

Anna Lefteratou

Jesus' Socratic Trial and Pilate's Confession in Nonnus' Paraphrasis of St John's Gospel

Abstract: This article argues that the *Paraphrasis of St John's Gospel* by Nonnus offers a response to late antique concerns as to why the salvific message of Jesus failed to be recognised by authorities of the Roman Empire in the Gospels. By reworking the portrait of Pilate found in John's Gospel, Nonnus transforms the governor into an unambiguously late antique *pepaideumenos*, one who ultimately participates in the promulgation of Christian salvation and truth. The analysis shows that Nonnus accomplishes this portrait through the use of Homeric parallels and allusions to Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, which transform Jesus' trial before Pilate from John 18 into a philosophical dialogue about justice, kingship, and truth. The poem invites its late antique audience to better identify with Pilate and to see his inscription of the title (*titulus*) on Jesus' cross as an early gentile confession of faith, ultimately making Pilate into an apostle *avant-la-lettre* and rehabilitating the role of Rome vis-à-vis Christianity for late antique audiences.¹

"What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."
Francis Bacon, *Of Truth*, 1625

"Justice and salvation cannot be reconciled."
Giorgio Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 45

Pilate is among the most contested characters in John's Gospel. Whereas in Matthew he washes his hands in a symbolic gesture, distancing himself from Jesus' murder, John shows him wearily inquiring into the meaning of truth, albeit half-heartedly. Later thinkers sought to understand Pilate's inquiries in light of his judicial capacity. The sincerity of his exchanges with Jesus became so much a point of doubt that Francis Bacon famously portrayed him as jesting.² Giorgio Agamben recently described him as the only truly human figure in the drama, unsuccessfully trying to reconcile salvation and justice.³ Views about the governor's life after Jesus' crucifixion are as

1 This work is part of a project on the reception of John's Gospel in Late Antiquity under the direction of Prof. Michele Cutino and his research group, GIRPAM, at the Faculté de théologie catholique, Université de Strasbourg.

2 "What is truth?" said jesting Pilate and would not stay for an answer.' Bacon, Francis 2020. 'Of Truth', in *Bacon's Essays* Bibliotech Press, 1.

3 Agamben 2015, 3: "[Pilate] is perhaps the only true 'character' of the Gospels."

Anna Lefteratou, Universität Heidelberg, Seminar für Klassische Philologie, Marstallhof 2–4
(Kollegiengebäude), 69117 Heidelberg
anna.lefteratou@uni-heidelberg.de

complex as those about his role in the drama of salvation. Apocryphal literature written between the fourth century and the early Middle Ages in the Latin West presents Pilate as an unrepentant villain, while literature from this period in the East casts him as a convert to Christianity. The Coptic Church went so far in this positive direction as to sanctify him. Such representations of Pilate arrive as early as the second century CE with Tertullian, who considered Pilate a Christian by conscience: *Pilatus, et ipse iam pro sua conscientia Christianus*.⁴

This article argues that the *Paraphrasis of St John's Gospel* reworks the portrait of Pilate by adding a contemporary fifth-century twist: Nonnus' Pilate is unambiguously a late antique *pepaideumenos* who succeeds, through his classical *paideia*, in combining salvation and truth, however awkwardly. Through the poem's classicising style and Platonist turns, the exchange between Jesus and Pilate is transformed into a heated philosophical dialogue about justice, kingship, and truth, inviting the poem's elite audience to identify more with the inquisitive prefect than with the jaded overseer found in John's gospel. Moreover, the recasting of the dialogue as Socratic enables a further apologetic interpretation of John 18 that brings out the triumphal Christian undertones of the exchange within the broader cultural context of the fifth century. This paper will proceed by first contextualising Jesus' trial before Pilate within late antique traditions ('Contexts'), followed by an analysis of the scene in the *Paraphrasis* that will focus on three main aspects: Pilate's characterisation as a late antique official through Nonnus' introduction of Homeric language ('The Late Roman Judge'); the Socratic echoes in Pilate's exchange with Jesus ('A Socratic Dialogue about Kingship and Truth'); and finally Pilate's transformation into a Christian convert, as expressed on the inscription he places on the cross ('Pilate's Conversion'). This inscription can ultimately be seen to embody the poem's apologetic and triumphal aspirations, with important repercussions for the character of Pilate.

1 Contexts: Classicism and Christianity

The *Paraphrasis of St. John's Gospel* (hereafter, *Paraphrasis*) is a hexametric classicising rendition of the Fourth Gospel in epic style and diction that closely follows the original in content. Its author, Nonnus, was an epic poet from Panopolis (modern Ahkhmim in Egypt) who wrote and published his work in Alexandria in the mid-fifth century. Nonnus' magnum opus was the *Dionysiaca*, a forty-eight-book retelling of Dionysus' ancestry, adventures, and apotheosis that aspires to compete with Homer and the sum of the epic tradition. Whereas in previous centuries scholars clung to the poet's alleged conversion to Christianity to explain his complex output comprising both Classical and Christian epic, modern scholarship tends to view the

⁴ Tert. *Apol.* 21.24.

Nonnian corpus in terms of conjunction rather than conflict: The *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrasis* in fact share complementary themes like a fascination with wine, sacred mysteries, and salvation, not to mention, *mutatis mutandis*, a suffering demi-god as protagonist. This characteristic especially allows the mythological poem to be read as a precursor to the Christian one, with Dionysus prefiguring Christ.⁵

The dialogue between Classicism and Christianity is pivotal for understanding the revision of the Christian gospels through a classicising lens. Julian's famous school edict of 362 CE may have given a further impetus to the explosion of biblical classicising verse happening in the fourth century. The gradual conversion of Roman elites to Christianity had created the need for Christian literature that appealed to the *pepaideumenoí* in language, style, content, and performance. Not only did authors compose 'new' poems on Christian themes (e.g., Prudentius' *Peri Stephanon*), they also made 'translations' of canonical and apocryphal works in classicising meter and style (e.g., the *Metaphrasis of the Psalms* or Juvencus' *Four Books of the Gospel*). These rewritings both stylistically embellish and amplify the original text, and provide an exegetical approach to their models.⁶ Poems such as Nonnus' *Paraphrasis* were heavily influenced by works like Cyril's *Commentary on John's Gospel*, resulting in transformations of original works that not only adopted the rhetorical tropes and literary aesthetic of late antique *variatio*, but incorporated an exegetical intention that lent further meaning to authors' rhetorical choices. Ultimately, these texts provide invaluable insight into the modes and characteristics of the reception of John's Gospel in Late Antiquity.

Nonnus' characterisation of Pilate is affected by this negotiation of Christian faith and Graeco-Roman cultural identity. As we will see, it is Pilate's *paideia* that proves instrumental to his conversion.⁷ This revisits the canonical Gospels, where Pilate sentences Jesus, washes his hands, composes the *titulus* or title, and hands Jesus' body over to Joseph of Arimathea, who is sometimes joined by Nicodemus.⁸ Still, this sketch of Pilate in the New Testament is rather mild, especially when compared to other contemporary sources that depict the governor as an irascible and difficult man.⁹

5 On the so-called 'Nonnian Question', see Chuvin 2014 and Accorinti 2016.

6 Socr. *HE* 3.15–6. For the development of Christian verse, see the introduction in Hadjittofi and Lefteratou, 2020; also p. 9 on the alleged impact of Julian's decree of 362, with literature. On Nonnus' paraphrastic technique, see Agosti 2009; see also Matzner 2008.

7 For John's Gospel, I use the SBLGNT text and the NRSV translation; for Nonnus, Book 18, Livrea 1989; for Book 19, Accorinti 1986–7, together with the text by Scheindler, 1881. The translations of Nonnus' *Paraphrasis* are from Hadjittofi, forthcoming; the text for Cyril's *Commentary on John* (henceforth *In Jo*) is from Pusey 1872 and the translation by Maxwell and Elowsky 2013. Other translations are mine.

8 Mk 15:2–5, Mt 27: 11–14, Lk 23:2–5, Jo 18:28. See the analysis in Brown 1994, 726. Note that Pilate washes his hands only in Mt 27:24–5.

9 Philo, in *Leg. ad G.* 299–304, depicts Pilate as inflexible, self-willed, merciless, and cruel (ἀκαμψής καὶ μετὰ τοῦ ἀυθάδους ἀμείλικτος [...] βαρύμηνος).

All the evangelists seem to have viewed Jesus' encounter with Pilate as a confrontation with Rome, and accordingly infused this moment with anti-Roman sentiment.¹⁰ Even so, Pilate's role in the drama of salvation was seen as being so crucial that he was even given a special place in the Christian Creed after 381, which located the occurrence of Jesus' passion *sub Pontio Pilato*, a politically specific time and space within the scope of the Roman Empire.¹¹ Pilate's judgement also counts as the first interaction between Christianity and imperial Rome, a fact that became very problematic for the Christianised empire, since Jesus' condemnation by a Roman official could be read as the all-powerful empire's blindness to the message of the Messiah. Rome's error was compounded by the fact that other gentiles outside the circle of Jesus' disciples manifestly believed in Jesus and his message, notably the centurion who features in Matthew 8:5–13.

To remedy this problem, certain apocryphal texts explain the tacit conversion of the Empire taking place in Pilate's praetorium.¹² These texts also expand on the trial scene, adding defence witnesses and showing Pilate eagerly attempting to deliver justice with more involvement than in his otherwise straightforward stance in the canonical sources.¹³ Apocryphal revisions typically stress the Roman setting of the trial: In the *Gospel of Nicodemus* 5, the standards of Caesar bow down in front of Christ. This text also shows Pilate's anxious inquiries about truth (3.2), which he clearly defines as earthly, thus suggesting that he probably did understand the non-earthly character of his interlocutor's message.

A 'Socratic' is found in some apocryphal texts that cast Jesus' trial as philosophical dialogue of sorts, but with a difference: While Socrates delivered an eloquent apology to his interrogators, Jesus stood silent – a source of astonishment for a Graeco-Roman audience.¹⁴ The idea of a 'Socratic trial' of Jesus is early: John's Gospel probably already encouraged an association between the two 'philosophers', their disciples, and their manner of death.¹⁵ The late first-/early second-century Syriac *Letter of Mara bar Serapion* is the first extant text to compare Pythagoras, Socrates, and the 'Wise king of the Jews', alluding probably to Jesus.¹⁶ Even if Jesus could not be read as a philosopher in early canonical texts, Paul's Athens reverberates with Soc-

¹⁰ Bryan 2005, 47.

¹¹ Pilate's insertion into the Creed enhances the historicity of Jesus' passion; see Staats 1987, Staats 2011, 1571–4, and Edwards 2009, 65–7.

¹² On the apocryphal sources, see Bovon and Geoltrain 1997, 243–59, Dubois 2005. On Pilate in East and West, see Staats 1987.

¹³ For the positive canonical background based on 1 Pt 2:23, 'but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly', see Staats 2011, 1572.

¹⁴ A silence interpreted as an oracular and eschatological statement, e.g., at *Or. Sib.* 8.292–3: 'and tortured he will keep silence; so that neither will know who he is, from whom, where he came – so that he may speak to the dead'; see Roessli 2010, 310.

¹⁵ On Socrates in John, see Van Kooten 2017, Van Kooten 2018, and Parsenius 2010. For the impact of Socrates on Luke, see Sterling 2001, *contra* Tabb 2015. On John's Platonism, see Hirsch-Luipold 2006.

¹⁶ Millar 1995, 459–63.

atic echoes,¹⁷ and the later apocryphal trials of the apostles are often reminiscent of Socrates'.¹⁸ Further interchange between the two figures may even be seen in the later Neoplatonic reception of Socrates as a theologian, a possible reaction to the Christian conceptualisation of Jesus as Messiah.¹⁹ Exegetes such as Justin and Origen stressed the similarities between the two trials, as they offered a shared cultural background that supported Christianity's apologetic cause.²⁰ Origen's reply to Celsus enquiring why Pilate was not punished like Pentheus for murdering a god shows the governor as merely an instrument, the real culprits being the Jews.²¹ Origen argued that Jesus' silence was intentional, ensuring that he could fulfil his mission through his death.²² Though he was like Socrates, the nature of his mission forced him to act differently and to eschew the *parresia* and sophistry characterising Socrates' speech.

Early to mid-fourth-century sarcophagi exist which depict Jesus as a philosopher, thus giving his trial by Pilate an apologetic and triumphal overtone. Junius Bassus' sarcophagus, for example, shows several scenes from the passion sequence that contrast Jesus' earthly and divine rulership, including Pilate, who is regally depicted on the top left. These include Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem and a representation of Christ enthroned in glory giving the law.²³ This is part of a larger trend of fourth-century visual reworkings of the trial scene that focus on the regal representation of Pilate in apposition to the enthroned Lord. With the conversion of the Roman elites to Christianity, the question of Pilate's accountability became one of interest to Christian authors. John Chrysostom portrayed Jesus as being in fact a talented interlocutor who only failed vis-à-vis Pilate because time was lacking.²⁴ Cyril's *Commentary* presents Pilate anxiously inquiring about the crime Jesus allegedly committed, fearing for his position and Caesar's retribution while Jesus increasingly

¹⁷ See Cowan 2021, with literature.

¹⁸ Cf. the third century *Apocr. Acta Andr.* 73 showing the apostle as an expert in maieutic; in *Apocr. Acta Petr.* 37, Peter bids farewell to his judges, echoing Pl. *Phd.* 117a (Bovon and Geoltrain 1997, 880, 90, 1110, 75).

¹⁹ Tarrant 2014, 144, 66.

²⁰ E.g., Just. Mart. *II Apol.* 10.7, *I Apol.* 46.2–4; Orig. *C. Cels.* 2.17. The bibliography is massive; see e.g. Harnack 1901, Geffken 1908, Rahner 1963, 192, 355, Ahrens Dorf 1995, and Frede 2006 on the negative reception, as Socrates may also embody pagan philosophy; see also Bady 2014 and Pietruschka 2019 on the Apamea mosaics; on the Neoplatonic reception of Socrates as a Messiah, see Layne and Tarrant 2014. For the representations of Jesus as a philosopher in early Christian art, see Zanker 1995, 286–305.

²¹ Orig. *C. Cels.* 2.34, shows the Jews sharing Pentheus' fate, being scattered across the earth.

²² Orig. *In Mt PG* 17.305.

²³ On Jesus' meekness and depictions of the trial on Roman sarcophagi, see Elsner 2011, esp. 380, where Jesus' silent triumph undermines Roman power.

²⁴ Jo Chrys. *PG* 59.455: '[Jesus] draws his attention through these [words] and convinces him (πειθει γενέσθαι τῶν λεγομένωνατῆν) to become a hearer of the speech'.

starts to win over his incredulous judge.²⁵ Further, Cyril depicts Pilate as hard of hearing and blind, thus *a priori* unable to recognise the truth, regardless of Jesus' efforts.²⁶ Cyril ultimately places the most emphasis on the problematic trilingual title 'King of the Jews', which he understands as an early confession of the Lord's triumph across the ecumene and a foreshadowing of his universal rule.²⁷

Pilate and his deeds appear in a positive light in the works of several exegetes. John Chrysostom read Pilate's inscription 'King of the Jews' as a quasi-apology.²⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus invited newly-baptised converts to stick to their faith with the obstinacy that Pilate stood by his inscription.²⁹ Consequently, while the *realia* of the story could not be altered, Pilate's judgement became entangled with the broader plan of salvation, and his stance required explanation, if not justification. When Nonnus composed his verse translation of the Fourth Gospel in the mid-fifth century, his audience's expectations would have been formed by these earlier revisions, both apocryphal and exegetical, including the portrayal of Pilate found in visual sources. Nonnus' choice of epic hexameter as his poetic medium would have also elevated audience expectations as to the validity of the final product. In what follows I focus Nonnus' further innovations vis-à-vis John's Gospel and its late antique interpretation, especially as concerns Pilate's late antique characterisation.

25 Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 3.52 (Pusey) and esp. 3.55: 'once again he shows the power of the truth, which convinces Pilate even against his will (καὶ οὐχ ἐκόντα) to declare the glory of him who is on trial'.

26 Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 3.56: 'Then, in order to make it clear that he was not unaware that Pilate was hard of hearing (δυσηκοῖας) and difficult to lead to right (τὸ σκληρὸν καὶ δυσπαρακόμιστον) thinking. [...] The word of truth is readily received by those who have already learned it and love it, but not by those who have not. [...] Just as for those whose physical eyes are injured and who have totally lost their sense of sight, their perception of color is entirely gone, [...] so also for those who have injured/blinded minds (πεπηρωμένον τὸν νοῦν) the truth seems foul and ugly, though it implants its spiritual/noetic and divine radiance (καίτοι νοητὴν τε καὶ θεϊάν μαρμαρυγὴν) in the souls of those who behold it'. The comparison evokes associations with the famously ironical treatment of Oedipus by Tiresias, who retaliates by telling Oedipus that he is blind with respect to his ears, eyes, and mind, Soph. *OT* 371: τυφλὸς τὰ τ' ὤτα τὸν τε νοῦν τὰ τ' ὄμματ' εἶ ('you are blind with respect to your ears, mind, and eyes').

27 Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 3.85–6. On the symbolism and universalist appeal of the title, as prefigured in the trilingual inscription, see Pontani 2003, esp. 160. Wiles 2011, 61, 72, shows that most exegetes saw the title as an invitation to the nations, cf. August. *Tract. Jo.* 117.5, where he takes it to refer to the kingship of 'true' Israel, those circumcised in heart.

28 Cf. John Chrys. *In Jo*, PG 59.469: '[Pilate wrote the title] to ward off (ἀμυνόμενος) the Judeans while, simultaneously, confessing (ἀπολογούμενος) Jesus'.

29 Greg. Naz. PG 36.421: 'You should imitate Pilate for the better and write something well, though he wrote erroneously (κακῶς γράφοντα, καλῶς γεγραμμένος). Say to those who assay you "I have written what I have written [Jo 19:22]". Elsewhere the Theologian employs him as a foil for Julian, the Χριστοκτόνος, Greg. Naz. PG 35.589, C. Jul., Or. 4. Cyril C. Jul. Or. 6.43.

2 The Late Roman Judge

The language Nonnus uses to describe Pilate as an ideal ruler and judge makes the Nonnian trial an intense courtroom drama in which the governor exhaustively attempts to defend Jesus. In Matthew 27:24, Pilate rinses his hands in front of the people; in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, he does so in front of the sun, an act of Roman piety.³⁰ Since the Fourth Gospel does not contain a similar scene, Nonnus meticulously crafts the image of the governor as a fair judge. This is an adaptation with which the poet's audience would have been familiar, both from classical (i.e., Homeric) and classicising (i.e., late antique panegyric, pagan and Christian) sources, and with which they could relate from examples in their own society. In addition, Nonnus' incorporates apocryphal material, adding a further Romanised touch to the trial of Jesus, and evokes the positive Eastern traditions about Pilate. From such a portrayal, Pilate emerges as an idealised late antique Roman noble whose good intentions are more than obvious. Nonnus highlights the disproportionate nature of Pilate's task, since the defendant was not simply a maligned man, but God himself. How then to best present this ruler-judge to the audience?

In John's Gospel, Pilate can be read as exemplifying earthly concepts of rulership which contrast with the Messiah's eternal and soteriological kingship. In the *Paraphrasis*,³¹ Nonnus' turns Pilate into the epitome of the ideal ruler and judge using language that recalls the treatment of Homeric leaders, wielding sceptres and sanctioned by Zeus.³² In the first century CE, Dio Chrysostom wrote that good kings should be like Agamemnon, shepherd of the people (ποιμὴν λαῶν), an opinion reiterated by Themistius in the fourth century to Theodosius I.³³ Nonnus raises Pilate to the level of a Homeric chieftain: He is introduced as a proud leader (αὐχίης ἡγεμών)³⁴ and a ruler (ἄρχαμος ἀνὴρ),³⁵ an allusion to the Iliadic rulers of peoples (ἄρχαμοι λαῶν).³⁶ He is quick (ταχυεργός, ταχύμητις)³⁷ and quick-witted (δόξυς),

30 *Apocr. Gosp. Nic. B* 3.1: 'and Pilate took water and washed his hands before the sun and said: "I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man. You see to it"' (Schneemelcher, vo. 1, 512).

31 The analysis is based on Livrea 1989 and Accorinti 1986–7 respectively. See also Franco and Ypsilanti 2021 for Nonnus' positive Pilate.

32 *Il.* 1.237–9 and Hes. *Theog.* 84–90, see Schofield 1986. For the wise king, see Stob. 4.761. In Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 1.26.168, Moses is supreme king, general, judge, and priest.

33 Dio *Or.* 2.6, Themist. *Or.* 15.176c and 189d. For Late Antiquity and its revision of the kingship ideal of the Second Sophistic, see e.g. Curta 1995, Van Hoof 2013 and Swain 2013, e.g. 16, 35, 55, *passim*.

34 *Par.* 18.131 and 163. Hesych. α 8510: αὐχίης· σεμνός. Pace, Hadjittofi (forthcoming) *ad loc.* translates 'haughty governor'.

35 *Par.* 18.163, 19.2, 19.197. The debate is not just typical of John but also of Matthew; see the political undertones in Matthew Carter 2011, 45–168; for John, see Rensberger 1984. For the historical framework and first-century Judea, see Bond 1998.

36 Cf. Patroclus, *Il.* 19.289; Achilles, *Il.* 21.221; Deriades, *Dion.* 21.213; Melanthius, *Dion.* 43.62.

37 *Par.* 18.140: ταχυεργός, 19.6: Πιλάτος ταχύμητις. On Pilate's readiness as a positive characteristic based on historical sources, see Livrea 1989, 178. The reading ταχυεργός is contested, as other manu-

but also short-tempered (ὀξύς), jumping up from his throne during the trial, an echo of his reaction in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.³⁸ Such Homeric characteristics can be found in late antique encomiastic poetry for rulers contemporary with Nonnus, as in an epigram for a duke of Egyptian Thebaid that employs the word ὄρχαμος.³⁹ Accordingly, these titles elevate Pilate beyond his historical office and draw a regal portrait of the man, one that has similarities with his image on late antique sarcophagi.

Wisdom was also a classical feature of a good ruler. Themistius, echoing Dio, saw the good ruler as embodying justice.⁴⁰ In Christian thought, these characteristics were seen as being exemplified in figures such as Moses-as-lawgiver and David-as-judge.⁴¹ In the *Paraphrasis*, Pilate is explicitly depicted as a wise judge, a σοφὸς δικασπὸλος.⁴² Moreover, such epic language was frequently used in panegyric for actual judges. Marinella Corsano shows, for example, that terms such as θέμιστες are recurrent in the Christian poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus.⁴³ Gregory presents Marcian, a δικασπὸλος, using recognisably ‘Homeric’ terminology, which his contemporaries would have understood as a reflection of the secular foundation of his administration. Gregory also uses personifications, like Θέμις and Δίκη, to legitimise his portrayals. In a similar way, Nonnus’ readers would have been able to see in Pilate not only a historical and biblical figure, but also an administrative representative of Roman elites, enabling a further sympathetic reading of him.⁴⁴

To show Pilate’s justice at work, the *Paraphrasis* noticeably revises the courtroom elements of the scene. Following the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the epic poem, in a formidable amplification of a single Johannine line,⁴⁵ describes the crowd of the Sanhedrin as prosecutors (*Paraphrasis* 18.130: κατήγορος ἑσμὸς) and rephrases the question as follows:

scripts give θρασυεργός, but it does not alter the overall Romanophilic representation of Pilate, cf. Sognamiglio 2021, 277–8.

³⁸ *Par.* 18.159: ὄξυ νοήσας; and 18.181: ἐὼν θρόνον ὀξύς ἑάσας. Livrea 1989, 200 understands both instances to show Pilate’s earnestness in doing his job.

³⁹ *P. Berol.* 9799, 10: “Thebes do not fret; for there is no other duke (οὐκ ὄρχαμος ἄλλος) greater,” Miguélez Cavero 2008, 76.

⁴⁰ Cf. Themist. *Or.* 19.227c–8a (Harduin), and the discussion in Swain 2013, 35–6, 119 on king as an ἔμψυχος νόμος (‘living law’).

⁴¹ For Eusebius’ Christian kingship, see Rapp 1998. For God as the Ur-judge, see e.g., Cyr. Alex. *In proph. min.* 2.72; *In Jo* 1.440. For mortal judges, see the reuse of the Homeric word in the poetry of Greg. Naz. *PG* 37.628, 770, 790, 981, 1266, 1510. For Nonnus’ echoing of this imperial imagery, see Agosti 2003, 540.

⁴² *Par.* 19.39, and periphrastically at 18.157: θέμιστος ἀυλή; and 18.139: ἀγνὸν ἀλεξικάκων δῶμα θεμιστῶν. For Pilate’s justice, see also Laura Carara in Ypsilanti et al. 2020, 214, and Franco and Ypsilanti 2021, 375.

⁴³ Corsano 1991, 169–70.

⁴⁴ For the role of empathy with fictional characters, see Keen 2007.

⁴⁵ Livrea 1989, 180.

John 18:29:

ἔξηλθεν οὖν ὁ Πειλᾶτος ἔξω πρὸς αὐτοὺς καὶ φησὶν, τίνα κατηγορίαν φέρετε κατὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τούτου?

So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?'

Paraphrasis 18.139–45:

νηπόλους δ' ἐρέεινεν ὀφειλομένω τινὶ θεσμῶ
μῦθον ἀπαιτίζων φονίης ἐπιμάρτυρα φωνῆς·
'ποῖον ἔπος φθέγγεσθε κατήγορον ἀνέρι τούτῳ;
τίς πρόφασις θανάτιο; τί τηλίκον ἦλιτεν ἀνήρ;
ποῖον ἔπος φθέγγεσθε κατήγορον ἀνδρὸς ὀλέθρου;'

And he started questioning the temple keepers, as was his legal duty, demanding a word of testimony to justify their calling for murder:

'What word of accusation do you speak against this man?

What is the pretext for his death? What grave sin has he committed?

What word of accusation do you speak for this man's doom?'

The wording used here recreates a courtroom scenario in which the accusers are driven by envy and malice. Envy shadowed the trials of philosophers and sophists, starting with that of Socrates.⁴⁶ The Nonnian Pharisees are portrayed as jealous, and are perceived as such by Pilate, a characterisation that derives from the Synoptic Gospels, rather than from John.⁴⁷ A parallel to Nonnus' motifs of the jealous accusers and the harried plaintiff can be found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.⁴⁸ The legal terminology of the passage remains standard, even though Nonnus expands upon John's word κατηγορία:⁴⁹ Pilate's inquiry about the pretext for the sentence of death (πρόφασις θανάτου) has parallels in legal prose and the *progymnasmata*.⁵⁰ In an overall sense, Nonnus reworks Pilate's interrogation of Jesus to cast it as a late antique trial scene.⁵¹ Nonnus also shows his sensibility to what is at stake in putting a

46 Cf. the comparison of Socrates with the slandered Palamedes in Pl. *Ap.* 41b; see Quiroga Puertas 2019, ch. 2 on *phthonos* as a popular ingredient of late antique invective. See also Konstan and Rutter 2003.

47 *Par.* 18.51: φθόνον ὀξὺ νοήσας. 18.156: Πιλᾶτος δὲ δολοπλόκον ἐσμὸν εἶσας. Mt 27:18: [Pilate] ἤδει γὰρ ὅτι διὰ φθόνον παρέδωκεν αὐτόν. Mk 15:10: ἐγίνωσκεν γὰρ ὅτι διὰ φθόνον παραδεδώκεισαν αὐτόν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς.

48 *Aproc. Gosp. Nic. B* 9.2: "and you are always accusers (ἀντίδικοι) of your own benefactors."

49 Cf. Livrea 1989, 180 on 'legalitarismo'. See also Vian 1997, 147–9, on Nonnus' knowledge of the legal terminology.

50 Cf. Dem. *De cor.* (Or. 18) 9: 'on this pretext (διὰ τὴν αὐτὴν πρόφασιν) they condemned them to death'; Liban. *Decl.* 12.2.33: 'what is the pretext of death (πρόφασις τοῦ θανάτου)?'

51 By contrast, in Christian writings, Jesus' death is usually depicted as a πρόφασις for the Resurrection, without the legal coloring found in Nonnus. Cf. Cyr. Alex. *Glaphyr. PG* 68.44: 'πρόφασις ὁ Χριστοῦ γέγονε θάνατος', quoting 1 Cor 15:42–9, the seed/resurrection metaphor.

god on trial: He redeploys the term ἐπιμαρτυρέω,⁵² usually used in epic to designate the gods as witnesses,⁵³ to ironically draw attention to the plight of Jesus, here the god against whom mortals have dared to bring charges.⁵⁴ Similarly ironic is Nonnus' allusion to the risk of committing *hybris* when Pilate, at *Paraphrasis* 18.144, asks about the extent of Jesus' sin/guilt (τί τηλικόν ἤλιτεν): Used from Aeschylus to Callimachus to depict human insolence,⁵⁵ the verb ἀλιταίνω was also used in Christian poetry to refer to sin.⁵⁶ Jesus' accusers thus appear as sinning, both in a Christian sense and in an epic sense, disrupting the natural hierarchies between earthly and divine power. The epic language Nonnus employs heightens the drama of the Christian tale, as it is not any unjustly slandered human facing trial, but a sinless omniscient god.

3 A Socratic Dialogue on Kingship and Truth

In Nonnus' version of the trial scene, Jesus leads the conversation, transforming it from a purely legal interrogation into a philosophical dialogue about kingship, with a characteristic Socratic overtone. The first important step towards a revision of John's trial in the *Paraphrasis* is the signposting of the dialogue into a series of interrogative snapshots. The comparisons below show how the *Paraphrasis* builds up suspense, tightens the dialogue, and restages the moment as a vivid mutual exchange:

Par. 18.158: Ἰησοῦν δ' ἐκάλεσσε καὶ εἴρετο μάρτυρι μύθῳ
Jo 18:33: ἐφώνησεν καὶ εἶπεν

Par. 18.159–60: εἰρομένῳ ... εἶπεν ... εἴρετο
Jo 18:34: ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς

Par. 18.163: καὶ ἴαχεν ὄρχαμος ἀνήρ
Jo 18:35: ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Πιλάτος

Par. 18.167: ἄναξ δ' ἀντίαχε μύθῳ
Jo 18:36: ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς

Par. 18.174: καὶ Πιλάτος πάλιν εἶπεν ἀμοιβαίῃ τινὶ φωνῇ
Jo 18:37: εἶπεν οὖν αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος

⁵² Vian 1997, 147 takes the word here only in the legal sense; the epic *Kunstsprache*, however, suggests otherwise.

⁵³ Cf. *Il.* 7.76, *Od.* 1.273.

⁵⁴ Cf. Jesus as a witness of his own truth at *Par.* 7.65 and 8.24: ἐπιμάρτυρος αὐτὸς ἐμαντῶ and 5.1: ἐπιμάρτυρον ἔστω. On the witnesses of his earthly ministry, cf. *Par.* 18.102 (the Pharisees, the crowds); on John the Evangelist, 21.137 as witness of his ministry.

⁵⁵ See Livrea 1989, 180 on Callim. *Hymn* 3, 255: ὅσον ἤλιτεν; Hes. *Sc.* 78, Aesch. *Eum.* 267.

⁵⁶ Esp. in the poetry of Greg. Naz. e.g., *PG* 37.1286, 1504. Cf. those punished in the underworld in the *Or. Sib.* 2.300: ὅσον κακὸν ἤλιτον ἔργον.

Par. 18.175: καὶ ἀντιάχησεν Ἰησοῦς
Jo 18:37: ἀπεκρίθη

Par. 18.180: καὶ Πιλάτος θάμβησε καὶ ἔμπαλιν εἴρετο μύθῳ
Jo 18:38: λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος

Par. 19.41: Ἰησοῦν δ' ἐρέεινε τὸ δεῦτερον ἠθάδι μύθῳ
Jo 19:10: λέγει οὖν αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος

Par. 19.43–4: κοίρανος ὄμματα πήξε καὶ οὐ Πιλάτῳ στόμα λύσας | ἀντίδοτον μύθοισιν ἀμοιβαίην
πόρε φωνήν.
Jo 19:9: δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἀπόκρισιν οὐκ ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ.

Par. 19.45–6: καὶ Πιλάτος βαρύμηνιν ἀπερροίβδησεν ἰωήν | οὐ με τεοῖς ἐπέεσσιν ἀμείβειαι;
Jo 19:11: λέγει οὖν αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· Ἐμοὶ οὐ λαλεῖς;

Par. 19.49: καὶ οἱ Χριστὸς ἔλεξεν ἀγήνορα κόσμον ἐλέγχων
Jo 19:11: ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ Ἰησοῦς

Nonnus' ingenuity in rendering John's λέγει and its cognate terms is here evident. His style reflects the late antique aesthetics of *poikilia*, but the highlighting of the dialogic-related terms – e. g., ἴαχεν-ἀντιάχησεν, ἀμοιβαίη φωνῆ, πάλιν, ἔμπαλιν, τὸ δεῦτερον – amplifies the Gospel text, and allows for a deeper understanding of the interlocutors' personal and emotional engagement (θάμβησε). It is characteristic, for example, that in the second interrogation, when Nonnian Pilate explodes (ἀπερροίβδησεν ἰωήν), this is because Jesus breaks the communication contract, foregoing his 'usual reply' (ἠθάδι μύθῳ), and remains silent, facing the floor (ὄμματα πήξε καὶ οὐ [...] στόμα λύσας). The significance of the break is emphasised through Nonnus' continued use of dialogic terms: (19.44) ἀντίδοτον, ἀμοιβαίην, φωνήν; (19.46) οὐ ἀμείβειαι. Pilate's explosion follows his disillusionment with respect to Jesus' prior dialogic approach, as the latter foils his interlocutor's expectations before Pilate can reach the truth.⁵⁷ The exchange develops into an emotionally charged philosophical dialogue between unequal parties, since the god-man leads the way to the truth. Where the dialogue fails, this is because of the deliberate silence of its mastermind; yet silence in the *Paraphrasis* does not impinge on the revelation of truth.

Throughout the poem, Nonnus is concerned with the theme of Christian truth and its revelation. Pilate, as the epically styled governor, is the last character in Nonnus' text to be shown being drawn from darkness into light or truth when in dialogue with Jesus Christ. Nonnus uses this motif across the poem for Jesus' interlocutors, starting with Nicodemus:⁵⁸ This is one way in which the author shows an important

⁵⁷ On Jesus' deafening silence here, see Rotondo 2012, 15.

⁵⁸ Throughout the poem, Jesus is represented as 'pulling' people towards the truth or the light, a pattern repeated here. E. g., 1.1 (Peter): ἐς ἐλπίδα ἔλκων; 3.5 (Nicodemus): ὄπη φάος; 4.4 (the crowds): εἰς φάος ἔλκων; 4.61 (the Samaritan Woman) *ibid.*; 4.246 (Samarita) *ibid.*; 6.108 (the hungry multitudes). For Nonnus' reworking of the light-darkness theme in Nicodemus, see Doroszewski 2014, who does not notice the Socratic tinge; for the conversion of characters such as Nicodemus and Martha, but not Pilate, see Rotondo 2017.

predilection for *Ringkomposition*. In Book 3 of the *Paraphrasis*, Jesus praises those “who come willingly towards the light”, in a profound gloss of the Fourth Gospel, where only the nocturnal setting is mentioned.⁵⁹ From a generic perspective, the Nicodemus episode sets the tone for Jesus’ subsequent exchanges, as part of an overarching didactic plot shifting between light and darkness.⁶⁰ However, this programmatic retelling of John 3 is also marked by stark Socratic reminiscences: Expanding on the birthing imagery found in John, the poem alludes to spiritual baptism as the antitype of human birth, “in the imitative form of women’s labor”.⁶¹ Baptism in spirit “is perfected, in the vapor of self-born spirit, | is life-sustaining spirit, unmidwifed, | the spontaneous offshoot of a born-again labour.”⁶² The poet emphasises the female agency in (re)birth, in contrast to the more neutral γεννάω and its derivatives in John,⁶³ thus evoking a kind of transcendental Platonising maieutic (ἀμαιεύτω θεσμῷ). Thus, in dialogue with Pilate, it is not surprising to see Jesus feigning Socratic ignorance:

John 18:34

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· Ἀπὸ σεαυτοῦ σὺ τοῦτο λέγεις ἢ ἄλλοι εἶπόν σοι περὶ ἐμοῦ;

Jesus answered, ‘Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?’

Paraphrasis 18.158–63:

Ἰησοῦν δ’ ἐκάλεσσε καὶ εἶρετο μάρτυρι μύθῳ·
αὐτὸς Ἰουδαίων βασιλεὺς πέλες; εἰρομένῳ δὲ
εἶκελος ἀγνώσσοντι θεηγόρος εἶπεν Ἰησοῦς,
εἶρετο γινώσκων ζαθέη φρενί· τοῦτο πιφαύσκεις
αὐτόματος σκηπτουῶν Ἰουδαίων με καλέσσας,
ἢ ἐσὶ σοὶ ἄλλος ἔειπε; καὶ ἴαχεν ὄρχαμος ἀνὴρ·

[Pilate] summoned Jesus, and asked with a testifying voice:

‘Are you yourself the king of the Jews?’ To His examiner,
divinely-speaking Jesus said, as if He did not know,
though He knew in His holy mind, and He asked: ‘Do you proclaim
and call me the scepter-wielding king of the Jews of your own accord
or did someone else tell you?’ And the governor cried [...]

⁵⁹ *Par.* 3.108: ἕξεται αὐτοκέλευστος, ὅπῃ φάος. Jo 3:2: οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτός καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ.

⁶⁰ Fowler 2002, 214 on the ‘initiatory didactic plot’, which features imagery of light and darkness. For more on Nonnus’ didactic representation of Jesus, see Hadjittofi (2020).

⁶¹ *Par.* 3.29: ἀντίτυπον μίμημα γυναικείου τοκετοῖο.

⁶² *Par.* 3.35–7: πνεῦμα πέλει ζωαρκές, ἀμαιεύτω τινὶ θεσμῷ | αὐτόματον βλάστημα παλλιγενέος τοκετοῖο.

⁶³ See Rotondo 2017, 103–16, esp. 106, n. 24 on Nonnus’ probable amplification of Jo 3:4: μὴ δύναται εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ δεύτερον εἰσελθεῖν καὶ γεννηθῆναι; for the connotations of γεννάω in Jo 3:3: ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν see Seim 2011, 724, where the verb probably implies male birthing.

Jesus here appears to be leading his interlocutor, through sheer divine wisdom (ζαθέη φρενί), into confessing (albeit implicitly) the truth (μάρτυρι μύθω).⁶⁴ The repetition of protestations of knowledge and of lack of knowledge (εἵκελος ἀγνώσσουντι [...] γιγνώσκων, the last two at the same metrical position) is important for the characterisation of Jesus.⁶⁵ This kind of feigned ignorance from a god-man corresponds to the late antique reception of Socratic irony as being not deceptive sophistry but rather a pedagogical tool for leading the interlocutor to a higher intellectual and psychic contemplation.⁶⁶ Simultaneously, Jesus utters a provocation that is not highlighted in John: The cluster *πιφάσκεις αὐτόματος* comes close to requiring a personal declaration from Pilate of his free will, thus pressuring him more than John's reflexive formulation at 18:34: *ἀπὸ σεαυτοῦ σὺ τοῦτο λέγεις*. This notion, of a self-initiated quest for the truth, is also important for Socrates' disciples: In the *Apology*, young people follow the philosopher of their own accord, as "good men should be attracted to good men".⁶⁷ In a Platonising context, the teacher who simulates ignorance does so that students will extract the truth that is already in him; this is exactly the way in which Jesus challenges Pilate.⁶⁸ On the whole, this Socratic representation of Jesus is fundamental for understanding the gradual disclosure of key revelatory terms in the *Paraphrasis*, in an exchange that the author casts as a philosophical and theological dialogue.

The dialogue takes as its topic the question of earthly versus celestial rulership. Pilate was traditionally depicted as fearing Caesar's reaction should Jesus' alleged kingship become a threat to Rome. Though the theme of Caesar's anger imperilling the governor's situation and affecting his decision remains in Nonnus,⁶⁹ the poem seems more interested in developing the Johannine contrast between earthly and Messianic kingship.⁷⁰ Discussions of ideal rulership were a staple of imperial declamation: Some famous examples include Dio's encounter with Trajan and Apollonius' alleged confrontation with Domitian, both of which were later imitated by the martyr's and the bishop's *parresia*.⁷¹ The Nonnian revision casts Jesus as a leader with a much greater potential than that of the governor. Thus, whereas epic language was used to depict Pilate as a just earthly ruler, the same language is carefully redeployed to exalt Jesus' twofold kingship, both earthly *and* celestial. While the governor is de-

⁶⁴ Pace this interpretation, see Vian 1997, 148 who sees in the term 'μάρτυς' here only a legal undertone, namely that Pilate is acting as 'juge officiel et μάρτυς en apposition'.

⁶⁵ For the syntax of εἵκελος ἀγνώσσουντι here as describing Jesus, see Livrea 1989, 188.

⁶⁶ For Proclus, see 'irony is ultimately seen as a purgative technique wielded by the wise for the sake of transforming the lives of particular individuals in need of salvation'. See Layne 2017 on irony.

⁶⁷ Cf. Pl. *Apol.* 23c: *ἐπακολουθοῦντες αὐτόματοι*; cf. the proverbial *αὐτόματοι δ' ἀγαθοὶ ἀγαθῶν ἐπὶ δαίτας ἴενται* in Pl. *Symp.* 174b.

⁶⁸ Cf., quotes Proc. *In Alc.* 21.1–10: 'for too long to learn the reasons for Socrates' behavior is to become a lover of the knowledge pre-existent in him'.

⁶⁹ *Par.* 19.60: *τρομεροῖσιν ἐν οὔασι*. Jo 19:8: *μᾶλλον ἐφοβήθη*.

⁷⁰ Jo 18:37. See Ashton 2007, 412–3.

⁷¹ See the overview in van Renswoude 2019, e.g. 38–9, 115–20.

scribed as ἡγεμών or ὄρχαμος ἀνὴρ, the poem emphatically calls Christ ἄναξ, a title evoking Agamemnon's supremacy among the Achaeans.⁷² Nonnus also maintains John's rare mentions of βασιλεύς, a term used sparingly in the Gospel outside the trial narrative.⁷³ After the resurrection, the poem refers to Christ as ὄρχαμον κόσμου.⁷⁴ Additionally, the term σκηπτοῦχος, which Christ uses at 162, has a Messianic tinge, while also evoking the authority of the Homeric judge-lords.⁷⁵ The language used to describe Jesus' alleged earthly kingship may have made Pilate more uncomfortable, hence justifying his fears that Jesus might be a threat to Caesar.

Nonnian Jesus goes to great lengths to highlight the differences between earthly and divine rule. Expanding on John, Nonnus writes a digression that features the qualitative adjectives 'earthly' and 'not earthly', at *Paraphrasis* 18.168–78: οὐ χθονίη [...] οὐ πέλον ἐκ κόσμου μινυώριος [...] εἰ γαίηιος [...] εἰ κόσμοιο [...] οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν ἔην βασιλῆιος ἀρχή.⁷⁶ The need to understand the rather arcane Johannine 'of this/the world' or 'of here' as potentially meaning 'the earthly realm' is revisited in the apocryphal traditions on Pilate and in the writings of later exegetes, who, like Nonnus, opted for a clearer formulation.⁷⁷ Nonnian Jesus prompts his interlocutor to imagine what divine kingship would be by focusing on something the judge knows, earthly kingship. This Jesus goes so far as to evoke the image of himself as the leader of an armed campaign in *Paraphrasis* 18.171 with the phrase ἐνόπλιον ἀγῶνα, versus his more vague mention in John of the 'retinue' or 'followers' (ὕπηρέται) who would protest his arrest.⁷⁸ As in the apocryphal narrative, Nonnus reshapes John's text so that it underscores the danger of an uprising against Caesar, led by a leader to rival him.⁷⁹ Interestingly, Cyril also offers a parallel source for the idea of a conflict incited by Jesus in the form of a 'riot' (ἄνταρσις), which he presents as one of the

72 Hom. *Il.* 1.279: σκηπτοῦχος βασιλεύς, ᾧ τε Ζεὺς κύδος ἔδωκεν; and *Od.* 4.64: διοτρεφέων βασιλῆων σκηπτοῦχων. Cf. Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.12. Livrea 1989, 190 on the late visual representations of the Emperor with the Christogram.

73 *Par.* 18.159; Jo 18:3. For John, see Bond 1998, 170–1: "within the Roman trial [...] the word 'king' occurs seven times. The impression is that John wants to focus on the title and to describe exactly in what sense Jesus really was a king."

74 *Par.* 21.105: πάντα σὺ γινώσκεις, ὅσα μήδομαι, ὄρχαμε κόσμου; a title used for the star-clad Heracles in *Dion.* 40.369 whereas Zeus is an ὄρχαμος ἄστρων, *Dion.* 3.264 and Hera an ὄρχαμος αἰθέρος, 4.166, reminiscent of the Stoic allegorical interpretation of the gods Zeus/ether, Hera/air, cf. Cornutus 3.6.

75 *Par.* 3.81: ὑψιμέδων σκηπτοῦχος.

76 Jo 18:36: οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου [...] εἰ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου [...] οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν.

77 *Apocr. Gosp. Nic. B* 4.3: 'on earth (ἐν τῇ γῆ) there is no truth?' For the Patristic understanding of the world, see Wiles 2011, 76–9, as either the noetic visible vs. invisible world (Origen); *Tht.* interprets esp. Jo 3:31 and being of the world as a kind of spiritual birth, not-of-the-world, and is associated with Adam; Cyril understands it as the difference between 'divine nature' and 'created beings'.

78 Jo 18:36: 'If my kingdom were of this world, my followers (ὕπηρέται [...]) ἡγωνίζοντο ἅν) would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews'. Ashton 2007, 374 contrasts the servants here with those of the Sanhedrin who arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

79 *Apocr. Gosp. Nic. B* 4.2: 'my soldiers would not have delayed defending me'.

Pharisee's accusations against Jesus.⁸⁰ The political threat posed by a potential rival 'king' thus gives an extra realistic and historic justification to Pilate's decision, and the Nonnian version states this explicitly.⁸¹

A similar late antique conceptualisation of the powers and behaviours characterising earthly kingship can be found in Nonnus' reworking of Jesus' rendition to the authorities. In Nonnus' version, the supposed armed revolt would have prevented Jesus from becoming a 'betrayed/handed-over slave'.⁸² A comparable formulation is found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which also Romanises the trial scene.⁸³ A late antique reader of Nonnus' account would have understood the term μεταχείριος ἔκδοτος (*Paraphrasis* 18.172) to refer to the arrest of a slave. The concreteness of the hand imagery (μετά + χεῖρ) in this expression is evocative of the literal powers of touch and possession exercised by state actors over their prisoners, and would have conjured Pilate's most famous gesture, the washing of his hands, thus contributing to a holistic and positive portrait of the judge. From an exegetical standpoint, the mention of slavery revisits the Pauline idea that Jesus took the form of a slave as means of redemption.⁸⁴ The *Paraphrasis* emphasises the contrasts between the grandeur of kingship, whether earthly or divine, and the abjection of humiliation, in part in order to underscore the radical nature of Jesus' position: καὶ Πιλάτος πάλιν εἶπεν ἀμοιβαίῃ τινὶ φωνῇ / ἧ ῥά νυ κοίρανος ἔσσι; (*Paraphrasis*, 174–5). Pilate uses the title κοίρανος instead of ἄναξ or βασιλεύς, a noun used for both mortals and immortals, and which Nonnus evidently chose because of its alliteration with the koine κύριος, 'Lord'.⁸⁵ This is a case of variation which may also indicate Pilate's gradual understanding of the identity of his interviewee. Pilate, vested with earthly power and informed by its workings, sees in Jesus an oxymoron, the sublime king who is yet a slave. To Pilate's insistent inquiries, Jesus expands in a revelatory digression:

John 18:37–8:

εἶπεν οὖν αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· Οὐκοῦν βασιλεύς εἶ σύ; ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Σὺ λέγεις ὅτι βασιλεύς

⁸⁰ Cyr. Alex. *In Jo.* 3.53: τὴν ἄνταρσιν.

⁸¹ For the idea of Caesar in the Gospels and in John specifically, see Bryan 2005, 6, 61–3, passim, who argues that the possibility of a revolt was common between 6 and 66 CE.

⁸² Jo 18:36: ἵνα μὴ παραδοθῶ. The translation is mine; Hadjittofi translates: 'for me not to be delivered into the hands of the Hebrews'. Here, μεταχείριος is used for slaves, cf. the Lat. *manus injectio*, *in manu*, 'to arrest'. The term ἔκδοτος also has legal and political potential, cf. Isoc. 4.122, Hdt. 3.1. See Livrea 1989, 194 for more parallels and for the allusion to Acts 2:23–4: 'this man, handed over (ἔκδοτον) to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law'.

⁸³ *Par.* 18.149: χεῖρὶ τεῆ παραδόντες and 18.173: μεταχείριος.

⁸⁴ Cf. Philip. 2:6. Clem. Alex. *Paed.* 3.1.2.2. Orig. *C. Cels.* 4.18. Greg. Naz. *PG* 35.397. Athan. *C. Arian.* I 38.2.

⁸⁵ The translation is mine; Hadjittofi translates: 'then, now, you are a lord?'; Livrea translates: 'sei dunque un re?', *pace* Livrea 1989, 195, who takes ῥά as a translation of οὐκοῦν, thus 'caratura classicheggiante'. Hesych. s.v. 739: ἧ ῥά νύ τοι· ἀληθῶς δὴ σοι quotes *Od.* 10.401. For the Christian connotations of the Homeric κοίρανος, see Agosti 2003, 337.

εἰμι. ἐγὼ εἰς τοῦτο γεγέννημαι καὶ εἰς τοῦτο ἐλήλυθα εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα μαρτυρήσω τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· πᾶς ὁ ὢν ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας ἀκούει μου τῆς φωνῆς. λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· Τί ἐστὶν ἀλήθεια; Καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν πάλιν ἐξῆλθεν πρὸς τοὺς Ἰουδαίους [...]

Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'you say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?' After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again [...]

Paraphrasis 18.176–81:

[...] καὶ ἀντιάχρησεν Ἰησοῦς·
καὶ γενόμεν εἰς τοῦτο καὶ ἤλυθον, ὄφρα κεν αἰεὶ
μάρτυς ἐτητυμίας πανθελεγέος ἀνδράσιν εἶην
καὶ πᾶς, ὃς προβέβουλεν ἀληθείης ζυγὸν ἔλκειν,
γλώσσης ἡμετέρης ἀψευδέα μῦθον ἀκούει.
καὶ Πιλάτος θάμβησε καὶ ἔμπαλιν εἶρετο μύθῳ·
ἀτρεκίη τί πέλει; καὶ ἐὸν θρόνον ὀξὺς ἐάσας
δώματος ἐκτὸς ἔβαινε καὶ ἔννεπεν ἄφρονι λαῶ,
νησπόλους δ' ἤλεγξεν· ἐγὼ πολυειδέει μύθῳ
κρίνας αἴτιον οὐδὲν ἐν ἀνέρι τῷδε δοκεύω·

'I was both born and have come for this purpose: to always be
a witness of all-beguiling truth for men;
and whoever prefers to bear the yoke of truth,
listens to the honest word of my tongue.'
And Pilate was astounded, and inquired again with this word:
'What is truth?' And, swift, he left his throne,
marched outside the building, and told the senseless multitude,
reproving the temple keepers: 'With manifold words I
examined him, and do not see any guilt in this man.'

In contrast with the corresponding passage in John, the Nonnian Jesus does not throw the title and the question back to Pilate, and he refrains from speaking in riddles.⁸⁶ Jesus instead confirms his identity as a Lord, challenges the governor's juridical proficiency, and presents him with a choice (προβέβουλε),⁸⁷ just as earlier he tested his free thinking (αὐτόματος). Jesus appears as a more successful interlocutor than he does in the Fourth Gospel, corresponding to other late antique readings of the passage that focused on Jesus' eloquence, regardless of his interlocutor's final decision.

The secular or earthly understanding of kingship developed by Nonnus in the trial episode has an added Platonising appeal: Just as Jesus drew Nicodemus to the light, with Pilate, Jesus draws men to the 'all-beguiling truth' (πανθελεγέος

⁸⁶ Jo 18:37: οὐ λέγεις. For the irony of Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel, but only for the knowing few, see Ashton 2007, 436.

⁸⁷ LSJ s.v. prefers one to another. Cf. Livrea 1989, 196 on the issue of personal will here.

ἐτητυμίας).⁸⁸ The similarity is underlined by *parechesis*, here a signal of an etymological link between (παν)θελγ(έος) and ἔλκ(ειν). The cluster has an erotic charge, consistent with the Platonist idea of the soul's attraction to ideal concepts.⁸⁹ Additionally, the words used for describing truth in this passage are placed in ascending order, from ἐτητυμῖα to ἀληθείη, leading to Pilate's final question (ἀτρεκίη τί πέλει). Nonnus lists the truth-related nouns from the most to the least usual, suggesting Pilate's gradual process of understanding Jesus' tutorial.⁹⁰

Free will is paramount, however, for illumination to take place. Earlier, Jesus prompted Pilate to act on his personal conviction (αὐτόματος), just as in Book 3 he praised those who came to the light of their own volition (αὐτοκέλευστος). Now, Jesus presents Pilate with the disposition that those who follow him must embody: πᾶς ὃς προβέβουλε. Nonnus' phrasing contrasts strongly with the oracular wording in John, which describes Pilate as not 'of the truth', a phrase that does not imply active engagement on the judge's part. In John, Pilate poses his final question ironically, and leaves the praetorium without waiting for an answer.⁹¹ His seemingly flippant attitude is what led Francis Bacon to famously describe him as jesting, not wishing to learn. In the *Gospel of Nicodemus* 4.3, Pilate is given one more chance to inquire about the possibility of an earthly truth, a revision that shows his wish to comprehend while still being unable to perceive Jesus' revelation. In Nonnus, Pilate appears amazed at the response (18.180: θάμβησεν), a reaction not reported in the Gospel (19:38: τοῦτο εἰπὼν πάλιν). This innovation from Nonnus is compatible with his overall portrayal of Pilate as an interlocutor with a Socrates-like Jesus, a teacher attempting to lead his student, Pilate, to a truth already within him. Amazement on the part of the student is a necessary component of maieutic pedagogy: Socrates, for example, praises Theaetetus for his amazement, as wonder leads to knowl-

88 The interpretation of John's 'truth' varied among exegetes. As Wiles 2011, 68–71 shows, Origen took a more 'intellectualist' approach, opposing (perceptible) truth and shadow, but not allowing the term to express 'the ultimate reality'. Later, 'truth' became a synonym of orthodoxy, since Jesus' teaching, and therefore his disciples', is the source of truth. In an attempt to bridge these views, Cyril argues for a Christian orthodox truth that would replace the shadows of the Old Testament.

89 Cf. for the underlying notion of pulling etymology, see Hesych, 207: θέλγει· ἀπατᾶ. θάλπει ἀπὸ τοῦ εἰς τὸ θέλειν ἄγειν. See Livrea 1989, 196 on the eroticised wording and Agosti, 2003, 546 for echoes with Pl. *Phdr.* 259b and for erotic attraction here in the context of Christian Platonism.

90 In the *Par.*, ἐτήτυμος and its synonyms appear 39 times; ἀληθής 22 times; ἀτρεκίης 14 times, and νημερτής only 6. On Nonnus' faithful rendering of John's concept of truth not found in the *Dion.*, see Franchi 2016, 425–526; on the use of νημερτές, see Agosti 2003, 491.

91 On the dramatic irony between Christ's saying and Pilate's understanding, see Ashton 2007, 346: 'when Pilate asks, "What is truth?" he shows that the irony of which he is the butt is a hair's breadth away from being a riddle. Like the Gospel's other words for revelation, "living water" and "bread of life", "truth" too has an esoteric meaning reserved for those "in the know".'

edge.⁹² With wonderment as a prelude to Pilate's question, he seems to have been on the right track for revelation to take place. Pilate's exit in the poem occurs early in the same verse (181, penthememere), showing him to be restless, perhaps more eager to fulfil his political duty than to become a follower of the Socrates-Jesus.

4 Pilate's Confession

Nonnian Pilate too will have to deliver Jesus to the crowd, even if he does so against his will and against all justice. Pilate's reticence was an idea already found in Cyril's Commentary, where the bishop says that Pilate was goaded by the Pharisees οὐχ ἔκων,⁹³ although this is not enough for Cyril to absolve him of guilt for Jesus' murder.⁹⁴ During the interrogation, Jesus had questioned Pilate's accountability, inquiring whether he had asked the question of Jesus' kingship independently (αὐτόματος), or because of hearsay. The governor's final decision, as portrayed in *Paraphrasis* 19.83, reveals his reluctance to condemn Jesus to death, and hints at his tacit conversion to Jesus' message: Χριστὸν ἔκων ἀέκων ἀδίκῳ παρέδωκεν ὀλέθρῳ ('whether he willed it or not, he delivered Christ to His unjust doom').⁹⁵ The Homeric oxymoron ἔκων ἀέκων evokes Zeus' unwilling surrender to Hera: It was a popular wording in antiquity, even emended, as it was thought to be inappropriate for the divine. Porphyry, in discussing the Homeric passage, argues that individuals may act impulsively, yet willingly, i. e., while their mental state desires otherwise.⁹⁶ Nonnus' use of ἔκων ἀέκων can therefore be seen to underline Pilate's state of inner conflict in a way that is absent from the text of John's Gospel. Jesus' deliberate self-sacrifice (ἐκούσιον πορείην)⁹⁷ also stresses the importance of that theme in the poem and contrasts with Pilate's hesitancy. Compared to the Pharisees, whose

92 Pl. *Tht.* 155d: 'above all, this is the philosopher's passion, to be amazed (τὸ θαυμάζειν); there is no incentive for philosophy other than this.' For the erotic context of love/wisdom and divine revelation, see also Livrea 1989, 198.

93 Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 3.74: 'Here he [John] clearly says that Pilate was practically conquered against his will (οὐχ ἔκων)'.

94 Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 3.75: 'He was dragged down to the will of the murderers, even though he often told them and clearly insisted to them that Jesus had been found guilty of nothing at all. This fact makes Pilate liable to the most extreme punishments as well'.

95 The Gospel does not reveal his emotions, cf. Jo 19:16: τότε οὖν παρέδωκεν αὐτόν.

96 *Il.* 4.43: ἔκων ἀέκοντί γε θυμῷ. The line had been emended to ἔκων ἔκόντι, as indecisiveness did not suit Zeus. But other interpretations were offered, e. g., Porph. *Quaest. ad Il.* 4.43: 'for any deed that is done through our impetus would be considered deliberate; but not every deed is also acceptable by reason' (οὐ πάσα δὲ πράξις καὶ τὸ εὐάρεστον τῆς διανοίας ἔχει). Cf. Franco and Ypsilanti 2021, 376.

97 *Par.* 19.87–8: 'and Jesus, carrying His own cross himself, started His voluntary (ἐκούσιον πορείην) course towards death, undaunted'. Cf. *Par.* 10.64: αὐτοκέλευστος ἔκων; 11.210: θανεῖν ἤμελλον ἔκων.

deliberate murderous intent (θελήμονες) is made clear in Nonnus' text,⁹⁸ Pilate appears sympathetic, a man whose circumstances ultimately humanise him.

Pilate indeed gets another chance to exercise his free will and express his opinion when he writes the *titulus*:

John 19:19–22:

ἔγραψεν δὲ καὶ τίτλον ὁ Πιλάτος καὶ ἔθηκεν ἐπὶ τοῦ σταυροῦ· ἦν δὲ γεγραμμένος Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων. 20 τοῦτον οὖν τὸν τίτλον πολλοὶ ἀνέγνωσαν τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ὅτι ἐγγὺς ἦν ὁ τόπος τῆς πόλεως ὅπου ἐσταυρώθη ὁ Ἰησοῦς· καὶ ἦν γεγραμμένος Ἑβραϊστί, Ῥωμαϊστί, Ἑλληνιστί. 21 ἔλεγον οὖν τῷ Πιλάτῳ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς τῶν Ἰουδαίων· Μὴ γράφῃ· Ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ἀλλ' ὅτι ἐκεῖνος εἶπεν Βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων εἰμί. 22 ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Πιλάτος· Ὁ γέγραφα γέγραφα.

Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews'. Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews." Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written'.

Paraphrasis 19.101–4; 107–8; 114–5:

καὶ Πιλάτος θηητόν ἐπέγραφε μάρτυρι δέλτῳ
γράμμα, τόπερ καλέουσι Λατινίδι τίτλον ἰωῆ.
ἦν δὲ σοφῶ καλάμῳ τετυπωμένον· οὗτος Ἰησοῦς,
οὗτος Ἰουδαίων βασιλεὺς Γαλιλαῖος Ἰησοῦς.
[...]
ἦν δὲ μιῆς παλάμης νοερῶ κεχαραγμένον ὀλκῶ
Αὐσονίῃ γλώσσῃ τε Σύρων καὶ Ἀχαΐδι φωνῇ.
[...]
καὶ Πιλάτος φάτο μῦθον ἀπηνέας ἄνδρας ἐλέγχων·
ἔγραφον ἀσφαλῆως, τόπερ ἔγραφον.

And Pilate inscribed a conspicuous engraving on a testifying tablet, which in the Latin tongue they call 'titulus' ['title']; and the pen imprinted on it wisely: 'This man is Jesus, this man is Jesus of Galilee, king of the Jews.'

[...]

and it was incised by the intelligent drawing of a single palm in the Ausonian language and in the Syrian and the Achaean tongue.

[...]

And Pilate spoke this word, reproving the cruel men: 'I wrote with certainty that which I wrote.'

The adjective Nonnus uses to characterise Pilate's writing, θηητόν (θηητόν γράμμα), underlines the importance of the public nature of the inscription: with it, Pilate's assessment of Jesus is broadcast to the nation. Nonnus' wording for the tablet, as 'witnessing' (μάρτυρι δέλτῳ), evokes his earlier description of John the Baptist's oral

⁹⁸ *Par.* 19.84–6: ἀναιδέες [...] ἐδέχοντο θελήμονες [...] ὠκύμοροι [...] φωνῆς.

confession, placed in Jesus' mouth: 'but He himself, through the proclaiming mouths of God-tongued men, gave living testimony (μαρτυρίην [...] πόρε δέλτω), in alternate books'.⁹⁹ Most intriguingly, Nonnus uses the same formula in Book 20 to refer to the output of John the Evangelist, the quintessential witness of truth.¹⁰⁰ Terms used for the *titulus* (μάρτυρι δέλτω, τετυπωμένον)¹⁰¹ are, moreover, reclaimed in Nonnus' first epic signature, the *sphragis* of the poem. By conspicuously linking Pilate's written 'confession' with other truth-bearing narratives, including that of John the Evangelist and of Nonnus himself, this line makes the *titulus a pars pro toto* of the poem. Pilate's writing of truth becomes a *mise-en-abyme* for the poet's and the evangelist's work, and associates Pilate's confession, that of a gentile, with the writings of the evangelist, and ultimately of the poet – an apologetic confession.¹⁰²

With these connections in mind, Nonnus embellishes the effort Pilate requires to write on the tablet. He insists on the noetic character of Pilate's action by using words that attribute wisdom to both the pen (σοφῶ καλάμῳ) and to the hand that wielded it (νοερῶ ὀλκῶ). The noetic undertones of the passage and the word ὀλκός in particular, convey once more the text's Platonist tinge: In the *Republic*, philosophy is the study which draws the soul from darkness into light and from experience into being.¹⁰³ Nonnus shows a similar adherence to the Platonistic pull (ἔλκω) of Christian truth throughout the poem. Pilate also shares the notion of effort in writing with the evangelist, as ὀλκός can be understood as 'trailing' or 'dragging': In *Paraphrasis* 20.139, John inscribes (χάραξε) the miracles and his confession on his tablet; in *Paraphrasis* 21.137 and 141, he writes (κατέγραφε) and inscribes (χαράξει) his books. Pilate's meticulous inscription (19.101: ἐπέγραφε) is a comparable work, inscribed on a tablet and meant to resound for eternity. Finally, the governor reaffirms (ἔγραφον ἀσφαλῆως) his account more emphatically in the *Paraphrasis* than he does

⁹⁹ *Par.* 5.146–9. For the celestial and imperial undertones of the Nonnian crucifixion see Lefteratou 2022.

¹⁰⁰ *Par.* 20.138: μάρτυς ἀληθείης. *Par.* 21.140: μάρτυς ἐτητυμίας. See Hadjittofi (2020), 81.

¹⁰¹ *Par.* 19.104 [Pilate's written confession], 20.140 [John's written confession]: ταῦτα δὲ πάντα πέλει τετυπωμένα μάρτυρι δέλτω. Cf. Jo 20:31: ταῦτα γέγραπται. Accorinti 1986–7, 101–3. For the interplay between oral and written media of confession in late antique poetry, see Agosti 2009, esp. 55; on the use of epigraphic metaphors for books and allusions to materials such as stone to evoke scriptural monumentality, see Agosti 2010, 23, esp. with reference to the metaliterary importance of Eudocia's *Apology*, *Par. Suppl. gr.* 388, where poem (ᾠοιδίη), book (βίβλος, δέλτος) and monument (δόμος) are entangled.

¹⁰² Classical authors 'sign' their works by adding metaliterary comments at the beginning or the end of a poem. Nonnus identifies himself with the Evangelists and 'signs' his Gospel at *Par.* 21.139: 'And perceiving all these things, he wrote them (πάντα κατέγραφε) down in the book filled with the words of God. But many other miracles the witness of truth sealed shut (σφρηγίσαστο) in wise silence'. See the analysis in Hadjittofi (2020), 85–6.

¹⁰³ *Pl. Resp.* 521c–d: 'the study that could draw the soul (μάθημα ψυχῆς ὀλκόν) from the world of becoming to the world of being', trans. Shorey. On the Platonic undertones, see also Accorinti 1986–7, 103.

in John.¹⁰⁴ While in the gospel text he appears flippant, or at best harried by dealing with demands spanning a cultural divide, in Nonnus he is 'certain' (ἀσφαλῶς) of his words. *Mutatis mutandis*, Pilate's testimony is that of the poet-evangelist as well. The simple truthfulness of what the tablet says is juxtaposed with the Pharisees' chaotic *post-factum* requests that the tablet be emended to indicate that the title 'king' is a falsehood.¹⁰⁵ Pilate's *titulus* emerges in Nonnus' account not as a jest or a hasty scribble, but as a conscious declaration. Like in the case of stone inscriptions, his writing in Nonnus intends to be monumental. Pilate thus becomes a kind of apostle in the drama of salvation, proclaiming the truth even before witnessing the resurrection.

Nonnus departs significantly in this respect from Cyril's exegetical guide, the *Commentary*. We saw above that some Christian exegetes found a seed of truth in the title and even interpreted it as a kind of apology. Yet, in *Commentary* 3.56, the Alexandrian bishop shows a Pilate unable and unwilling to see the truth, a stance that Nonnus does not replicate. Instead, the poet refutes the Cyrilline text by showing a Pilate who acts more deliberately than not – he is both ἐκὼν and ἀέκων, rather than completely benighted, as in Cyril. In a similar manner, Nonnus revisits the parallel passage from Colossians¹⁰⁶ which Cyril references to describe the *titulus* as the legal contract guaranteeing God's salvation for mankind; the tablet acts as a seal on its own contract when it is nailed to the cross.¹⁰⁷ Claudia Rapp has wonderfully explained the Christian fascination with metaphors of sealing and stamping as instrumental in the shaping of Christian identity.¹⁰⁸ Nonnus, for his part, underscores Pilate's role as author, rather than mere scribe of the *titulus*, whereas in Cyril, Pilate is an unwitting amanuensis to the Saviour's truth. This is an original exegetical twist, as Cyril denies the judge's conscious participation in the salvation plan,¹⁰⁹ while Nonnus supports it.

104 Cf. Jo 19: 22: 'Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."' See also the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the *Apolytikion* of the Epiphany: ἐβεβαίον τοῦ λόγου τὸ ἀσφαλές. For the oral speech/preaching and the written speech/testimony, see Rotondo 2008.

105 *Par.* 19.111–3: 'Write not that he is the king of the Jews, but that he said in his mendacious voice (ὅτι κείνος ἔλεξεν ἐπὶ ψευδήμονι φωνῇ) "I am the lord of the Hebrews, scepter-wielding Jesus."' Jo 19:21: "'Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.''"

106 Cf. the interchange between Jesus' body and the title, both nailed on the cross, in Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 2.244, 2.274, and esp. 3.83–4. Willes 2011, 72 discussing Cyril, reads it as an 'unsatisfactory attempt to identify the title with the handwriting against use which was nailed on the cross', alluding to Col 2:14. However, in Late Antiquity, autographs and contracts were used as professions of faith, e.g., Rapp 2015, 730 on χειρόγραφον as meaning a written declaration.

107 Col 2:14: 'He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness (χειρόγραφον), which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross'.

108 Rapp 2015, eps. 729 on σφραγίς as the seal of baptism.

109 Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 3.84: 'This is surely the "record that stood against us," (τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον) which the divinely inspired Paul says [Col 2:14] the Lord nailed to his cross and led the rulers and authorities in triumph in it, that is, led them as vanquished and fallen from their rule. Even though the Savior himself did not fasten the inscription, but the coworker and servant of the madness of the Jews did it, it is ascribed to the one (καὶ τοῦτο ὡς αὐτουργὸς ἀναγέγραπται) who allowed it to

What Pilate confesses through his inscription is precisely the topic of his exchange with Jesus: kingship. In the *titulus*, Jesus is proclaimed king in three languages – Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, a fact that is not taken ironically in the *Paraphrasis*.¹¹⁰ The Nonnian version highlights its universalist concerns by explaining the Latin translation of the Greek word γράμμα at 101: γράμμα τόπερ καλέουσι Λατινίδι τίτλον ἰωῆ. Nonnus' connection of the two languages, absent in John, shows the importance of translation for the Roman Empire, but also the importance of both Greek and Latin for the promulgation of the Christian message. Following the Christian exegetes who saw in this inscription a foreshadowing of Christ's earthly as well as celestial rulership, the *Paraphrasis* shows Pilate finally reaching the desired truth in the moment he writes the inscription. By having Christ proclaimed as earthly king, a culmination of the poem's messianic and celestial insinuations, the text firmly establishes Jesus' kingship as being both earthly and divine. This is Pilate's act of confession, even if he reaches the truth and publishes it in writing through a somewhat clumsy process. Jesus' hexametric maieutic has ultimately produced a fine confirmation of faith from the governor.

Nonnus' poem takes a gentile perspective,¹¹¹ and accordingly uses the gentile Pilate's participation in salvation, even if only implicitly, to emphasise the universality of the Christian faith. Pilate's proclamation of Jesus' kingship is his most important textual contribution to posterity, an outcome that makes his dialogue with Jesus successful. Pilate's intervention in the trial can be explained as a means to proclaim truth to the nations: His condemnation of Jesus was necessary, not only because Jesus' death was a precondition of his salvific mission, but also because Pilate's inscription constituted the first written expression of Christian truth, a sign that it would subsequently spread throughout the world. Nonnus further alludes to the universal aim of Christianity with the mention of Galilee in the *titulus*. Pilate's inscription of 'Galilee' rather than 'Nazareth' underscores his inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation. That the governor in Nonnus 'rejoicingly' gives up Jesus' body for burial,¹¹² is a further exegetical proof that he is a gentile convert to Christ.

happen as if he did it himself. And he triumphed over rulers in it, since it lay open for all who chose to read it (προὔκειτο γὰρ τοῖς ἐθέλουσιν εἰς ἀνάγνωσιν), pointing out him who suffered for us and gave his soul as a ransom for the life of all.'

110 On irony in the Fourth Gospel, see Ashton 2007, 346, 413, *passim*.

111 Cf. Mt 4:15; and its association with the gentiles in Hippol. *Frag. in Gen 27* (Achelis); Euseb. *Demonstr.* 9.8.9. On associating Galilee with the pagans, see esp. Athan. *PG* 28.688 and Cyr. Alex. *In Jo* 1.582.

112 *Par.* 19.197: 'but rejoicing (χαίρων), that one [Pilate] gave the ever-living corpse to the God-fearing pallbearer', versus Jo 19:38: 'Pilate gave him permission (ἐπέτρεψεν).'

5 Conclusions

The *Paraphrasis* offers a late antique retelling of John which, like modern Johannine scholarship, explores the impact of Graeco-Roman culture on the evangelist. The representation of Pilate as a judge in a quest for truth depends on each era to redefine, whether jesting for Francis Bacon, powerless for Agamben, or fully committed to truth, as in Nonnus. Above all, the *Paraphrasis* offers an important glimpse into the late antique reception of John's Gospel. There would be no need to retell the Fourth Gospel were there nothing to add or restate: Thus Nonnus' embellished recasting of the Gospel of John can be seen to address several exegetical questions with its apologetic aims. Nonnus' answer to the pressing question of why Rome was so blind to the message of the Messiah is that it in fact was not. The comments on the governor's mental and emotional state portray him as a more human character and make him more relatable to the audience. By the fifth century, the apologetic use of the judgement scene aimed to explain the reasoning behind Jesus' condemnation by a representative of Rome. The long-owed apology, as embodied in Nonnus' text, was not to justify Jesus' silence and meekness before Pilate, as in Origen, but focused rather on his *parrhesia* and deliberate self-sacrifice. The reworking of the trial as a philosophical dialogue evokes the popular Christian association of Jesus' trial with that of Socrates, but Nonnus takes the similarities further: Nonnian Jesus, by reemploying Socratic technics such as maieutic, feigning ignorance, challenging personal responsibility, and inducing amazement, improves upon earlier Socratic versions of Jesus that stumbled over his lack of *parrhesia*. In this poem, it is Jesus' eloquence that implicitly leads Pilate to the desired truth. The trial scene is thus transferred from first-century Judaea to a fifth-century metropolis, like Alexandria. Pilate's eagerness to understand and his ultimate confession imply a triumphal understanding of Christ's lordship.

The Homeric and Platonising intertextualities Nonnus places into the trial also depict the gentile Pilate positively and prompt the late antique reader to identify with him. The classicising models and themes used to address the topic of rulership, such as the ideal ruler and the wise judge, are found both in Homer and in panegyric, and are part of the late antique discourse on rulership as refashioned by Roman elites. We saw above that both Pilate and Jesus are designated with epic epithets used for Homeric chieftains and successful late antique rulers. The analysis also revealed a careful selection of terms used for Pilate and for Jesus respectively: The first is an ὄρχαμος and a σοφὸς δικασπὸλος, but ultimately it is the latter who is proclaimed king and Lord, ἄναξ, κόιβανος. The lordship of Christ is thus described with vocabulary used for late antique panegyric. Additional philosophical themes, such as the issue of free will, sin, or types of anagogic learning, eventually enable Pilate to better apprehend the revelation, which is disclosed in a language spoken by the imperial elite. In the Nonnian reading of John 18–9, the erudite gentile, as embodied in Pilate, balances *paideia*, philosophy, and faith, and can reach truth, thanks to the fact that

his interlocutor, Christ, speaks in the same cultural idiom. Nonnian Jesus indeed speaks in a Socratic language to which elites could relate. In the case of Pilate, now presented as a late antique magister, *paideia* could be seen as instrumental to conversion. Thus, if in Nonnus the judge must convict Jesus, it is no longer due to his failure to comprehend the revelation, but rather because of the divine plan. Roman elites and Nonnus the poet could identify themselves with Pilate and unproblematically proclaim their confession and eventual salvation.

Pilate's crucial role in the enactment of salvation is made most evident in his inscription of the *titulus*, which functions as the judge's confession and as a testimony of faith. The act of writing words of truth, meant to endure for all time, functions at a metaliterary level as a model for the poem. Following a tradition stretching back to Tertullian and Eusebius, while also alluding to the apocryphal tradition, Nonnus transformed Pilate into an early convert, even an apostle *avant-la-lettre*. The title Pilate places on Jesus' cross becomes the ultimate confession of Jesus' eternal kingship, both 'in this world' and beyond. In the fifth century, Rome and its emperor had been Christian for almost two centuries. The 'confession' of the title, recorded in a trilingual inscription by a Roman governor, is a prolepsis of the conversion of Rome, and hints at the universalist aspirations of the imperial church. Nonnus' Roman governor, with whom he associates both John the Evangelist and Nonnus the poet, could not be a negative model; Pilate in the *Paraphrasis* is an active instrument in the Christianisation of the nations. Indeed, what he wrote was written well, καλῶς γεγραμμένον.

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