

Sin and redemption



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the Bible, as in *The Master and Margarita*, the reader has grown accustomed to despising Pontius Pilate, the infamous procurator of Judea. In both texts, it is Pontius Pilate who sentences Yeshua Ha-Notsri—a harmless, wandering preacher—to a painful death on the cross. Even more despicable, perhaps, is the fact that Pilate himself is plainly aware that Yeshua has done no wrong besides a minor technicality in a speech regarding Caesar. Although Pilate ultimately has the choice of letting Yeshua go, he fails to do so out of fear for his own political welfare. Yet, despite this arguably unforgivable moral failing, after reading the novel, the reader is nevertheless able to sympathize with the procurator. Through Bulgakov's artful retelling of the Biblical story, the reader can better understand Pontius Pilate's situation and the rationale with which he ultimately makes his fateful decision. Furthermore, Bulgakov extends the story beyond the scope of that in the Bible, revealing Pilate's subsequent tormented regret and desperate attempts to right the wrong he had committed. The one-dimensional story character we encounter in the Bible is much easier to hate than the man we meet and come to know intimately in *The Master and Margarita*. Granted that Pilate's confirmation of a completely undeserved death sentence is not exactly morally infallible, the reader must also examine the context in which he eventually came to make this decision. Right upon encountering Pilate in the novel, we find out that he is suffering from a massive, blinding headache. The crippling pain from this physical ailment grows to an extent where Pilate, at one point, hallucinates a cup of dark poison, yearning for a means of ending his agony, and, at another point, even has a vision of the head of Caesar replacing that of Yeshua. The situation is made no better by sunlight beating down on the courtyard. Bulgakov makes it clear that anyone in

Pilate's physical condition would have a little trouble acting completely rationally in order to fulfill his political duties. As if the physical torment of a severe headache were not enough, Pilate must also deal with the emotional voids in his life. He is a Roman procurator assigned to fulfill his duties in a far-off, foreign land. Having only a dog for company, he is even worse off than his biblical counterpart, who at least had a wife. Pilate's only human companions are his sycophantic secretary, his brutal soldiers, and the condemned men whose death sentences he has the weighty decision of confirming or vetoing. In addition, if we were to look at Yeshua's case in a purely legal and political perspective, we see that Pilate does not have much choice in respect to letting this preacher live. For one, Yeshua has certainly committed the unforgivable offense (and unhesitatingly attests to it) of speaking out against Caesar and his power to rule. There is only one way prescribed to deal with such an offense: death. A decision to spare Yeshua would come with some costly consequences. It is no coincidence that Pilate encounters the vision of Caesar's head replacing Yeshua's; he knows very well that any disobedience to Caesar would unquestionably carry detrimental results to his career, if not his life. Placed in this uncomfortable position where the wrong choice could mean life or death, it is clear that most, if not all, readers would have acted in exactly the same way. Although Pilate eventually is forced to confirm the death sentence, the reader can observe that he does take measures beforehand to try to save Yeshua. During the hearing, it is evident that Pilate does not wish for the innocent man's death. He initially finds nothing meriting punishment and is even about to overturn the sentence before he reads the charges that Yeshua has spoken against Caesar. When addressing this particular issue, he attempts to signal to

Yeshua by strategically drawing out the “ not” in “ Did you or did you not?” when he asks him if he had ever said anything about Caesar. Pilate even warns Yeshua plainly before he makes his statement that anything said against Caesar would result in a painful death. Even when Yeshua has begun his confession, Pilate attempts again to save him by strategically asking him if he had perhaps forgotten what he had said to Judas about Caesar. When this measure fails and Yeshua is condemned to die, Pilate makes one last attempt to save him, appealing to Kaifa to have Yeshua freed instead of Bar-rabban, reasoning that Yeshua’s crimes are not nearly as heinous as those of Bar-rabban. Thus, the reader cannot justifiably ignore the fact that Pilate did make repeated efforts to save him. During the course of the execution, it appears that Pilate still has not forgotten about Yeshua. Pilate arranges for a cup of anesthetics be offered to Yeshua shortly before the ordeal and when the executioner ends Yeshua’s suffering with a spear wound to the heart, telling him to praise “ merciful Hegemon,” the reader cannot help wondering if Pilate had ordered the quick death, as well. Up to the last moment in Yeshua’s life we see that Pilate tries to minimize his suffering and bring him a quicker, less humiliating death. After the execution is over, Pilate makes a covert order to have Yeshua’s betrayer, Judas of Kerioth, killed. He makes this order under the guise that Judas is to be “ saved” from his enemies (presumably, other friends of Yeshua) who are going to kill him that night for having betrayed Jesus for a few coins. One interpretation of this initiative on Pilate’s part (the “ mercy killing” theory) is that he would also like Judas to have a quick death, as opposed to a death by his enemies. He thus orders his men to do it efficiently to reduce suffering, as Yeshua probably would have wanted it, if death was the only choice. Yet a darker interpretation of

this killing is that Pilate is, in a way, taking revenge upon Yeshua's betrayer himself, having his own men deal out justice to him. In this way, he lashes out at the one other person to be blamed, attempting to reconcile himself with Yeshua's undeserved death. In either instance, the reader sees that Yeshua's death still clings to Pilate's conscience, an unexpected thing for a man who must have sentenced so many others to an equally painful death. That night, Pilate's remorse and desperate regret manifest themselves. He is initially unable to sleep at all, having only his dog Banga to be there for him. When he does finally settle into an uneasy doze, he sees himself walking with Banga and Yeshua. In this dream, he and Yeshua are debating lofty matters with one another but both agree that the execution had been a "misunderstanding" and had never really happened at all and that cowardice is one of the worst vices. However, Pilate is shortly awakened, tormented by the light of the moon and Banga's howling. He comes to realize that he has indeed executed an innocent man, a great man, and the only man who was able to understand him and help him. He comes to the realization that his cowardice and subsequent failure to stand up for what he knew was right has resulted in the loss of a friend and guide as well as the imposition of an everlasting burden on his conscience. In reflecting upon Pilate's failure to stand up for what he knew was right, the reader initially finds it easy to regard him with animosity. However, through Bulgakov's story of Pilate's perspective, we see more clearly into the circumstances surrounding his decision. We also have the opportunity to see Pilate's painful regret and the gestures he makes to make up for—if not right—his wrongs. Indeed, it is significant that he has sinned; it is more significant, however, that he has tried to redeem himself.