

Suspending, Believing, and Truth Telling

Reading Giorgio Agamben's Pilate and Jesus with Bultmann and Foucault

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Introduction

In terms of its material history, the New Testament can be said to emanate out of the finale of Christ's ministry, beginning with Jesus before Pilate. The manuscript fragment *John Ryland's Greek Papyrus 3.457*, most often known simply as P52, has since its discovery in 1920s Egypt presented the modern reader with arguably the oldest available Christian text, in the form of 18:31–33, 37–38 of John's Gospel.¹ Generally dated around 100 C.E.,² P52 contains a heavily fragmented version of John 18 and Jesus' famous dialogue with Pilate. P52 is, in a sense, the genesis of New Testament exegesis. In *Pilate and Jesus* philosopher Giorgio Agamben spends an entire essay on the Johannine trial of Jesus Christ before Pontius Pilate (the main focus of John 18:28–19:41).³ For Agamben more is at play than a merely rhetorically reaching back for a possible theo-political *Urtext*. Neither is it an attempt of rejuvenation or the re-hashing of arguments used elsewhere in Agamben's *oeuvre*. Jesus' conversation with Pilate is rather like an exegetical *Urknall*, reminding us of the material conditions of possibility for the study of the New Testament.

It is the argument of this article that Agamben's reading of John 18:28–19:41 re-actualizes the text in such a way as to skillfully allow for a connecting sus-

1. For an introduction to the ancient Greek manuscript known as John Rylands Greek Papyrus 3.457, Rylands Library Papyrus P52, or simply P52, see <http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/search-resources/guide-to-special-collections/st-john-fragment/>, accessed 2018-01-30.

2. For a recent discussion of the dating of P52, see Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of P52: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel", *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005), 23–48.

3. Giorgio Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, Stanford 2015.

pense between the fields of political theology and exegesis. This connection finds its strength not only from the symbolic and material importance of John 18–19, but more importantly, it draws from Agamben’s reading of Jesus’ meeting with Pilate and its characteristic suspension of judgment. Even though John’s Gospel at times offers textual resistance to Agamben’s thought and project (see “Bultmann and Believing” and “Foucault and Truth Telling” below), Agamben’s exegesis of John’s Gospel goes unnoticed only at the loss of the “guardians of the letters.”⁴

According to *Pilate and Jesus*, the Johannine trial of Jesus Christ before Pontius Pilate conjoins and then suspends the categories of justice and salvation.⁵ A particular suspension of the judgment of Jesus is here charted, by considering the trial as a place of confrontation between history and transcendence, earth and heaven, tradition and judgment. Something like a stalemate is created through the converging of these forces, leaving the future of Christian political theology and possibly also the view of history as “process” (It. *processo*, “trial”) in a state of crisis. Pontius Pilate embodies this crisis by an unwillingness to judge Christ as transcendent, while still handing him over to be crucified, thus leaving the would-be Messiah without a fair trial or just sentencing. “King” Christ, on the other hand, “did not come to judge” Pilate but merely testify to a kingdom not of this world. The transcendent logic of the son-of-God and immanent reasoning of the “vicar of Caesar” here cancel each other out: “The indecisive one – Pilate – keeps on deciding, the decisive one – Jesus – has no decision to make.”⁶ In short, Agamben argues that since the Christ is not given a true verdict, neither the Roman nor the Jewish laws are truly active in this event.

Regardless of the title of this article, there will be no attempt to engage with the overall projects of either Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) or Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Yet, something should very briefly be said about the general trajectory of Agamben’s work. The Italian philosopher (b. 1942) works on an array of issues and concepts, but perhaps stands out for his *Homo Sacer*-series (1995–) focusing on political philosophy and theology, and issues surrounding forms-of-life and biopolitics. In this particular endeavour, Agamben has with a critical eye, time and time again, turned to the fields of Christian theology, church history and Christian origins. Noteworthy is his commentary on Paul’s

4. The imperative given to Hermas Shepard in the third mandate, to keep the holy words pure and set apart (28.5) is a good descriptor for the general temperament of New Testament exegetes towards other disciplines “meddling” with the New Testament corpus. Exegetes are in this regard modern “scribes” – paraphrasing the discussion of ancient scribes in Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature*, New York 2000.

5. I would like to thank the Foucauldian Circle at the joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology, Lund University and in particular Professor Mitchell Dean of Copenhagen Business School, for comments on a previous version of this paper, presented at a seminar in May 2017 on Foucault and Governmentality.

6. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 58.

letter to the Romans, *The Time That Remains*,⁷ where we meet a thinker getting his hands dirty in the exegetical soil. Lastly, it is also in its place to here briefly mention Agamben as a part of a wider “revival” of the New Testament texts and exegesis as resources for certain strands of contemporary philosophy.⁸

In this article, I will summarize Giorgio Agamben’s essay *Pilate and Jesus*, by focusing on the mechanism of suspense as stalemate. I will also compare this reading of suspense in Jesus’ trial with that of Rudolf Bultmann and the Johannine theme of believing (Gr. πιστεύειν, “trust, rely on, believe”). Lastly I propose that Michel Foucault’s discussion of truth telling (Gr. παρησία, “speaking open, truthfully”) can function as a terrain whereupon both Pilate and Jesus can be located, while remaining in Agamben’s stalemate.

Agamben’s *Pilate and Jesus*

When Giorgio Agamben in *Pilate and Jesus* revisits the ancient question “who killed Jesus?” the attention is focused on the usual suspect: Pontius Pilate. According to Agamben, leaning heavily upon κρίσις (“judgment, separating, distinguishing”) as a stand-in for the concept of *the juridical trial*: “A traditional interpretation of Jesus’ trial must [...] be revised.” Christian traditions from antiquity and onwards often portray an ambiguous and troubled Pilate, sending the would-be Messiah to death on unclear grounds. In *Pilate and Jesus*, Agamben considers the figure of Pilate and a peculiar *suspension of judgment* of the Nazarene seen in canonical passion narrative(s). By concentrating specifically on John’s Gospel, Agamben maps a peculiar landscape created by the juxtaposition of an eternal and a finite kingdom, a spiritual king and earthly governor. It is here that the so-called “King of the Jews” is confronted by the “vicar of Caesar” in great detail. Agamben argues that the hesitation of the infamous Roman prefect draws attention to a state of crisis for the (Jewish and Roman) law. In line with the rhetorical flow in Franz Kafka’s (1883–1924) *Trial* and its treatment of Joseph K., both the Roman and Jewish law ultimately fails to deliver just judgment in the case of Jesus versus the Jewish religious leaders.¹⁰ The Johannine Pilate in particular, embodies a general problem of κρίσις and the falling short of the law, as the innocent Jesus is crucified.

Pontius Pilate’s role within the earliest Christian movements and communities can be described along a chronological trajectory from *obscure Roman figure* to *significant Christological witness*. Most notably in Mark’s Gospel (generally

7. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Stanford 2005.

8. However, one can argue that this revival has tended to be a bit one-sided and pertains mostly to the philosophical side of the conversation. For a recent thorough engagement of philosophers that turn to the New Testament in search for possible sources for political theology (e.g. Taubes, Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben), see Ole Jakob Løland, *Pauline Refigurations: A Study of Paul the Apostle in the Works of Jacob Taubes and Slavoj Žižek*, University of Oslo PhD thesis, 2016, chap. 1.

9. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 48.

10. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 51

dated mid/late first century C.E.), Pilate takes on a quite unclear role with regard to the crucifixion of Jesus, whereas in the Gospel of Peter and Gospel of Nicodemus (generally dated second and fourth century C.E. respectively), Pilate becomes a *defender of Jesus* against the injustice of “the Jews” and is perhaps not even responsible for the sentence of execution of the Messiah.¹¹ The Roman official rather quickly became a hagiographical object with an independent cycle of texts and a certain degree of importance across the manifold religious communities associated with the crucified Messiah.¹² The obscurity of Pilate, seen most clearly in Mark’s Gospel, is however never completely eradicated in later whitewashing traditions, and can be detected in remaining associations of hesitation, cowardice, and impotence, highlighted for instance in Dante Alighieri’s (1265–1321) treatment.¹³

Agamben is aware of Pilate’s general trajectory towards Christianization in early and later traditions, and by following this line of flight chooses to focus on John’s portrayal of the meeting between Jesus and Pilate,¹⁴ with a constant side-eye to the reception of the canonical passion narrative in the church fathers, Dante, and Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Of course, Agamben acknowledges the difference in how the canonical Gospels treat the figure of Pilate and, in extension, how they come to deal with the question of Roman power. Again, John’s Gospel is chosen as the preferred Pilate-text because of the rich description it offers. Here, John stands at one end, with a “round” conversation, and Mark on the other, presenting a rather “flat” dialogue between Jesus and Pilate.

The 58-page long essay begins with a quote from Carl Schmitt (1888–1985): “The Christian Credo [...] speaks of historical events. Pontius Pilate belongs there essentially. He is not just a pitiful creature who oddly ended up there.”¹⁵ Pilate is a crucial theo-political and historical agent in Christian theology; most early Christian texts all place Pilate at the scene of the crime. Yet, historically speaking, there is not much more than this to be said. Biblical imagination and fabulation of Pilate, for instance in John’s Gospel, is therefore a witness to a theo-political signification of the vicar of Caesar.

Pilate became a way of dealing with the aporia “Who killed Jesus?” “Why did the Christ die?” by describing an enigmatic juridical process headed by the historical figure Pontius Pilate, Roman prefect of Judea. In all canonical accounts, Pilate stutters in his judgment and is unwilling to perform his assigned role. While ultimately handing Jesus over to be crucified, it is unclear whether this is done according to the law and which law is given precedence; Roman or

11. For a discussion on the dating of these early Christian texts, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, New York 2000. On “the Jews” in John, see note 33.

12. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 3

13. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 34, 38–40

14. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 15.

15. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 1.

Jewish? Or is Jesus handed over to crucifixion outside of law? Who is ultimately responsible for Jesus' death?

Agamben's essay is divided into nineteen sections (pp. 1–45) and an epilogue named *Glosses* (pp. 47–58). Sections 1–5 (pp. 1–12) ask “why precisely Pilate?” and discuss the function of Pilate handed down in Christian canonical and apocryphal traditions, by outlining the continuing importance of the figure of Pontius Pilate. In sections 6–13 (pp. 12–37) Agamben offers some historical reflections on the main Gospel text (John 18:28–19:41) and focuses on the function of Pilate, as well as his key concepts of κρίσις and παράδοσις (“tradition, transmission, handing down”). A general schematic for how to read the Johannine dialogue between Pilate and Jesus is also presented. For instance, here Agamben notices that this central conversation is spread out over five hours and seven Gospel units/scenes, framed by the verb “to go” (ἔρχομαι) and the activity of going in and out of “the pretorium.”¹⁶ The in's and out's of the narrative and importance of the verbal marker ἔρχομαι is not only mirrored in how Agamben discusses this, the second part of the essay, freely going in and out of the Johannine scenes, but also draws attention to the dual forces converging in Pilate and Jesus' conversation. The main problem here emerges; Pilate decides to interrogate Jesus and send him to his death, yet at the same time hesitates and remains largely unconvinced of his guilt. Why?

In sections 14–19 (pp. 38–45), Agamben frames Pilate's hesitation by considering the duality of judgment and tradition actualized around the dualisms of justice and salvation; the Roman Empire and the Church, the eternal and the earthly. Agamben has Jesus represent the divine order and Pilate the finite, historical event, leading to a full-blown contrast between two opposing realms of authority and jurisdiction. Citing Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), this contrast is foreshadowed in the first sections of Agamben's analysis in the following manner:

[T]wo judgments and two kingdoms seem to confront each other: the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal. Spengler has expressed this contrast with characteristic vividness: “When Jesus is brought before Pilate, two worlds stand immediately and irreconcilably opposed: that of facts and that of truths, and with more dreadful clarity than at any other time in the history of the world.”¹⁷

The suspense of just judgment exemplified by Pilate is contextualized within this contrastive template.

The *Glosses* deepens the perspective from sections 1–19 under the claim that “the traditional interpretation of Jesus' trial must thus be revised.”¹⁸ The main

16. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 16–26.

17. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 14–15.

18. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 48.

point is that the Johannine trial is a mere simulacrum of judgment, since Pilate insists on suspending any juridical decision with regard to Jesus' punishment and ends up handing Jesus over to be crucified, thus following *traditions* in defiance to the Roman *law*. "As there has been a semblance of a trial, so what follows is presented, at least in appearance, as the execution of a *capitis damnatio*, of a capital punishment,"¹⁹ meaning that *Pilate and Jesus* in essence presents us with a trial without judgment. Jesus does therefore not die as innocent "under the law," which not only has major theological implications but also says something about "the state of exception" in relation to the law.

John 18–19 and Suspension as Stalemate

With the judgment of Pilate history bursts into the [divine] economy and suspends its "handing over." The historical *krisis* is also and above all a crisis of "tradition."²⁰

In Agamben's reading of Jesus' trial, the historical event embodied in the person Pilate and especially the sending of the purported Jewish Messiah to certain death synthesize the two fields of transcendence and immanence into an unstable unity. At a point in time, Pilate and Jesus come from totally opposite points of entry to symbolize the meeting of heaven and earth, religion and history, and most importantly κρίσις ("judgment") with παράδοσις ("tradition"). In addition to the citation above, Agamben also emphasizes the suspension of judgment over Jesus. How does this conflation of κρίσις and παράδοσις in suspension take place?

Pilate and Jesus considers the trial of Jesus from the perspective of a two-tier world of the transcendent and the immanent. The transcendent is bound to a divine economy of salvation. However, in Christian tradition, *history* is the site of the realization of God's economy. God becoming human, in the Christ, is subject to an "emptying" of certain divine qualities in order to enter into the historical level of immanence. Tradition, as handing-over, is then associated with the above, the beyond, and made available through revelation. Jesus Christ mediates between the divine economy and "this world" by moving between the two realms and revealing a kingdom "not of this world" *in* history, in *this* world. Pontius Pilate, on the other hand, is located on the finite, immanent level and given the task to represent a wholly secular order. As magistrate and official of the Roman Empire, Pilate has the authority of Caesar to bind and loose in all juridical matters, according to the law.

In the salvific economy, Jesus is to be handed over to the Jewish religious leaders and later crucified, for the sake of the redemption of the world. Judas

19. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 51.

20. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 30. Italics in original.

Iscariot's handing-over of the Messiah is instrumental to this end and of course, "according to plan."²¹ However, Pilate is not supposed to be an ally of Christ's transcendent kingdom but rather follow a secular-political logic to its conclusion when dealing with the Empire's subjects. Pilate fails to execute his role and Jesus is treated as any other Jew and falls into a socio-political lacuna. Agamben here draws attention to the similarities of the fate of the Christ with Kafka's the Trial; the absence of justice in the execution of Joseph K. parallels Pilate's sending Jesus to be crucified without a proper juridical process.²² Similarly to Joseph K., Jesus dies suspended of justice and dignity and is handed over to antagonists driven by corruption and lack of honesty.

Ultimately, Agamben's stalemate can be described as Pilate's conflicted choice of not judging Jesus; the representative of the transcendent level. Even though Jesus himself acknowledges that Pilate has power "from above" to judge (John 19:11), the trial remains in suspense. Agamben believes a reason for this is Pilate having problems locating the source of Christ's authority:

The question of Jesus's kingdom, whether it be worldly or heavenly, remains in suspense up to the end. And it is precisely for this reason that the final argumentation of the Sanhedrin ("We have no king but Caesar") convinces Pilate to hand Jesus over.²³

Pilate's hesitation is created by an either-or problematic, locating Jesus' discourse *either* from heaven *or* from earth. The final handing-over of Jesus to the crowd is caused by *vox populi* and treated as a purely political compromise. In the last instance, Pilate is convinced of Jesus as an earthly political threat, *to himself*.

In terms of κρίσις and παράδοσις described above, when delivering Jesus back to the Sanhedrin and the crowd, Pilate abandons the role of judge and allows for Roman protocol to be overlooked. Tradition is enforced as law, since the Christ is a reformist within the same tradition that is appealed to when seeking to put him to death.

The level of authority given to both Jesus and Pilate in Agamben's two-tier world is not able to solve the situation described in John 18–19 and Jesus is sentenced to an unjust death. The Johannine Pilate has the power, as representative of the earthly kingdom, to judge the heavenly King – but in the end avoids this. When the two meet, neither the Christ nor Pilate is able and/or willing to use the full force of their authority. This results in a hesitation and a stalemate between the transcendent and immanent domains. The stalemate between transcendence and immanence (as a state of constant crisis) is by Agamben

21. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 26–29.

22. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 51.

23. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 25.

argued to be symptomatic of our age: “We all know Pilate and his hesitation in front of tradition and the transcendent all too well.”²⁴

In the following sections, I will put Agamben’s interesting reading of John into conversation with Rudolf Bultmann and Michel Foucault. I find two aspects of suspension as stalemate missing in Agamben’s account: Jesus’ technique of *truth telling* (παρρησία) and a Johannine demand of *faith* (πιστεύειν). In short, John’s Jesus speaks truth in a public, open, and courageous manner, while at the same time emphasizing faith as a prerequisite for a correct relation to this spoken truth. Truth telling and faith are thus connected in John’s Gospel and produce the nexus that illuminates much of Pilate’s question: “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Bultmann will lead in a review of believing, while Foucault will help with truth telling.

Bultmann and Believing

Before considering the function of faith (Gr. πιστεύειν, “to believe”) in the trial of Jesus by exposing Agamben’s suspension as stalemate to the wider context of John’s Gospel, I believe it is of importance to note commonalities between Rudolf Bultmann and Agamben’s reading of John. Agamben’s treatment of a foundational, theological tension between Jesus and Pilate, the world, the state, et cetera, should strike an exegete as resembling the discussion seen in Bultmann’s analysis in his much-celebrated commentary of John’s Gospel.²⁵ Due to a joint attentiveness to the theo-political content of the *Urknall* of exegesis, Bultmann confirms Agamben’s recognition of a peculiar suspension of judgment in the trial of Jesus, as well as emphasizing the centrality of a mythic and clashing two-tier worldview, at the heart of this suspension.

Firstly, it is worth remembering that Bultmann’s lasting legacy in Johannine studies is hard to overestimate. *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (1964) is arguably among the most influential readings of this text in the twentieth century, carving out a milestone in the art of writing a critical commentary.²⁶ In a recent foreword to a re-publication of *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, Paul Anderson illustrates this by referring to Ernst Haenchen (1894–1975) who “describes Bultmann’s commentary as a giant oak tree under which nothing could grow in its shade, and this reference indeed describes accurately its dominance among Continental Protestant scholarship for several decades at least.”²⁷ Any reading in a Bultmannian spirit should be treated as a serious contribution to an on-

24. Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, 57.

25. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Philadelphia, PA 1971.

26. In this capacity, Bultmann’s commentary still holds up as an impressive synthesis in its treatment of both the relevant primary and many of Bultmann’s contemporary secondary sources. See also Paul Anderson, “Foreword”, in Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Eugene, OR 2014, i.

27. Anderson, “Foreword”, i.

going study of John's Gospel, and Agamben's exegesis is definitely growing under Bultmann's tree.

Secondly, Bultmann stressed an apocalyptic tension between humanity-divinity, as well as temporal schemas confronted in John's Gospel, particularly in the form of a present and future eschatology, as an external reality to the author(s) of the Gospel. Notwithstanding that Bultmann located a discussion of these tensions mainly within a source criticism and consequently analyzed the problems as caused by a more or less successful stitching together of John's three major sources (the passion narrative being one of them), Agamben and Bultmann share an interest in an irreducible tension between imminent and future eschatological order, as well as immanent and transcendent sources of authority.

Thirdly and more generally, Agamben and Bultmann share a vocation in relation to the biblical text that functions along the lines of Bultmann's overall "methodological" focus (also known as *demythologization*). Both point to the Gospels as sites of events harbouring hermeneutical challenges for a contemporary world, rather than treating the Gospels a traditional, and perhaps even lifeless, object set-apart for specialized and/or religious interpretation. The suspension in John 18:28–19:41 is located in the domain of demythologization, in the sense of freeing this dialogue from an exclusive domain of exegesis, and "translating," the subject matter (*die Sache*) of the Johannine material into the field of political theology. John is here read without binding it, to what Bultmann would have called, a constraining, historical or even exegetical *Weltbild/Weltanschauung*, thus making it possible to locate the potential of the text in an array of different contexts. Similar to Bultmann's commentary, Agamben's reading of John's Gospel calls for an exegesis of John 18–19 attune to the text's possible afterlife; wholly in line with the "missional task" of demythologizing.²⁸

As a fellow *demythologizer*, Agamben moves freely over what could be seen as discursive boundaries and in effect *suspends* a "standard" division of labor of the biblical texts' application that would tend to block any serious engagement with the text from, for instance, philosophical and political spheres. In the role of demythologizer, Agamben's reading of John's Gospel also produces suspension as stalemate on a higher level. This demythologizing sense of urgency in Agamben's relation to the New Testament strikes me as thoroughly Bultmannian, even though the latter shows no familiarity with the existence of the former.²⁹

What comes out of juxtaposing Bultmann's and Agamben's treatment of Pilate and Jesus? Bultmann is, as expected, much more detailed in the analysis

28. David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology*, Minneapolis, MN 2015.

29. Agamben does, however, refer to Martin Dibelius (1883–1947), Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), and Karl Barth (1886–1968).

of 18:28–19:16 than Agamben, which for example leads to a different structure of the text narrative flow and the trial’s relation to the Johannine story as a whole.³⁰ But more to the point, Bultmann and Agamben share an overall description of Pilate’s and Jesus’ interaction, as “the relation of the power of the state and that of God”:

The subject of the conversation of Jesus with Pilate [...] is the relation of the power of the state and that of God. It should become clear that the authority of the state as established by God stands over against the world, that it does not belong to the world, and therefore it can and ought to act independently of the world, and that carrying out of the state’s activity stands before the either-or: God or the world? *The responsible representative of the state can as well be open for God as for the world.* So far as the state is concerned openness for God simply mean straightforward objectivity in the knowledge of its responsibility for the right. *Pilate has chosen the standpoint of neutrality in respect to the claim of Jesus,* and from the state’s point of view he could do so, inasmuch as a *recognition of the revelation cannot be demanded from the state as such.* His neutrality would have been in the right if it had represented nothing more than the impersonal objectivity of his office. It has already been seen that this objectivity would mean decision against the world; and now it is indicated that precisely *this objectivity demands openness for God.*³¹

Without mentioning what is for John the otherwise central theme of faith, Bultmann above discusses the relation between the state, truth, and faith. Bultmann’s “Pilate-problem” can be summarized as the state’s expected responsibility towards faith-claims of divine revelation. According to Bultmann, Pilate’s handing-over of the decision of Jesus’ fate to *the world* (i.e., the religious leaders spearheading an otherwise Jewish faceless crowd) is as an immense failure. Pilate’s failure is framed as forsaking issues of faith and God, and refusing to respond to Jesus’ apocalyptic claim to authority. The so-called *neutrality* and *objectivity* of the state is handed over.

Remember that the world, following a Johannine binary logic of *kosmos* and *kingdom*, is based solely on lie and deceit.³² Since sovereign authority primarily resides with the Christ, as a representative of the divine kingdom, and only

30. Bultmann focuses his structuring of 18:28–19:16 on other aspects than Agamben’s inside/outside, or the coming and going-dichotomies seen in the interaction between Jesus and Pilate, and divides the text into six rather than seven scenes. See Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 650.

31. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 660. My italics.

32. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 652: “[The world] has made its decision against revelation and wants to be rid of the man who disturbs the peace. It cannot do it of itself; it cannot silence his word through its own word. And since the means at its disposal are ineffective against his superiority, it appeals for help to the authority of the state; the word acknowledges that the state is set over it, but it misuses for its purposes its religious law. That its nature is lying and murder is plain.”

in a mediated fashion with the Roman delegate Pilate, who is given the task to judge objectively over the world in the function of state-representative, the world is considered the arena of disbelief and outright hostility towards faith in revelation and truth. Instead of allowing for the possibility of Jesus speaking truth by testifying to divine revelation, Pilate falls victim to political pragmatism and seeking to please the religious leaders of the crowds. The political pressure from the crowd, in the form of “the Jews” and in particular the leading high priests, becomes too much for Pilate to handle.³³

Against the background of the verb-form πιστεύειν appearing around 100 times in John’s Gospel,³⁴ the relative absence of “believing” in the dialogue of Jesus and Pilate does not pose a great threat to Bultmann’s focus on faith in John 18–19.³⁵ The presence of the term’s absence marks out an appropriate thematic background for Jesus’ trial, since Pilate’s dialogue partner gives answers to questions with a particular apocalyptic tone, demanding faith in his truth. When Pilate is confronted with Jesus, “the question about the *law* becomes a question about *faith*. For without doubt Pilate himself is [...] asked whether he is willing to listen to the voice of the Revealer, and he must show whether he ‘is of the truth,’” says Bultmann.³⁶ Pilate’s lack of decision and ultimate handing-over of Jesus, in the last instance, is entirely because of a lack of courage to *believe* in the truth, i.e. in Jesus. In short, Bultmann’s point about neutrality of the state is not really an issue of neutrality towards faith, but names fairness in relation to both the cosmos and the kingdom.

Agamben does not address the question of faith in *Pilate and Jesus* and in particular how it relates to Pilate’s (ab)use of power. Bultmann claims that Pilate should have been neutral to matters of faith, in the sense of championing an objectivity that demands “openness to God.” No decision was to be made by the state *a priori* in matters of revelation.³⁷ Bultmann here clarifies that the

33. Bultmann’s particular understanding of “the Jews” with “the world” and “the people” in John 18–19 is not an obvious consequence of the text, but rather marks an exegetical choice. Contemporary Johannine scholar, Craig Keener, for instance, recently considered the relation of “Jew,” “people,” and “world” in John 18–19 with regard to the Jewish religious leaders only and not a general Jewish public. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Peabody, MA 2003, 1114. There is currently an ongoing discussion on the proper translation of Ἰουδαῖος in John. See, for instance, Daniel Boyarin, “The IOUDAIOS in John and the Prehistory of Judaism”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* (2002), 216–239; Adele Reinhartz, “Judaism in the Gospel of John”, *Interpretation* 63 (2009), 382–393.

34. Richard T. France, “Faith”, in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight & I. Howard Marshall (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Downers Grove, IL 2013, 223–226. Curiously, the otherwise for the New Testament ubiquitous noun-form πίστις does not appear in John.

35. πιστεύειν appears only as the Gospel-author breaks the fourth wall in relation to the crucifixion-event, in 19.35b “ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς πιστεύ[σ]ητε.”

36. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 655. Italics in original.

37. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 660–661: “It has already been seen that this objectivity [of the state] would mean decision against the world; and now it is indicated that precisely this objectivity demands openness to God. An unchristian state is possible in principle, but not an atheistic state.”

suspension of judgment in John 18–19 is only possible because Pilate simultaneously (1) forfeits just judgment on Jesus’ claims to revelation and (2) fails to uphold the state’s responsibility to treat faith-claims with fairness and “neutrality.” Instead, Pilate’s responsibility to act justly in relation to both world and kingdom ends with the handing-over of Jesus to a faithless world that had already made up its mind.

Foucault and Truth Telling

Agamben’s (and Bultmann’s) reading of Jesus’ trial, as suspended judgment in a two-tier worldview, reveals many interesting aspects harboured in the Johannine text. While Agamben and Bultmann have a tendency to cement dualities (of finite and infinite et cetera), or at least dialectically cement them as polar opposites, the common ground of Pilate and Jesus is worth a second look after reading *Pilate and Jesus*. I believe that Foucault’s reading of παρρησία in Greek antiquity could be a key to reading the suspenseful situation differently, in order to reveal a different side of the event taking place in John 18:28–19:41.

Even though truth telling (Gr. παρρησία, “free, bold speech”) is a significant Christological gloss in John’s Gospel,³⁸ and should therefore arguably be treated as potentially operative on both a narrative and rhetorical level in Jesus’ dialogue with Pilate, Bultmann only discusses παρρησία very briefly.³⁹ This can perhaps be explained by the lax scholarly reception regarding the history of the term, prior to researchers like Stanley Marrow⁴⁰ and, perhaps surprising to some, the work by philosopher Michel Foucault.⁴¹ For instance, in the penultimate pericope leading up to the introduction of Pontius Pilate (John 18:19–24: the preceding “trial” before the Jewish religious leaders) παρρησία is said to define Jesus’ discourse as a whole: “I have *in truthful openness* spoken to the world” (ἐγὼ παρρησία λελάληκα τῷ κόσμῳ, John 18:20).⁴² Bultmann can perhaps be forgiven for his negligence, since he nonetheless lays out necessary groundwork for a comprehension of παρρησία as (1) “the right or the courage to appear in public, freedom of speech, openness” as well as (2) the “actions

38. παρρησία appears more frequently in John than in any other New Testament text: John 7:4, 7:13, 7:26, 10:24, 11:14, 11:54, 16:25, 16:29, 18:20. Noteworthy is that παρρησία also appears in other places of the Johannine literature: 1 John 2:28, 3:21, 4:17, 5:14.

39. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 291 n. 1, 361 n. 6, 587.

40. Stanley B. Marrow, “Parrhēsia and the New Testament”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982), 431: “For, though its occurrence in the NT is not infrequent, and its function there far from insignificant, parrhēsia has attracted scant attention in the vast literature of NT word studies.” Foucault also comments on the same scholarly lacuna. Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*, Basingstoke 2010, 45–46.

41. Foucault, *The Government of Self*; Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*, Basingstoke 2012. Due to lack of space, I will only examine Foucault’s treatment of παρρησία in lecture three, first hour (1983-01-12) from *The Government of Self* and lecture nine, first hour (1984-02-29) from *The Courage of Truth*.

42. My translation.

performed in public.”⁴³ The meaning of “courage to appear in public” is said to be closest to the Greek original meaning and is therefore in some sense primary, while the later has come to have a wider influence sometime after the first century C.E.⁴⁴ This is, unfortunately, as far as Bultmann was willing to go with *παρρησία*.

In his final two lecture-series given at *Collège de France*, Foucault spent time looking closer at the “original” meaning of Bultmann’s distinction and how the ancient concept of *παρρησία* instructs an understanding of “self-government,” or *governmentality*, in Greco-Roman antiquity. What then is *παρρησία*? Tracing the ancient technique of truth telling in a Hellenistic context, Foucault situates *παρρησία* in Cynic philosophy and political-oratory when “a man stands up to a tyrant.”⁴⁵ The risk of death is a mark of the parrhesiast and distinguishes this kind of truth telling from more general forms of sharing opinions openly. In fact, parrhesiastic truth telling is only seen in a select few, willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of what is being said. For standing by “the subject of the enunciandum”: “In parrhesia the speaker emphasizes the fact that he is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciandum – that he himself is the subject of the opinion to which he refers.”⁴⁶ Since the Johannine Christ is the Truth (ἐγώ εἰμι [...] ἡ ἀλήθεια, John 14:6) and throughout the Gospel is described with the noun *παρρησία*, the parrhesitic character of Jesus’ “speech activity” (as Foucault would have put it) can be argued to effect Johannine Christology at large. When Jesus is faced with capital punishment from the vicar of Caesar, trans-historical truth is then put on trial and given chance to defend itself. The Johannine Jesus lives and dies as a truth-teller *par excellence*.

Jesus the Cynic is an already well-trodden thesis within exegetical scholarship, associated with John Dominic Crossan as a prominent advocate. Although the momentum of a Cynic Christ is perhaps past, we will do well to remind ourselves of the strong parallels that do exist between Cynics and Christ as parrhesiast: a wandering charismatic prophet, teaching in a primarily pastoral context, founding a peripatetic movement committed to living out the radical truth of salvation/wisdom in praxis.⁴⁷ In sum, Jesus fits a general bill of an ancient Cynic and more importantly, for present purposes, also Foucault’s archetypal parrhesiast-form.⁴⁸

43. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 291 n. 1.

44. For instance, seen in rabbinic literature and became a loan term for Rabbinic Hebrew, perhaps sometime around the second century C.E.

45. Foucault, *The Government of Self*, 45–50.

46. Michel Foucault, “The Meaning and Evolution of the Word ‘Parrhesia’”, in Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia*, Digital Archive: Foucault.info, 1999.

47. Paul Rhodes Eddy, “Jesus as Diogenes? Reflections on the Cynic Jesus Thesis”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), 449–469

48. Foucault interestingly does not associate *παρρησία* with the Christ (to my knowledge), but

Foucault calls truth telling a *technique* of “spiritual” governance of both self and others. Further, *παρρησία* refers to performative ability rather than content of truth, which I argue together with Bultmann’s discussion of believing, creates an interesting link. Truth telling modifies Bultmann’s input above, since a parrhesiast is technically prepared to allow the full force of suspension when dealing with issues of faith and divine revelation (taking spiritual responsibility for self and others), as well as all other possible matters of discourse. Jesus and Pilate temporarily share in a truthful conversation, where they both utilize the technique of *παρρησία* and arguably are able to adopt what Bultmann calls a “neutral” stance towards faith and each other. This notion of neutrality is then an effect of truth telling and is, once more, far from value free, but rather a radical openness for inquiry and a willingness of taking revelation of God as its object without backing down. *παρρησία* can therefore be seen as producing the technical possibility for Jesus’ and Pilate’s state of stalemate.

Agamben’s stalemate is then perhaps not created because of the converging of transcendent and immanent levels in Pilate’s hesitation, but by the anomaly of a truthful and parrhesiastic dialogue in John’s Gospel. When animosity and enmity disappears from the interaction with the Christ, it is as if the story is put on hold and Pilate is able to critically formulate the problem of transcendence: transcendence suspends reality. Note however, that Jesus’ claim to transcendent authority and power throughout the Gospel is always treated as a problem by the antagonists (Jesus equating himself with the Jewish God et cetera), and only Pilate is able to suspend Jesus’ claim by critically questioning it and locating him on a radically immanent terrain and the technique of governmentality. When Pilate truthfully asks Jesus, “what is truth?” – the Messiah is silent. In short, perhaps Jesus’ “transcendent level” is suspended in Pilate’s trial because of the secondary nature of the theology of transcendence in relation to this truthful conversation.

What about Pilate? If considering Pilate as a fellow parrhesiast, Foucault’s discussion of *παρρησία* can function as a template to consider the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus from a (radically) immanent viewpoint. Up until the very last scene and the very last instance of John’s passion dialogue, Pilate is trying to convince the Sanhedrin and the crowd of Jesus’ innocence and the subsequent impotence of the Roman law, in this particular situation. With the apparent risk of harming his own position, Pilate is portrayed as going against the *vores populi*. However, being neither a Cynic nor in the face of death, the Roman official gives way to the pressure and also forfeits the right to be called an indubitable parrhesiast outside of the meeting with Christ. Pilate does not suffer the fate of speaking the truth but caves to external pressure. Regardless, I claim that the conversation described by Agamben is characteristically truth

rather with other prominent Christian figures, notably Paul. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 330. This is curious in light of Christ being the archetypical “witness to truth” and martyr within the entire Christian tradition.

telling. My reasons for this claim is as follows: in contrast to the other dialogues Christ has with the crowds and religious leaders throughout the Gospel (see e.g. John 6), Pilate does not get upset at Jesus' theological statements or enigmatic and (semi-)obnoxious responses to pose questions, but truly engages in the conversation. The meeting with Pilate is also quite different from other similar situations in John's Gospel (see e.g. John 3 and the meeting with Nicodemus), in that Jesus obtains from his usual insults, double entendre, and rhetorical hyperboles. Something happens in Pilate and Jesus' conversation that stands out in John's Gospel and I see this event as a truth-event: John 18:28–19:41 as an event of *παρρησία*.

This joint event of truth telling between Pilate and Jesus allows for the establishing of *an immanent terrain* that grounds the suspension described by Agamben and Bultmann. That is, neither party is able to make much use of claims to sovereign authority in the actual conversation. If the suspension as stalemate really is set against the background of *παρρησία* as truth telling, Agamben's juxtaposing dualities can be considered as a secondary dimension rather than the constituting forces of Jesus' trial, meaning that the claims to transcendence by Jesus can be considered as use of a theological technique in relation to Pilate. Jesus then embodies an expression of self-governing in light of his theology, a technique built on a notion of transcendence, which Pilate finds intriguing from his own perspective as representing a Roman technique of sovereignty. Pilate, as Agamben rightly suggests is attributed with a less transcendent claim of authority than Jesus (not in direct relation with God, but rather something of a middleman), he wants to get a grip on the situation and is looking for the truth behind the religious leaders' agenda "to bring Jesus in." The suspense is not strong enough to hold and Pilate abandons truth telling, in the last instance, and hands Jesus over to a stronger party: the multitude.

This terrain of truth telling appears in the middle of two claims of transcendent authority – from heaven and by the sword. Appealing to a beyond *here* is absurd. This absurdity of transcendence ("I have the power to kill you" says Pilate – no, answers Jesus, "you would not have the power unless it came from the real power, which I possess") is brought out, in the form of a suspension that sheds light and foreshadows the problem of appealing for a "not of this world" argument in both parties. When speaking the truth to each other, for whatever reasons the truth is spoken, the absurdity clinging to certain techniques of sovereignty and not speaking about the most obvious source of political power, *the crowd*, is revealed.⁴⁹

In relation to Foucault's spiritual definition of *παρρησία*, the terrain of truth telling can, in the last instance, be situated as governmentality of the multi-

49. See note 33 on the complexity with interpreting and translating Ἰουδαῖος. The crowds and "the Jews" in John 18–19 should therefore not be equated, at least not without a discussion paying attention to the *Adversus Iudaeos* discourse of Greco-Roman antiquity and also the anti-Semitic uses of the New Testament and texts like John 18–19.

tude. When sovereignty is discussed in this terrain, the crowd emerges as the main inhabitants of political power and authority. Pilate does not hand over a decision *ex nihilo*. The crowd, spearheaded by the high priests, forces it from him. The event of truth telling in John 18:28–19:41 speaks of an interesting aspect of powerlessness to be seen in Jesus and Pilate, especially when framed by the faceless crowd. Their claims to transcendence and authority cannot get rid of the very real political force surrounding the charade of the high priests, the hesitation of Pilate, and the obscurity of the Christ. The truth-event reveals that Agamben's suspension of transcendence might be related to the desires of the crowd. The multitude is the excluded Other in Pilate's and Jesus' discourse that returns with a vengeance. Transcendence can here be seen as inscribed into the powerlessness of the political in face of the crowd.⁵⁰

In contrast to hard-liner antagonists in John's Gospel, Pilate tries to treat Jesus' claim to heavenly kingship parrhiastically and as a consequence ends up suspending it temporarily, putting it in a stalemate *in time*. Yet, time goes on, and the eternal, in the form of transcendent authority, is then perhaps best described as an ideal produced by and in time. Jesus' theological claim *von oben* is interesting to Pilate, who ultimately decides that it belongs to a politically immanent sphere. As truth-tellers, Jesus and Pilate are then both located on the same terrain of immanence and neither can claim a special revelation from above *when speaking frankly*, which is also why Pilate is somewhat bewildered by Jesus' theology. The trial can then perhaps be seen as a folding of the divine into the human, with Pilate's questioning of Jesus. If the two would have had a few more hours of talking, and less coming and going of the Sanhedrin, perhaps there would have been a more illuminating outcome rather than Pilate's tired resolution to give in to the crowd. A general transcendent claim of authority was not on trial, in my reading, but rather a suspension of a transcendent technique and claim to authority in face of the real political power of the multitude.

Conclusion

Giorgio Agamben's *Pilate and Jesus* frames the Johannine trial of Jesus before Pilate in terms of a curious suspension of authority and sovereignty. Pontius Pilate is described as an earthly representative equipped with the power of the Roman state to judge Jesus the Christ, but avoids judgment and instead "hands him over" to the hostile crowds. In contrast, Jesus the Nazarene is described as the heavenly representative, with divine authority, who also abstains from judgment and lets his own death be a symbol and testimony to God's truth. This particular stalemate between transcendence and immanence (as a state of constant crisis) is by Agamben argued to be symptomatic of our age.

50. A special thank you is here due to Dr. Andreas Seland for phrasing this aspect so well, in commenting on a draft of this paper.

Agamben's intriguing display of suspension as stalemate between the Christ and Caesar's Vicar in John 18:28–19:41 is supported by the scholarship of Rudolf Bultmann, with the addendum of a Johannine narrative stress of believing (πιστεύειν). Pilate's ultimate failure to decide on the fate of Jesus is also a failure of the state to uphold neutrality and objectivity in relation to faith. Pilate's responsibility towards Jesus should, according to Bultmann, be treated with reference to the centrality of believing in the Gospel, and the state's obligation to embody openness to God and revelation.

Foucault's notion of truth telling (παρησία) confirms and adds further depth to Agamben's reading of suspension as stalemate in John 18–19, by treating Jesus' dialogue with Pilate from the vantage point of an immanent terrain, or as truth-event. The technique of truth telling clarifies the relation of believing to suspension, and therefore builds on Bultmann's contribution to the discussion, by pointing towards the technical necessity of governmentality for suspending matters of revelation and creating the terrain essential for truth telling in John 18–19.

Lastly, Agamben's *Pilate and Jesus* also exemplifies a sort of higher suspension, in line with Bultmann's mission of demythologization. If suspension as stalemate is a mark of truthful engagement and conversation, and truth telling the ability to hold truth at a distance while at the same time being ready to engage with questions of faith and revelation, then *Pilate and Jesus* is, in and of itself, an invitation to partake in a creative suspension produced when interdisciplinary spaces and scholarship meet. Hopefully exegetes and theologians alike will hear this silent call and join in the conversation, parrhesiastically and with a suspenseful openness. ▲

SUMMARY

In this article, Giorgio Agamben's essay *Pilate and Jesus* and in particular its notion of *suspension as stalemate* is treated as an important contribution to an ongoing exegetical conversation about the theological valence and event of John 18:28–19:41. In Agamben's essay, the suspension created by the dialogue between the Christ and the "Vicar of Caesar" demonstrates a peculiar stalemate of immanent and transcendent claims to sovereignty. Then, the central concept of believing (πιστεύειν), both for John's Gospel as a whole and the passion narrative in particular, is juxtaposed with the theo-political thrust of *Pilate and Jesus*. By turning to Rudolf Bultmann, the article suggests a minor corrective to Agamben's reading of John and guides the concept of suspension as stalemate towards a slightly different outcome. Lastly, as a final supplement to Agamben's suspension as stalemate, Michel Foucault's famous emphasis on the Greco-Roman concept of truth telling (παρησία), from his final two lecture-series given at *Collège de France*, is also brought into play. Considering the conversation of Jesus and Pilate as taking place from an

immanent terrain of truth telling, Agamben's vision of suspension in the trial of Christ is extended further.