

Pilate's Choice

So it was that Pilate sat down on the judgment seat, at the appointed time, and said to the Jews, 'Whom, then, will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?'

Now the chief priests and elders had persuaded the multitude that they should ask for Barabbas, to destroy Jesus. They shouted as one man; 'Release unto us Barabbas.' And Pilate was much troubled; for he knew that for envy they had delivered him. At that moment, his wife Magia sent to him, saying, 'Have nothing to do with this just man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.'

And Pilate was torn inwardly, and in a loud voice he declaimed, 'What then is truth?' Possessed by anger, he turned and said to the crowd, 'Thou shalt have Barabbas. As for Jesus the Christ, in my hands his fate

remains. Return on the morrow at the same hour, and hearken to my judgment upon him.'

He released Barabbas unto them, and the multitude were confused; some on this side cheered, whilst others called for sedition, but they were not of one mind. And the chief priests and elders called upon the crowd to rise up, but their confusion remained, and they did not rise up; and the people emptied the square, until only the elders remained.

All the while Jesus stood silent in the Hall of Judgment, until Pilate returned in scorn at the Jews and their hardness of heart, and ordered his soldiers to take Jesus to a dungeon. And he was mindful of his wife's dream, and said, 'Treat him with kindness; take these thorns from his head, place a new cloak around his shoulders, and let him eat and drink.'

His soldiers also were confused, for before they had struck Jesus and ordered him, 'Prophecy!' And they murmured against Pilate, saying, 'This Jew has turned our master's head.' They took Jesus into the

palace, and found him a cell built but three days before, with a single window set high in the wall. And a spirit of jest came upon them, and they scratched, 'The King of the Jews' above the door to his cell. Yet they obeyed Pilate, and they treated Jesus with kindness - but he spoke not a word.

And Magia observed all that took place, pondering all these things within her heart. That evening she descended to Jesus, bearing bread and wine. She entered his cell, saying, 'Rabboni,' and held his hand tenderly, as Jesus accepted her gifts without a word. Returning to Pilate, she said, 'Truly, this man is the Son of God.' And Pilate was at peace concerning his judgment.

At these tidings, Jesus's disciples were in disarray. 'Did he not say that he must die in Jerusalem?' they said to each other, for it was only now that their master's words returned to them. 'Did our hearts not burn within us as he told us the temple would be rebuilt in three days? Yet now a Roman governor holds our Lord.'

On the morrow at the appointed hour, Pilate returned to the judgment seat and spoke again with the Jews. The elders had exhorted many to attend, but their confusion remained, and there were a third of the day before. 'Jesus is held,' Pilate said, as he laughed in his heart. 'I will pass judgment in the course of time. Return at this same hour tomorrow, and you will hear his fate.'

The elders wailed, for they understood that Pilate had tricked the multitude. And the crowd muttered, and their minds turned to other things: one had a field to plough, another had nets to mend, while a third had grapes to press. The following day came, and there were but a handful of Jews together at the appointed time, and once more Pilate said unto them, 'Return on the morrow.'

From a high room Magia watched, and laughed; and at that moment an angel appeared to her, but she was not afraid. 'Blessed art thou amongst women,' said the angel, 'for thou hast seen the times and understood.'

Within the twelfth month thou shalt give birth to a daughter. Behold, it is I, the archangel Michael, that proclaim it.' And Magia sang in her heart as she bowed her head, for she was barren. She cried;

'O most high God, thou has sent thy Son amongst us, I have learnt his name, and my heart is at peace. Thou hast promised the end of my reproach amongst men; even so, may that day come quickly!'

And Magia told Pilate she had seen an angel, and she told him of his promise and of his name, and Pilate was filled with amazement. This became a secret between them.

On the morrow, Pilate arrived at the appointed time, and there was no one to hear him. He sat on the judgment seat, and he dismissed his men, and his soul fell silent, and he looked to the sky; and as he listened to the song of the birds of the sky, the cruelty that lay in his heart slowly began to melt, and he beheld in a vision the path of righteousness, laid out before him, ascending into the heavens, and he heard a voice, saying,

‘Behold, Pilate, know that thou can choose.’ And lo, Pilate flinched before this choice; he looked within his soul for courage, yet he found none. But he knew himself to be vindicated in his dealings with Jesus.

In his cell, Jesus sat, alone; his wounds healed, for he was treated with kindness. He ate fish and honeycomb, and drank water with vinegar; then again, he fasted and grew pale, and wrestled in prayer, day and night. His jailers watched, but he never spoke. They said of him, as they played dice outside his door, ‘He worked miracles, let him work another. He saved others, now let him save himself. He escaped the cross; but now he crucifies himself.’

It came to pass that Magia did conceive, and Pilate wondered in his heart at the silent man in his dungeon. He descended to Jesus, and sent his jailers away. ‘You rest in my power,’ he said in anger, ‘you sit in the palm of my hand, your life I decide in a single breath. Yet over my wife’s womb I am powerless. Your God visits us, and so I am in your

power, evermore.' And Jesus turned from his wrestling in prayer, and gazed into Pilate's eyes, but spoke not a word.

In weariness the disciples returned to their homes, overcome with foolishness. But alone amongst them, the disciple whom Jesus loved remembered his master, and he took in Mary the mother of Jesus to his home, and cared for her as if she were his own mother, and Mary Magdalene also. And in John's house there was a constant listening for the return of the Christ.

Before the twelfth month, Magia gave birth, and Pilate and she were consumed with joy. 'Her name is Abigail,' Magia said, and Pilate acceded to his wife's desire. The Jews whispered amongst themselves, 'Pilate has named his daughter Abigail,' and wondering in their hearts, they remembered Abigail, the first wife of King David. The young girl grew strong and well, and was a deep blessing to her father and mother.

And Pilate reflected on the path of righteousness he had seen, although he told no one of his vision, not even Magia. His thoughts rested also on the silent man wrestling in prayer in his dungeon, and the cruelty in his heart dissolved yet more, and his eyes were opened. Slowly he grew to know in his heart that the God of the Jews was the true God, and he trembled.

He began a kindness unto the people he governed: respect to the Sabbath, justice to the poor and the widowed, a fair tax in all the land. He summoned the leaders of the Jews unto him, and said, 'Come! Let us understand that dispute endangers prosperity. Let us work for the betterment of this realm, and of each other.' And a spirit of harmony prevailed in the land from that day.

The Jews had forgotten the man lying alone in Pilate's prison, for there is nothing to publish abroad concerning a man without words. His disciples dispersed in fear, bereft of understanding over Jesus, and they took up once more their nets by the lake of Galilee. And fresh prophets

arose amongst the people, and again many shouted, 'The Messiah has come!' but always they were disappointed.

Magia was consumed by her child Abigail, and her visits to Jesus grew fewer in number; for she longed to hear him speak, but always he looked into her eyes in silence, and she grew tired of their meetings. Pilate remembered the silent man in his dungeon, but there was fear in his remembering, because he knew himself to be in his power; and Pilate remembered the path of righteousness, the choice that lay before him.

The jailers that watched over Jesus were succeeded by other jailers, and they were succeeded in turn, until no one in the dungeons could remember who Jesus was; and as for, 'The King of The Jews,' the dust of the years had covered his cell lintel so that it could be read no longer. The jailers watched this pale man they did not know alone in his cell, his hair untouched across the years, racked in prayer day and night, silent as the grave.

Now an angel of the Lord appeared to John in a dream. 'Behold, awake! For this is the time of God's Kingdom upon earth, the second coming of your Lord. Make haste to Jerusalem to speak with him there. Travel alone; take nothing save your cloak and your sandals.'

And John replied, 'But your servant is old; is there not a younger man?' The angel replied, 'It is I, the archangel Michael; you are chosen.' With a sigh, John girded his loins for the journey. He told Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene of his visitation, and a spirit of joy fell upon them after their long years of sojourn. Nourished by the Holy Spirit, John made his way in peace; those who gave him succour on his journey, he blessed, those who hindered him, their dust he shook from his feet.

On the day of John's arrival, Pilate sat alone on the judgment seat, reflecting on the vision granted to him there. Waking from his dream, he saw John, who bowed low.

‘Pilate, great Governor of the realm, I bring you greetings from Galilee.

An angel has sent me to meet with Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, whom you hold in your dungeons.’

‘An angel with a name?’ asked Pilate.

‘His name is Michael,’ John replied.

And Pilate’s soul leapt at the remembering, and the fear in his heart disappeared.

At that moment, from the cell where Jesus sat there came a groan, and one jailer said to the other, ‘At last, he speaks!’ And lo, when they opened the door of his dungeon, the sun was high and the light struck the window, and Jesus stood with arms outstretched as the sun rose upon him, and he said to himself, but the jailers heard; ‘It is finished.’

(The opening words were provided by the writers of the King James Bible, and my thanks goes to them.)

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