)	Scene 7 (19:14-15a)
Pilate: Here is the man!	Pilate: Here is your King!
Jews: Crucify him! Crucify him!	Jews: Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!

First, instead of presenting Jesus as "the man" (19:5), he now declares, "here is your king" (19:14). Second, as Pilate sticks to his opinion regarding Jesus, the Jews also hold firm to their intention, demanding the execution of Jesus even more. John now records Pilate's final statement during the trial: "Shall I crucify your king?" (19:15b). Pilate consistently addresses Jesus as the king of the Jews, even until his last speech. Upon Pilate's final recorded speech, the Jews declare their most controversial statement of faith: they proclaim their loyalty to Caesar, the Roman emperor, as their sole king (19:15). By declaring their allegiance to Caesar, they inevitably state their disloyalty to YHWH their God. Hence, for this bargain, Pilate is willing to sacrifice Jesus. Jesus at last is handed for crucifixion. Pilate thinks he gains what he wants: the loyalty of the Jews, as well as personal and political security. The Jews believe they have achieved their goal. Yet, ironically, it is God's plan that succeeds. In one way or another, Jesus will go to the cross (18:32).

Scene 7 above ends the heated conversation between Pilate and the Jews on the trial of Jesus. However, Pilate's role does not end there. Narratively, he has one more important task: to make a public declaration of the kingship of Jesus. It is at the cross that the universal declaration of the kingship of Jesus ironically takes place. Generally, a sign would be written on the cross to show the reason for a person's crucifixion. As for

Jesus, Pilate writes, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (19:19).[27] The kingship theme does not find its climax at the trial. Rather, it finds its strongest expression through the words written as ordered by Pilate. The Jews protest and request a different wording, where Jesus is depicted as a fake claimant to the kingship (19:21). Pilate, however, refuses the request and holds firm to his decision ("what I have written, I have written" – 19:22).[28] What started as a personal interrogative question at the beginning of the trial ("are you the King of the Jews?") has now found its climax as a statement to be read by all people, as evidenced by the trilingual pronouncement in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (19:20).[29] In fact, Pilate's phrasing almost has the quality of scriptural authority in it. In John, the term *graphō* is often used to recall the Jewish Scripture (Old Testament).[30] Through Pilate, Jesus is proclaimed as king to all the people.

The Functional Characterization of Pilate: A Synthesis

What then is the function of the character of Pilate in John 18-19? There are at least four major findings from the analysis above. First, as noted by many, John uses the character of Pilate as his narrative medium to channel the theme of Jesus's kingship. Pilate is the one at the center of the issue, who goes back and forth between Jesus and the Jews debating the kingship of Jesus. His speeches and deeds are imbued with notions of kingship, albeit in an ironic manner. In total, there are 12 references to 'king' (*basileus*) in the trial and crucifixion narrative and half of them come from the speeches of Pilate.[31]

John 18:33	Are you the King of the Jews?
John 18:37	So you are a king?
John 18:39	Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?
John 19:14	Here is your King

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[27] Arthur M. Wright, *The Governor and the King: Irony, Hidden Transcripts, and Negotiating Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2019), 196–197. Some translations tone down Pilate's involvement regarding the wording of the inscription (e.g., NIV, NRSV). The Greek phrase in John 19:19, however, depicts Pilate's involvement in a more direct way (cf., ESV, NASB): "Pilate also wrote the inscription" (*egrapsen de kai titlon ho Pilatos*).

[28] *ho gegrapha, gegrapha*.

[29] Kim, *The Kingship of Jesus*, 157; Carter, *John and Empire*, 168.

[30] Wright, *The Governor and the King*, 199–200.

[31] *basileus* is mentioned once by Jesus (18:37), once by the soldiers (19:3), and four times by the Jews (19:12, 15, 21[2x]).

John 19:15 Shall I crucify your King?
John 19:19 Pilate also had an inscription written … It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

When we compare the total references to *basileus* in the gospel of John, the centrality of the role played by Pilate becomes more evident. Outside of the passion narrative, there are only four references to/about Jesus as king. In John 1:49, Nathanael declares directly to Jesus that he is indeed the King of Israel. Furthermore, when Nathanael addresses Jesus as a king, he does not refuse the title. In fact, he affirms Nathanael's declaration. In John 6:15, the people seek to force Jesus to be a king. Here, the intention of the people clearly refers to an earthly, political king. It brings little surprise when Jesus refuses their desire. In John 12:13, 15 Jesus receives the kingship title again. Here, the context is the fulfillment of the OT prophecy regarding his messianic kingship (Ps. 118:26, Zech. 9:9). The people address him as the King of Israel (John 12:13) and as the Daughter of Zion (12:15). As in the case of Nathanael, Jesus does not refuse the title.

It is in the context of Pilate's trial of Jesus that John is able to depict the kingship title in full. It is perhaps the most suitable condition for the elaboration since, aside from Jesus's innocence, the trial centers on Jesus's claim as a king. The last dispute about the kingship also summarizes John's position, "what I have written, I have written."

Second, the theme of kingship intensifies in a gradual manner and finds its climax in Pilate's final act. At first, Pilate questions Jesus about his kingship. Such question-form indicates Pilate's attempt to verify the claim of Jesus. However, in his final act, Pilate's question turns into a bold statement to be read by all people. At first, Pilate places little interest in the claim that Jesus is king. But gradually, Pilate becomes fearful and worried about his safety after considering the possibility that Jesus is indeed a king – and not just any king, but the one who is the son of God. In the early hearing with the Jews, Pilate addresses Jesus as "the man," but later on, he consistently refers to him as "king". As the passion of Jesus finds its climax at the cross, so does the theme of his kingship. For John, the glorification of Jesus takes place at the cross (John 12:23; 13:31-32).[32] So it is fitting that the glorification also incorporates a declaration of his

[32] See, for example, Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 307; Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, 386–387; Wright, *The Governor and the King*, 134, 155.

kingship to be read and seen by all. John is able to achieve this through the narrative agency of Pilate.

Third, even though Pilate continuously depicts Jesus as the King of the Jews, his kingship is essentially universal in scope, far superior to the Roman empire. This is most evident in the conversation between Pilate and Jesus regarding the title "son of God". As mentioned above, the most likely context for this title is the emperor of Rome. The emperor is the one who holds the title "son of God". To be called "the son of God" is to compete against Caesar as the king above all kings. Moreover, by correcting Pilate's sense of authority – that Pilate's authority to hand Jesus over is not from Caesar but God the Father – Jesus shows him that Jesus is *the* king who has the highest authority, which he receives from the Father.[33] In other words, Jesus's kingship, kingdom, and source of authority are far more superior than those of Rome.

Fourth, Pilate is not a neutral outsider judging the trial of Jesus. The real drama is that Pilate himself is on trial. For John, the character of Pilate does not merely function as a neutral medium to convey the theme of Jesus's kingship. Rather, in the narrative, he also functions as someone who needs to choose a side: whether to accept the kingship of Jesus or to reject it. For the reader of John, nobody can escape the question and implication of Jesus's kingship. Pilate becomes an example of someone who, in the end, fails to choose the true king. Pilate prefers to sacrifice Jesus rather than to lose his life and political career. In other words, he prefers to place his allegiance to Caesar, the earthly king, rather than Jesus the true son of God.[34]

Conclusion

This article has sought to understand the functional characterization of Pilate in John 18-19. It has shown that John uses Pilate as his narrative medium to communicate the theme of the kingship of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, the notion about Jesus's kingship finds its

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[33] Martinus de Boer rightly observes that from the beginning it is clear that Jesus will eventually be crucified (John 18:32). Although Pilate does not want any part in Jesus' trial and crucifixion, he will nevertheless crucify Jesus. The question now is not what will happen, but how such thing (Jesus' crucifixion) will come about. This shows that Pilate's act is actually a part of the divine plan (de Boer, "The Narrative Function of Pilate in John," 142–143).

[34] Cf., Wright, "What Is Truth?" 218–219.

fullest depiction through the speeches and deeds of Pilate, evidenced in his trial of Jesus and his insistence on the wordings on the cross. Furthermore, there is a clear dynamic and progress in depicting the kingship of Jesus, beginning with a vague, personal question, and climaxing with a declarative statement to be read by all people. Through Pilate, Jesus is shown, ironically, not only as the King of the Jews, but also as "the son of God," a king with authority far more superior than the Roman emperor.

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