



Texts in Context

People Like Us: Minor Characters in Matthew's Passion

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I do not think I had the reaction to *The Passion of the Christ* that Mel Gibson was hoping for. The longer the film went on, the more distanced I felt from the events unfolding on the screen. The betrayer was so creepy, the violence so unrelenting, the soldiers so sadistic, the disciples so absent that I could not find a character with whom to identify. If cinema is meant to transport us into the world depicted on the screen, where were audience members supposed to locate ourselves in Gibson's story? Rather than drawing us into the drama of Christ's trial and death, the movie kept us behind the glass of the camera lens and had many of us backing up even from that vantage point. We were voyeurs to the sin of humans so inhumane that we could justifiably say we would not have done such a thing to Jesus or anyone.

This reaction is the opposite of the conclusion I am led to as I read the Passion Narratives or sing the hymns of Lent. Instead of "Surely not I, Lord!" a Lenten hymn gives us the confession, "'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee,"¹ and the story confirms the hymn writer's conclusion. The Passion Narratives present characters who combine things we often find in ourselves: efficiency and heartlessness, good intentions and cowardice, attempts to control outcomes and remorse over the results of our control.

¹Johann Heermann, "Ah, Holy Jesus," trans. Robert Bridges, in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) #123, verse 2.

Letters to some of the major characters in Matthew's Passion Narrative invite hearers into the story, helping them understand more fully both the gospel message and themselves.

Matthew's Gospel adds details about minor characters in the passion that make those characters more rounded and accessible to modern readers. Matthew relates not only the betrayal of Judas but also his remorse and ultimately his suicide. Only in Matthew does Jesus forbid the taking of oaths (Matt 5:34–37), and then, Matthew alone reports that Peter denies Jesus not just with curses as he does in the other gospels, but also by swearing an oath, "I do not know the man" (Matt 26:72). It is in Matthew that we see Pilate wash his hands and declare his innocence at the end of the trial over which he presides. Only in Matthew do the people announce their culpability in the death of Jesus by saying to Pilate, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt 27:25). In Matthew, all of these characters bear responsibility for Jesus' abandonment and death, but each of them is also multidimensional and in some ways, tragic.² By looking closely at the characters of Judas, Peter, Pilate, and the crowds in Matthew's Passion Narrative, I hope to give readers of the passion ideas for how those characters involved in Jesus' death are people like us or, better, how we are, at least some of the time, people like them.

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Because I hope also to give preachers and teachers of the passion some ideas for how we may invite our hearers into the story rather than distancing them from it, I have chosen to present these character analyses in the form of letters to the characters. This experiment is inspired by a question that surfaces regularly in the context of teaching Scripture in a seminary: Is it possible to practice imaginative engagement with a scriptural text without resorting to making up details that are not in Scripture? Directors of Jesus movies regularly make things up. Scenes appear that have no basis in the gospels. For instance, Gibson departed from the biblical story to offer a compassionate picture of Pilate's wife helping the women followers of Jesus mop up his blood after the flogging.³ Similarly, dramatic monologues of the kind often used in midweek Lenten services are long speeches fashioned in the imagination of the modern playwright, resulting in a drama that relates the inner musings of the centurion at the cross or others who appear only briefly and who say very little in the passion story as the gospels tell it. These imaginative engagements of the passion may help hearers become familiar with the biblical story, or they may familiarize hearers with a story significantly different from the one the evangelists actually tell. My aim with the letter form is to be as creative as possible

²This multidimensionality is not true of those Matthew refers to as "the chief priests" or "the chief priests and elders." They are always opposed to Jesus, and in every scene where they appear in the passion they are working to bring about his death.

³While the scene itself is apparently cut out of whole cloth, Gibson is representing the tone of later Christian tradition. Pilate's wife, named Claudia in the tradition, is honored as a saint in both the Coptic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

with the story of these characters without putting words in their mouths or placing them in scenes that are not in the Gospel of Matthew.

* * *

Dear Judas:

What were you thinking?

You started out as one of the twelve, just one of the guys; at least those of us who know you only from the gospels imagine you must have started out that way. For a while you must have blended in with the others who were following Jesus. For our part, we never remember a time when we did not know you also as “the betrayer.” From the moment the evangelists introduced you to us, they highlighted that feature of your résumé. You betrayed him. You made it possible for the enemies of Jesus to seize him without the interference of crowds who might have been loyal to him in a fight. What were you thinking?

“Did you think you understood Jesus better than he understood himself and so you were right to push him toward his destiny?”

Often modern novelists and film directors present you as an almost heroic character. They say you were trying only to move Jesus toward a further definition of his mission. Is that true? Did you simply mean to force a confrontation between Jesus and the chief priests and elders, a confrontation that you thought Jesus would win? Did you know that the people who offered to pay you for your work would seek to kill him for his? Did you think you understood Jesus better than he understood himself and so you were right to push him toward his destiny?

What were you thinking? Did you do it for the money? For a while it looked like you did. John told us you were a thief, in charge of the common purse and stealing money from it. Everyone else told us you made a deal for your inside information. “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” you asked the chief priests, as if ratting out Jesus could double as an occasion for you to pick up some coin.

In the end, though, you gave them back their silver and you showed as great a capacity for remorse as you had shown for duplicity. About you Ronald Goetz writes that “his pathetic attempts to return the money and his suicide indicate it probably wasn’t greed” that served as motivation.⁴ Goetz thinks your heart was broken by a Jesus who refused to fight for his own cause. Frustrated at the Lord’s passivity, you “struck at him with the feelings of a betrayed spouse—rage, disappointment, injured love and humiliation.”

Whatever your motivation, the hardest part about your story is the waste on every side. When Mary anointed Jesus before his death, you were among those worried that she was squandering expensive ointment. “Why this waste?” you dis-

⁴Ronald Goetz, “Judas as Patron Saint,” *The Christian Century*, 18–25 March 1987, 262.

diciples wanted to know. Yet look at how waste punctuates your story. You seek to undo the harm you have done and waste your breath. In horror and despair, you go and waste yourself. As a result of your bargain with the chief priests, Jesus is wasted. Why this waste?

I notice you were there for supper. You were there when Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me" (Matt 26:21). You heard everyone's shock at that news of betrayal. You heard them say to Jesus, "Surely not I, Lord?" and so you turned to say, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He said only, "You have said so." He did not blow your cover, and he went on to share the cup with you as well as the others, saying, "This is my blood of the covenant." You were an insider to the last, sharing the bread and the wine poured out "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28).

We have that cup in common with you, and more. Most of us like money at least as much as you did. With coins jingling in our pockets, we feel safe. Like you, we are attracted to an audience with powerful people; it is especially gratifying when we have something they need. We also know, as you do, what it is to be astonished at our own capacity for harm. "Why this waste?" indeed. In the end you knew you had betrayed innocent blood. In the end, we know our only hope—and yours—is that blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. In that blood, with that forgiveness, what you and we have wasted is redeemed.

* * *

Dear Peter:

If Judas blended somewhere at the back of the pack, you were always out front. You were the first one Jesus called (Matt 4:18), and your name begins every list we have of the twelve disciples. You asked questions, walked on water, made that great confession, and dared to speak in front of Moses and Elijah. Some people imagine you were just impulsive, quicker to speak than to think, but I see courage in your dramatic ups and downs.

Take that walk on water for example. Everyone was afraid, Matthew says. The wind was tossing you farther out to sea, and someone—or some *thing*—was coming at the boat. Responding to the screams that it was a ghost, Jesus said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (Matt 14:27). Then you spoke up. You would not blend. Over the wind that was still blowing, you hollered back at him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Why the test? Why did you ask, "If it is you..."? Were you discovering something about the identity of that one on the water, or something about yourself? Whatever you were doing, it took courage to follow through, and you did. You were out of the boat, on the water and then you...well, you did get afraid. Talk about dramatic ups and downs in your story: There you were bobbing in the water. You began to sink; you cried out and Jesus caught you. (So it wasn't a ghost after all.)

At Caesarea Philippi, when the questions got personal, you found your voice again. When Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?" various disciples reported the news. When Jesus asked, "Who do *you people* say that I am?" you

alone answered him with a confession of faith that won his praise. People today like to portray you as a brawny, dull-witted fisherman, but in that moment you knew more than any instructor on earth could teach you. You knew it, and you spoke up.

*“people today like to portray you as a brawny,
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more than any instructor on earth could teach you”*

When a moment later he said how he would die, you were just as bold to speak again. “God forbid, Lord. This must never happen to you!” you said. If any of us had been listening to Jesus, we would surely have said—or at least wanted to say—the same thing. Jesus had just said he would die a horrible death, that he *must* go to Jerusalem precisely in order to suffer and die that death by crucifixion. You were right to wish it were not so, but at the same time you were wrong. These things can turn so quickly. As Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church,” you had risen to a place as exalted as your place atop the water. Then a moment later, your fears about his death would sink you from that height again, and this time Jesus would rebuke you as a stumbling block.

You were undeterred. You learned the lesson about his suffering, and you resolved to stick with him no matter what. In your last exchange with him, you said, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” It sounds like you, resolute and fearless, like a man who would climb out of a boat in a wind-storm, like someone who would run into a burning building when everyone was running out. Such people are our heroes. The Marines, we’re told, will never leave a wounded comrade, and even those of us who hate war love this fierce fidelity. The last words you said to Jesus were, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Matt 26:35). Dear Peter, as you say this you are who we want to be. We want to be that strong, that bold, that loyal to our Lord.

Jesus warned you that you would not keep your word, and the gospels tell us how his word came true: A servant girl would spook you and you would lie three times. Three times you claimed you did not know the one for whom, just hours before, you had known you were prepared to die. Again you were so bold and then so cowardly. You are the best of what we are, and you are the one undone by fear. We might not believe these traits could coexist so dramatically in you, but then, we’ve seen them in ourselves. We have watched our boldness disappear at a smart remark or bully’s threat. We have heard words coming from our mouths that we knew were just not true. We have wanted to be better. We have wept that we are not as faithful to our Lord as he has been to us.

* * *

Dear Governor:

You have quite a claim to fame. Most of us do not know the names of any other Roman governors of Judea, but we know yours. What's more, before many of us knew anything else about you—or anything about Rome for that matter—we knew by heart that Jesus had “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” As Judas had handed Jesus over to the Jewish authorities, so the authorities handed him over to you, and you would hand him over to be crucified. Jesus had told his disciples that they would be “dragged before governors and kings” on account of their association with him (Matt 10:18). As it turned out, he would be the first to be so dragged.

Everyone tells us you wanted to know if Jesus was king of the Jews. It is a good question for a representative of imperial power to ask. Was Jesus a rival to the kingdom and the rule of Rome? The local authorities were quick to see a threat in him and to accuse him in front of you. You asked Jesus to defend himself against these charges, but he wouldn't answer you. After your question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” and his reply, “You have said so,” he would not speak again until he cried out on the cross. From what we hear, you were amazed by this.

What amazed you? His silence in the face of mortal danger? The fact that one so meek could be confused with those who threaten *pax Romana*? The calm he showed before a man of your importance?

Bits of evidence had reached you and you knew that he was innocent. You knew it was the chief priests' jealousy that motivated their disdain of him. Your wife sent word about his righteousness. You asked the crowds, “What evil has he done?” and they could not tell you. You knew that Jesus did not deserve a death sentence according to Roman justice, and more than once it looked like you might let him go, but then...you didn't.

Perhaps you didn't let him go because you didn't think you could. A riot was beginning, we are told. Your hands were tied. You took refuge in the role we often find a home in, too: you were the victim of circumstance. Yes, that's it. Acting on you were the forces of the chief priests' envy, the prisoner's silence, and the mob's edginess. What could you do? You “could do nothing” (Matt 27:24), nothing, that is, except sound like a man on trial himself. “I am innocent of this man's blood,” you protested. At least one man in this trial would defend himself.

Our organizational theorists tell us that those in charge routinely think they have less power than they actually do. An organization gives us power and in response we tell ourselves we really cannot do the right thing. The issue is complex. Our hands are tied. People would not follow us. Our workload is so full we have no time and no energy to be a hero. A riot is beginning. We are amazed by those we recognize as not only meek but also good; we are amazed but rarely changed by them. “The meek shall inherit the earth,” that one who stood before you said, but like you, perhaps, we find that we are skeptical. We wonder if the earth will not forever go to those who stop the riots, who make their compromises and who wash their hands of injustices they feel powerless to stop.

The last we hear of you, O Governor, you are apparently dispatching troops to guard a dead man. “Go,” you say to the chief priests and the Pharisees. “Make the tomb as secure as you can” (Matt 27:65). Finally you display some power; you show decisiveness. You inhabit your office. Yes, like rulers everywhere, you send the troops. I wonder if you ever heard how fruitless that one act of governing was.⁵

* * *

Dear People:

Crowds like you followed Jesus, brought the sick to him, and looked on while he argued with the Pharisees. You were as amazed at his teaching as Pilate would come to be amazed at his silence. Our hymns remind us that you cried, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” at the beginning of the week and “Crucify him!” at its end. How could things have changed so much so fast?

There was a time, during the trial before Pilate, when it looked like you little people, the men (and women?) on the street, might have the power to release Jesus. Pilate offered you a deal. He would free a prisoner to you. Fans of Jesus know the end and still, when we hear that part about the festival release, some of us think again, “Here’s our chance. Things have been grim, but they can turn around right here. This is the loophole we have been looking for. Here is the chance for the people Jesus ate with and taught and healed to return the favor of giving him release. And wouldn’t that be an elegant way to write the story? The insistence of the crowd will be too much for Pilate. He will have to let Jesus go.”

We wait, and for the umpteenth time you choose a different prisoner. The insistence of the crowd was indeed too much for Pilate, but the release you insisted on was not for Jesus. The gospel writers make sense of this by saying that the chief priests and the elders circulated through your crowd and stirred you up to call for freedom for Barabbas and to shout, “Crucify him!” about Jesus. I find little comfort there. If those people had told you to jump off a bridge, would you have done that too? “Peer pressure” from the chief priests and elders is hardly an excuse. You seem to know that, because you do not try to wash your hands of Jesus’ blood as Pilate did. While Pilate blathers on about his innocence, you take responsibility. Your last words in this story are unprompted by the authorities. You say, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt 27:25). Scholars comment that you were not speaking “a self-curse, but a declaration of responsibility: We acknowledge our involvement if the governor will not.”⁶

I would rather stand with you than with the spineless governor, but either way, we are in deep trouble. Those who take responsibility and those who dodge it work together to direct events so that a good man dies. We rush to judgment. We

⁵For more on the theme of power and powerlessness in the character of Pilate as well as Herod the Great and Herod Antipas, see Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Power and Powerlessness: Matthew’s Use of Irony in the Portrayal of Political Leaders,” *SBL Seminar Papers* 31 (1992) 454–466.

⁶W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 3:591.

are carried along on a wave of someone else's hatred, fear, and envy. We do not resist and so we do harm. Some days we do only a little harm; some days people die because of what we did or did not do. This reality is not just your crowd's problem. It is widespread, if not universal, that in the end the blood of at least one innocent is on our hands, and widespread too that children often do not escape the outcome of their parents' sins.

Back at the beginning of this story, before there were any crowds like yours or mine, when Mary was about to have a child, the angel talked to Joseph in a dream. "She will bear a son," the angel said, "and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). He did this saving work throughout his life, forgiving people, healing them, restoring relationships—saving people from their sins. "The well have no need of a physician," he said (Matt 9:12), and then he spent his life healing and calling not the righteous, but sinners.

"Dear Jesus, save your people from our sins."

What you did not know—what is still a mystery to those of us who have had the benefit of centuries' worth of collected wisdom about it—is that Jesus was doing exactly the same thing in his death. "He will save his people from their sins," the angel said before Jesus was born. Along the way, he said that he would give his life "a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28). On the night he was betrayed, he shared a cup with those around him, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant shed for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28).

I'm fairly sure that when you shouted out that line about his blood being on you, you were saying, "Bring it on!" to the way he would be killed. (God help us, we have likely all cheered on destruction!) Yet the other way to say the line is, "God, number us and those who follow among the many for whom Christ's blood effects forgiveness." His blood be on us and on our children. Dear Jesus, save your people from our sins. ⊕

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