

Irony as an Interpretative Key to the Narrative of the Dream of Pilate's Wife (Mt 27:19)

以反諷的手法作鑰匙 闡釋比拉多妻子的夢 (瑪27:19)

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摘要：本文討論比拉多妻子的夢，此乃六個《瑪竇福音》有關夢境敘述的其中一個，是最後，也是最短的一個。「比拉多正坐堂時，他的妻子差人到他跟前說：『你千萬不要干涉那義人的事，因為我為他，今天在夢中受了許多苦。』」（27:19）雖然記述這個夢境的篇幅只有一節，但這一小節著實告訴我們許多。本文運用文學批判的釋經法，嘗試透過反諷的手法，闡釋比拉多妻子的夢。

關鍵詞：夢、比拉多的妻子、反諷

Abstract: *This article examines the narrative of the dream of Pilate's wife. Being one of the six dream narratives related in the Gospel according to Matthew, this narrative is the last one as well as the shortest. "While [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him'" (27:19). Though the dream narrative is told in a single verse, this verse actually tells us a lot. By employing the method of literary criticism, the current article is an attempt to interpret the dream of Pilate's wife using the literary device of irony.*

Keywords: *dream, Pilate's wife, irony*

1. Introduction

The *Gospel according to Matthew* relates altogether six dreams: 1:18b-25, 2:12, 2:13-15, 2:19-21, 2:22 and 27:19, among which three are relatively longer reports (1:18b-25; 2:13-15, 19-21) and the other three are only brief references to dreams (2:12, 22; 27:19).¹ All this finds no parallel records in any other Synoptic Gospels or John. In fact in the entire Greek NT, the term ὄναρ—translated as “dream” in Matthew—is found exclusively in this Gospel.² Hence it seems evident that the motif of dreams is one appealing particularly to this evangelist.³ It seems equally evident that the evangelist has set his mind on achieving a certain purpose or message by means of dreams. Thus, our interpretation of dreams plays a key role in our reading of the Gospel.

1 Derek S. Dodson, *Reading Dreams: An Audience-Critical Approach to the Dreams in the Gospel of Matthew*, Library of New Testament Studies 397 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 1. Dodson's monograph has proved to be an indispensable resource to interpret the dreams in Matthew and has given much inspiration for the current paper right from the outset.

2 Given the limited space of the present work, we will not enter into discussion on the differences between the definitions and uses of “dreams,” “visions” and “appearances” in the NT. Interested readers may consult, e.g., Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereafter: BDAG, s.vv. “ὄναρ, τό” (Mt 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; 27:19), “ἐνόπιον, ου, τό” (Acts 2:17), “ὄραμα, ατος, τό” (Mt 17:9; Acts 7:31; 9:10, 12; 10:3, 17, 19; 11:5; 12:9; 16:9, 10; 18:9) and “ὄρασις, εως, ἡ” (Acts 2:17; Rev 4:3; 9:17).

3 Robert Gnuse, “Dream Genre in the Matthean Infancy Narratives,” *Novum Testamentum* 32, no. 2 (1990): 117.

This paper examines the last dream in Matthew: the dream of Pilate's wife. The narrative is told in a single verse: 27:19. Nevertheless, as Getty-Sullivan rightly affirms, "Matthew manages to say quite a lot with this one sentence."⁴ On the other hand, there are some interpretative ambiguities with regard to the meaning and nature of this dream.⁵ The short message Pilate's wife sends to her husband begins with μηδὲν σοὶ καὶ τῷ δίκαιῳ ἐκείνῳ (literally, "nothing to you and to that righteous [person]") which in the present context means: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man."⁶ Thus, questions arise: Does Pilate heed his wife's advice? Are there any implications of the intervention of the dream message in the middle of the trial of Jesus? What is the function of relating the dream of Pilate's wife in the Gospel, given that Jesus is executed unjustly at the end? By employing the method of literary criticism, the current paper is an attempt to interpret the dream of Pilate's wife using the literary device of irony. It is believed that using irony as an interpretative key can help shed light on the questions raised.

It is a common practice among biblical scholars to compare the passion narratives recounted in the four canonical Gospels,⁷ even more so to make comparisons between the accounts of

4 Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 131.

5 See Dodson, *Reading Dreams*, pp. 162-163.

6 For the English translation, quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

7 Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, Anchor Bible Reference Library, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994); and Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) are two typical examples.

Matthew and Mark,⁸ on the grounds that Matthew depends heavily upon Mark.⁹ Our treatment of the passion narrative, however, will be focused on Matthew's version alone. First and foremost, Matthew is the only Gospel where this dream is related. Second, while a synoptic study or redactional analysis requires comparison across biblical books, a literary analysis focuses on the function of the literary device in interpreting a pericope. The pericope is to be respected in its own right. Our investigation of the dream of Pilate's wife, therefore, will be based on its context in the Matthean passion narrative.

Before we proceed to the main body of the paper, there remain some preliminary issues that need to be clarified, namely the context of the dream and a textual problem.

1.1 Context of the Dream

The dream of Pilate's Wife (27:19) fits neatly into the big context of Matthew's passion narrative. It has its immediate context in the pericope of Jesus' trial before Pilate (27:11-26), which falls within the larger context of the arrest, trial, and death of Jesus

⁸ Thus, e.g., W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary, vol. 3 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004); Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33B (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995); and Donald P. Senior, *The Passion Narrative According to Matthew: A Redactional Study*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 39 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1975), etc.

⁹ As Senior states at the introduction of his redactional study on Matthew, "It is estimated that four-fifths of the Matthean Passion story is identical in vocabulary and content with its Markan counterpart." Senior, *Passion Narrative According to Matthew*, p. 1.

(26:47–27:56). According to Brown’s division, the Roman trial pericope in Matthew (27:11-26) can be subdivided into three parts: i) initial questioning by Pilate (vv. 11-14); ii) Barabbas (vv. 15-21) and iii) condemnation of Jesus (vv. 22-26).¹⁰ The dream is very appropriate for its context which accounts for the events leading up to Jesus’ condemnation. Its message is fundamentally concerned with the notions surrounding the final condemnation, that is, the notion of innocence (vv. 23a & 24) and that of unjust shedding of innocent blood (vv. 24-25).¹¹ These notions will come up again in our discussion later.

1.2 Textual Problem

There is a textual problem which involves the designation of Barabbas in 27:16-17. The name Jesus is put within square brackets in the identical text shared by the 28th edition of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland)¹² and the 5th edition of the United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament* (UBS GNT)¹³, thus: [Ἰησοῦν] Βαραββᾶν (v. 16) and [Ἰησοῦν τὸν] Βαραββᾶν (v. 17), “Jesus Barabbas.”¹⁴ The vast majority of manuscripts do not attest

10 Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. xv. Note that the part relating to Jesus before Herod has been removed here.

11 Cf. Senior, *Passion Narrative According to Matthew*, p. 245, with some modification of the biblical reference. Senior’s view is also referred to in Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, p. 132.

12 Henceforth: NA28.

13 Henceforth: GNT5.

14 See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 56. For details of the textual witnesses, refer to the critical apparatus of NA28. It is noticed that the critical apparatus of GNT5 also provides information of great details for these two verses.

the presence of Ἰησοῦν;¹⁵ only a few do.¹⁶ Origen disapproves of the reading Jesus Barabbas for the reason that “in the whole range of the scripture we know that no one who is a sinner [is called] Jesus.”¹⁷ In the light of the survival of the reading Jesus Barabbas, it is more plausible that Barabbas was likewise called Jesus but the name Jesus was later deleted by pious scribes; it is inconceivable that the name of the Lord could otherwise have been added into the text.¹⁸ The conclusion made by the UBS GNT Committee concerning this textual problem reads:

[T]he original text of Matthew had the double name in both verses and... Ἰησοῦν was deliberately suppressed in most witnesses for reverential considerations. In view of the relatively slender external support for Ἰησοῦν, however, it was deemed fitting to enclose the word within square brackets.¹⁹

Even though the textual problem regarding the designation of Barabbas is not an issue of direct relationship to the dream we are dealing with, the possibility—likelihood indeed—of Barabbas also bearing the name Jesus will open up more room for our discussion

15 Witnesses include: Codexes Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, Bezae and other uncials, Family 13 and other minuscules, Majority text, the entire Latin tradition, all the Coptic versions, and so on.

16 They include: uncial 038, the original reading of minuscule 700 (these first two manuscripts have “τόν” omitted in v. 17), Family 1, Syrus Sinaiticus, and a few others.

17 Quotation from Origen as quoted from Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, p. 56.

18 See Hagner, *Matthew 24–28*, p. 820. Hagner further mentions the possibility of harmonization of Mt 27:16-17 with Mk 15:6, where only the name Barabbas is recorded.

19 Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, p. 56.

on the irony in the narrative. We will come back to this point later. Having clarified the problem pertaining to Barabbas, we now return to the theme of this paper, the dream of Pilate's wife. And we will begin with a literary analysis of the dream.

2. Literary Analysis of the Dream of Pilate's Wife

2.1 The Character of Pilate's Wife

When the character of Pilate's wife is introduced in 27:19, she is unnamed. In Christian tradition, her name is Claudia Procula.²⁰ Being the wife of the Roman governor, her name is supposedly known to the evangelist of Matthew. Yet taking into consideration the possible rationale behind the evangelist's decision not to mention her name,²¹ we will conform to her designation in relation to Pilate as given in the Gospel: ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ ("his wife") and refer to her as "Pilate's wife."

As a matter of fact, Pilate's wife never makes an appearance in the narrative in which she is mentioned. We hear only the word she sends to her husband. Hagner describes the scene vividly: while Pilate is presiding over the trial of Jesus, Pilate's wife has an urgent

²⁰ For sources, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), p. 499.

²¹ Designations in the Bible are not simply a matter of writing style, but weighty expressions which play an important role in shaping the reading. To name but one typical example, Bathsheba is not identified by her name but is *still* designated as τῆς τοῦ Οὐρίου "the one [who had been the wife] of Uriah" in the genealogy of Jesus in Mt 1:6.

message for him, “so urgent that he [is] to be interrupted.” Such an action of Pilate's wife, Hagner adds, could be explained by the fact that dreams are taken seriously by the Romans in those days.²² One may wonder why Pilate's wife is able to interrupt the trial. According to Gnllka, by that time Emperor Augustus has already lifted the ban prohibiting Roman women from accompanying their husbands to their governing posts.²³ But still, there is court protocol to follow. This explains why even the wife of the Roman governor needs to send a messenger.²⁴

According to Brown, Pilate's wife is cast a role similar to the noble pagan women favorable to Judaism in contrast to the pagan men who are “virulently anti-Jewish” as depicted by Josephus.²⁵ And this is probably the reason why it is Pilate's wife, rather than Pilate himself, who receives the divine revelation in a dream²⁶—this is our next theme as we move on.

2.2 Dreamer as Agent of Divine Message

In the Bible, dreams are understood as a means by which God communicates with mankind, hence a source of divine guidance

²² Hagner, *Matthew 24–28*, p. 823.

²³ Joachim Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, 2. Teil, Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 1/2 (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), p. 456, n. 21 states: “Kaiser Augustus hatte das Verbot, daß römische Frauen ihre Männer auf ihre Statthalterposten in die Provinz begleiteten, aufgehoben.”

²⁴ Kathy Coffey, *Hidden Women of the Gospels* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 144.

²⁵ Refer to Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 806 for details.

²⁶ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 805.

or intervention. Pilate's wife plays the role of the recipient of the divine message, resembling Joseph (Mt 1–2) and the magi (2:1–12), earlier God-fearing characters in the Gospel to whom God sends reliable dreams.²⁷ Also, it should be noted that for one to receive prophetic message foretelling a tragedy is not something unheard of in the Greco-Roman history. For instance, Julius Caesar's wife had a dream on the very night before her husband was assassinated.²⁸

Because God does not deign to speak directly to pagan rulers, divine messages to such rulers are usually communicated through a third party, for example, to Pharaoh through Joseph (Gen 41) and to Nebuchadnezzar through Daniel (Dan 2). The same applies to Pilate, the Roman governor—he too needs a third party.²⁹ We should point out one thing amazing in the case of Mt 27: 19, that is, the third party is herself a pagan agent as well. Then, even more interestingly, bounded by the protocol of the juridical system, Pilate's wife cannot approach her husband in person, but can only send word to him.³⁰ In other words, this divine message is communicated to Pilate via two agents, one acting as the agent of the other. This is a unique case.

2.3 Identifying the Righteous / Innocent One

The adjective Pilate's wife uses to describe Jesus is δίκαιος, which is usually translated as “righteous.” This Greek term appears

²⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 587.

²⁸ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 807. For further examples, see Dodson, *Reading Dreams*, p. 164.

²⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 587.

³⁰ I owe this observation to Coffey. Refer to Coffey, *Hidden Women of the Gospels*, p. 144.

altogether 79 times in the NT, within which 33 times in the four canonical Gospels, 17 times in Matthew, hence an important Matthean notion.³¹ Among these 17 occurrences in Matthew, the adjective is used mostly as a collective noun. Only in three instances is δίκαιος used to refer to a concrete individual, namely Joseph (1:19), Abel (23:35) and Jesus (27:19). In other words, Pilate's wife has the knowledge in identifying the righteous one, just like the narrator (with respect to Joseph) and Jesus (with respect to Abel).

Albright and Mann call attention to the designation of "that Righteous One" Pilate's wife identifies with Jesus since it is an "old Messianic title, which was becoming archaic by NT times."³² The two commentators, however, make no attempt to explain why such a designation is used here by the speaker who is non-Jewish, confessing that they have no means of determining it.³³ In Schrenk's opinion, the account should not be read with a judaised overtone. Pilate's wife probably simply means that Jesus is "innocent" and "morally righteous."³⁴ Similarly, Luz puts it, Pilate's wife "knows

31 It should be added that δικαιοσύνη "righteousness" is also an important notion in Matthew (3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32). Mt 6:33 speaks for itself: "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

32 W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible 26 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 344. We have found some examples of the use of this old Messianic title in the NT, though: Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; Jas 5:6; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 Jn 2:1, etc.

33 Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, p. 344.

34 Gottlob Schrenk, "δίκαιος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 187. See also his exposition of "The Messiah as the Righteous" on pp. 186-187. The dictionary is hereafter abbreviated as *TDNT*.

that Jesus is a ‘righteous man’ and not a criminal who deserves death.”³⁵ This is the view we share, for we also agree that such interpretation fits the context better. Hence we read 27:19 as Pilate’s wife identifying Jesus as “that innocent man.”

2.4 Interpretations of the Dream

We see in the OT that God or the angel of God speaks directly to the dreamers (Gen 20:3-7; 28:10-15; 31:10-13, 24, etc.) or that God gives the interpretation of dreams to those He selects (e.g., Gen 40:8; 41:16, 39; Dan 2:17-23).³⁶ Then in the NT, we also see God or His angel speak directly to Joseph (Mt 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22b) and the magi (2:12) in the infancy narrative. In all these cases, plain directions are given with respect to what will happen or what is to be done. So far when God speaks through dreams, He does so in an unequivocal and unambiguous manner.³⁷

The case of 27:19, nonetheless, is unusual in this regard. The content of the dream of Pilate’s wife is very brief—and to a certain extent, ambiguous. It is not clear about what she means by “Have nothing to do with that innocent man.” On one hand, she affirms that Jesus is innocent; but on the other hand she uses the language of what France calls a “formulae of dissociation.”³⁸ This ambiguity in the meaning and purpose of the dream naturally

³⁵ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 498.

³⁶ Cf. Albrecht Oepke, “ὄναρ,” *TDNT*, 5:229.

³⁷ Oepke, “ὄναρ,” *TDNT*, 5:235-236.

³⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), p. 1046, n. 6.

allows different interpretations of all kinds, particularly with respect to the message intended for Pilate. Does it mean that Pilate should release Jesus who is innocent, or that Pilate himself should not get involved in the judgment of the innocent, or does it mean something else? Regarding these questions, scholars' opinions have been very divergent, as we will see below.

Knowing from her dream that Jesus is an innocent man, Pilate's wife advises her husband not to get involved in the condemnation of Jesus. Her message is more a warning for Pilate than an urge to save Jesus. Hagner and Dodson seem to be suggesting this interpretation.³⁹ Coffey's opinion is similar: the advice of Pilate's wife for her husband is to employ a "hands off" policy, that is, to avoid complicity in the death of Jesus.⁴⁰

Taking a different view, Getty-Sullivan believes that Pilate's wife tries to secure the release of Jesus by influencing her husband to make a just judgment.⁴¹ Gundry and Luz are also on this side.⁴² But we have to say that Getty-Sullivan has gone too far in identifying Pilate's wife as a disciple of Jesus based on an echo of Jesus' words on her lips.⁴³ It is not fitting that the scholar should apply to Pilate's

³⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 24–28*, p. 823; Dodson, *Reading Dreams*, p. 165.

⁴⁰ Coffey, *Hidden Women of the Gospels*, p. 145.

⁴¹ Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, p. 133.

⁴² Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 562; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 498.

⁴³ The utterance of Pilate's wife: *πολλὰ...ἔπαθον* "I suffered much" echoes that of Jesus when he speaks of the Messiah: *πολλὰ παθεῖν* "[he must] suffer greatly" (Mt 16:21; Mk 8:31; cf. Mk 9:12). However, while the suffering of the Messiah is detailed in Matthew and Mark, the suffering of Pilate's wife remains indeterminate.

wife the image of imitating Jesus as advocated in Mark. The utterance of “suffered much” is—as Getty-Sullivan herself is also aware of—“a phrase more typical of Mark than of Matthew.”⁴⁴

Nolland compares the utterance of Pilate’s wife to that of the demoniacs in 8:29: “What have you to do with us?” and understands Pilate’s wife to mean there is nothing in common between her husband and Jesus. She therefore asks her husband to play no part in the process of the execution of Jesus. In other words, her advice is an issue of self-interest, rather than defending an innocent man.⁴⁵ In line with Nolland, Gnlika remarks that we hear only of the torment the woman’s dream causes her, but nothing of the content of the dream itself. For the woman, the dream is a foreboding sign, and her concern is directed towards her husband alone.⁴⁶

Carter has an exceptional interpretation of the dream of the person whom he designates as “Mrs. Pilate.” It is worth quoting his words in full:

No wonder she has suffered much! Jesus’ faithfulness will mean the end of her world! Her dream seems to have revealed Jesus being faithful to God’s saving purposes, and this is clearly bad news for Rome and Pilate!⁴⁷

44 Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, pp. 132-133.

45 John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 1172.

46 Gnlika, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, vol. 2, p. 456: “Anstelle des Inhalts des Traums hören wir nur von der Qual, den der Traum der Frau bereitete. Er kündigte also Unheilvolles an. Die Sorge der Frau ist auf ihren Mann gerichtet.”

47 Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor*, Interfaces (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 94.

Thus, seeing Jesus as a dangerous threat to both Rome and her husband, Mrs. Pilate is actually encouraging Pilate to speed up the execution of Jesus.⁴⁸ Carter's interpretation can be traced back to a certain Christian tradition which attributes the dream of Pilate's wife to the work of the devil. In that case, the purpose of the dream is to prevent Jesus from accomplishing his salvation.⁴⁹

2.5 Effects of the Dream

The purpose of the dream may be disputable; it has an indisputable effect in bearing witness to Jesus' innocence. Pilate's wife certainly is a witness to this.⁵⁰ Yet, as France reminds us, "It is God, rather than just Pilate's wife, who thus testifies to Jesus' righteousness, over against the accusations of the Jewish leaders."⁵¹ Then there are two more witnesses: Judas and Pilate. Judas confesses having betrayed innocent blood (27:4).⁵² As for Pilate, in washing his hands and declaring his own innocence in shedding the blood of Jesus, he is also declaring Jesus' innocence at the same time (v. 24).

Then, does Pilate listen to his wife's caution to have nothing to do with that innocent man? The majority of scholars who take the affirmative side base their argument on Pilate's act of washing his

48 Carter, *Pontius Pilate*, p. 94.

49 Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 804; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 587, n. 34. Luz gives a different list of sources; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 499, n. 61.

50 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 498.

51 France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1055.

52 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 498.

hands,⁵³ an act intended as a public gesture to absolve himself of any involvement in Jesus' condemnation (27:24).⁵⁴ Commenting on such effort of Pilate "not to become tainted by innocent blood," Brown emphasizes that Pilate will still be touched by it—just like the chief priests who have tried in vain to avoid being tainted by Judas' blood money (vv. 4, 6-8).⁵⁵ Hare states that Pilate "accedes to this divine warning" received from his wife, and yet he makes no attempt to rescue the innocent Jesus but simply avoids taking responsibility for his death.⁵⁶ In Coffey's view, Pilate tries to distance himself from the proceedings in several maneuvers because he gives full credence to his wife's dream. Coffey concludes that "Pilate's final attempt to evade responsibility comes in the denial," as expressed in his gesture of hand washing.⁵⁷

Readers should remember the interpretation of Carter that the dream of Pilate's wife has the purpose of encouraging Pilate to remove Jesus quickly. For Carter, there is no doubt that Pilate heeds his wife's advice. As he explains, just like the dreams in the infancy narrative enable God's purposes for Jesus to be carried out, here "Mrs. Pilate's dream achieves the same purpose in urging Pilate to execute Jesus."⁵⁸

53 So, Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 562; Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 806; Hagner, *Matthew 24–28*, p. 823; Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1172, and the like.

54 Albright and Mann draw our attention to the fact that this hand-washing scene is recorded by Matthew alone; Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, p. 345.

55 Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 806.

56 Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 317.

57 Coffey, *Hidden Women of the Gospels*, pp. 144-145.

58 Carter, *Pontius Pilate*, p. 94.

Still, some scholars disagree. Callon is of the opinion that the interference of Pilate's wife only reflects poorly on the Roman governor who refuses to acquiesce to his wife's request.⁵⁹ In Callon's own words, "Matthew emphasizes that Pilate *knowingly* condemns an innocent man to death, and thus offers a harsher rendering of Pilate."⁶⁰ This negative portrayal of Pilate is shared by Dodson.⁶¹ As for Getty-Sullivan, "Pilate's fears about Jesus' innocence are confirmed from this off-stage voice, and now he is all the more eager to be rid of his role as judge of Jesus."⁶² That is why he asks the crowd to make the decision instead. But in giving up his own power in deciding on the verdict, Pilate does not heed his wife's word that Jesus is innocent.

3. Echoes of the Dream Reports in Matthew 1–2

As stated at the outset, dreams is a repetitive motif in the *Gospel according to Matthew*. The dream of Pilate's wife echoes the dreams in the infancy narrative in several levels.⁶³ In what follows, we will examine their similarities in terms of the language and the narrative.

⁵⁹ Callie Callon, "Pilate the Villain: An Alternative Reading of Matthew's Portrayal of Pilate," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (2006): 65.

⁶⁰ Callon, "Pilate the Villain," p. 68.

⁶¹ Dodson, *Reading Dreams*, p. 166.

⁶² Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, p. 131.

⁶³ Interested readers are invited to consult Dodson's *Reading Dreams*, Ch. 5 for the exposition of "Dreams in the Gospel of Matthew." See esp. pp. 146-167.

3.1 The Formula κατ' ὄναρ

In Van der Bergh's words, the formula κατ' ὄναρ (literally, "according to a dream") which appears in the infancy narrative as well as the dream of Pilate's wife (1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; 27:19) is a "*terminus technicus* to indicate a message of divine origin."⁶⁴ Senior describes κατ' ὄναρ as "a decidedly Matthaean phrase" since it is used nowhere else in the NT, but six times in Matthew alone.⁶⁵ Given that the term ὄναρ appears exclusively in Matthew in the entire NT corpus (as already noted in the introduction of this paper), so must be the case of κατ' ὄναρ as well. Interestingly, we have also discovered that ὄναρ—and hence κατ' ὄναρ too—is not used even in the LXX corpus.⁶⁶ We may therefore modify Senior's description of κατ' ὄναρ into "a decidedly Matthaean phrase in the entire Greek text of the bible."⁶⁷

64 Ronald H. Van der Bergh, "The Reception of Matthew 27:19b (Pilate's Wife's Dream) in the Early Church," *Journal of Early Christian History* 2, no. 1 (2012): 70.

65 Senior, *Passion Narrative*, p. 245.

66 In the LXX, the formula used to translate various forms of בחלום (literally, "in a dream") is usually ἐν (τῷ) ὕπνῳ (e.g., Gen 20:3; 31:10; 40:9; 41:17, 22; Num 12:6; 24:4, 16; 1 Kgs 3:5; 3 Macc 5:20; Isa 29:7, 8; Dan 4:13; 9:21). The formula κατ' ὕπνον is also used (Gen 20:6; 31:11, 24). The Term ὕπνος primarily means "sleep," but can also mean "dream," depending on the context, see, e.g., J. Lust, E. Eynikel and K. Hauspie, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), s.v. "ὑπνος, -ου."

67 The formula κατ' ὄναρ appears in an inscription of early Christian times (*Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*); BDAG, s.v. "ὄναρ, τό."

3.2 Genitive Absolute

The dream of Pilate's wife further echoes the dream reports in 1:18b-25, 2:13-15 and 2:19-21 in another instance of the use of language: genitive absolute.⁶⁸ According to Senior, it is a characteristic of Matthew to use an introductory genitive absolute.⁶⁹ As will be shown below, the construction of the genitive absolute in 27:19 resembles the same construction used in the dream narratives in 1:20, 2:13 and 2:19:⁷⁰

27:19 Καθημένου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος (While he was sitting on the judgment seat)

1:20 ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος (But when he had considered this)

2:13 Ἀναχωρησάντων δὲ αὐτῶν (Now when they had gone)

2:19 Τελευτήσαντος δὲ τοῦ Ἡρώδου (But when Herod died)

They all function as circumstantial participles.⁷¹ What is peculiar about this use of introductory genitive absolute in 27:19 is that it is not expected to appear here. In his study of the form of dreams in

⁶⁸ Note that the use of genitive absolute by the NT authors is less restricted than the classical usage. For illustrations, refer to F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. R. W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), hereafter: BDF, § 423.

⁶⁹ See the examples in Senior, *Passion Narrative*, p. 243.

⁷⁰ Refer to the corresponding analyses in Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, unabridged, 5th rev. ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1996).

⁷¹ BDF, § 417.

Matthew 1–2, Gnuse observes that in introducing a dream, genitive absolute is typically used for a dream report whereas aorist participle for a dream reference.⁷² But as we can see here, the language used in the introduction of the dream of Pilate’s wife—a dream reference as it is—does not follow the expected pattern, rather it follows the pattern of the three dream reports in the infancy narrative.

3.3 Narrative Parallels

Apart from the language, the dream of Pilate’s wife echoes the dreams in Matthew 1–2 by way of narrative parallels. As illustrated in Dodson’s study, the divine signs at Jesus’ birth parallel the ominous signs at his death—a death not spelled out but foreshadowed in the dream of Pilate’s wife. At Jesus’ birth, there are representations of divination, which include: the prophecies (1:21-22; 2:5-6; 15, 17-18, 23), the divinely appointed time (1:17), the divine conception (1:18, 20) and the star (2:2, 9, 10). At Jesus’ death, the ominous signs include the daytime darkness (27:45), the tearing apart of the temple curtain (27:51) and the earthquake (27:51). The suffering of Pilate’s wife further creates “a sense of foreboding” associated with Jesus’ death.⁷³

Dodson also contrasts the characters and their actions in these narrative parallels. The Gentile magi learn of Jesus’ birth from a star and then act on his behalf based on a dream (2:12). On the contrary, the Jewish leaders share culpability in Herod’s plot to destroy the child Jesus. In a parallel fashion, Pilate’s wife, who is also a Gentile,

⁷² Gnuse, “Dream Genre,” pp. 106-107, 109.

⁷³ Dodson, *Reading Dreams*, pp. 164-165, 167.

is made aware of Jesus' innocence and acts on his behalf based on her dream (27:19). The Jewish leaders seek his death, on the contrary.⁷⁴ Luz summarizes the contrast concisely: "a Gentile sees clearly while a Jewish king and the Jewish leaders are blinded."⁷⁵ As a remark, such contrast in the narrative parallels is highlighted from the perspective of irony.

Finally, in echoing the dreams in the infancy narrative, the dream of Pilate's wife creates at the end of the Gospel an inclusion with the beginning of the Gospel.⁷⁶ With this note on the inclusion, we conclude our discussion on the echoes in the dreams in Matthew. We will now look at how the literary device of irony functions as an interpretative key to the narrative of the dream of Pilate's wife.

4. Irony as an Interpretative Key

As will be confirmed below, the Roman trial (27:11-26) — the context of the dream of Pilate's wife — is a pericope full of ironies. In their concluding observations on this pericope, Davies and Allison put it plainly, "the literary method is irony."⁷⁷

To start with, Davies and Allison highlight the role and position of Jesus in the court vis à vis Pilate. Jesus, the Judge of the world (25:31), now stands before Pilate who sits upon the judgment seat

74 Dodson, *Reading Dreams*, p. 166.

75 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 498.

76 Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 805.

77 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, pp. 593-594.

(27:19).⁷⁸ Gnlika comments that it is a necessary formality for the judge to be sitting on the judgment seat, without which the court verdict would not be lawful.⁷⁹ On the one hand, Pilate is observing the protocol of the court. On the other hand, he fails to carry out his duty as a judge in conducting an objective investigation and passing a just verdict in the case of Jesus.

Then, despite sitting on the judgment seat, the governor has no power at all over those he governs. Even though he clearly knows that Jesus is innocent of the charge (27:23), Pilate does not exercise his power to acquit Jesus accordingly (v. 26). More importantly, Pilate's handing his own power over to the crowd can be seen as a move on his part to get rid of his role as the judge. Such a move, we must say, is rather ironic in the court setting.

Just as in 15:21-28, the truth about Jesus is recognized by a Canaanite woman, here in 27:19, the truth is recognized by a Roman woman.⁸⁰ The chosen people of God are not the one chosen in this event to receive the divine message. That Pilate's wife is selected over the Israelites to be the recipient of God's revelation is itself another irony.

78 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, p. 586. Luz disagrees with the common translations of βῆμα into "judgment seat" or "throne of the judge," but argues that the term should be translated as "step" or "tribunal" instead; refer to Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 498, n. 53 for his explanation. While Nolland agrees that βῆμα literally means a "step," he emphasises the function of βῆμα as the judicial bench in Mt 27:19; Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1170.

79 Gnlika, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, vol. 2, pp. 456-457. In Gnlika's words: "Das Sitzen des Richters auf dem βῆμα [Richterstuhl] war eine notwendige Formalität, ohne die der Gerichtsspruch nicht rechtskräftig war."

80 As Brown comments, this is another "sign of the evangelical openness of the Gentiles who could recognize the truth about Jesus." Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1, p. 806.

Irony also manifests itself in the roles Pilate's wife and the Jewish religious leaders play in the court. Senior captures the court scene as follows: "a dramatic parallel between two sets of intercessors: Pilate's wife pleads for Jesus—the Jewish hierarchy pleads for Barabbas."⁸¹ The timing the dream comes into Matthew's picture (27:19), that is, while Jesus' trial is in progress, deserves further comment. The particle *δέ* at the beginning of verse 19 presents a stark contrast between the attempt of Pilate's wife to save Jesus and the act of the Jewish leaders' handing Jesus over out of their jealousy (v. 18).⁸² Then what comes after the intervention of Pilate's wife is the narration of the efforts by the Jewish leaders to persuade the crowd to demand not only the release of Barabbas, but also the death of Jesus (v. 20).⁸³ As Hagner explains, the subject of *τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν ἀπολέσωσιν* in verse 20, literally "they might kill Jesus," is *τοὺς ὄχλους*—the crowd who asks for Barabbas.⁸⁴ In other words, the Jewish leaders manage to persuade the crowd to achieve both of their ends. That the message of the dream emerges at this point of Pilate's trial of Jesus is believed to be an ironic stroke by the evangelist. It functions as a reproach against the Jewish leaders. France is right in contending that the intervention of Pilate's wife at the Roman trial of Jesus "serves only to deepen the guilt of the Jewish leaders."⁸⁵

81 Senior, *Passion Narrative According to Matthew*, p. 247; cf. Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, p. 133.

82 Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 562.

83 Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 391.

84 Hagner, *Matthew 24–28*, p. 824.

85 France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 1055. The commentator also makes a contrast between "Judas the traitor, the Gentile woman, and the hard-bitten Roman governor" on one side, and "the Jewish leaders and crowd" on the other (pp. 1050-1051).

Kam describes Pilate's wife as a symbol of courage who "dared to interrupt a public trial."⁸⁶ Although her story consists of only one verse, Kam asserts that the character of Pilate's wife is significant, for she is the only person who ever speaks against the condemnation of Jesus in Matthew.⁸⁷ The courage exhibited by Pilate's wife shows her husband in a bad light, for he behaves like a coward when faced with the pressure from the Jewish leaders and the crowd. The irony is magnified when we compare the examples of Joseph and the magi in Matthew 1–2 and the counter-example of Pilate in 27:11–26. Joseph and the magi follow the divine instructions from their dreams and protect the child Jesus. In contrast, Pilate pays no heed to the divine message from his wife's dream and condemns the innocent Jesus.

The crowd choose to free a criminal (27:20) instead of an innocent man. Their choice is full of ironic elements in the sense that the innocence of Jesus is attested by God Himself whereas the release of Barabbas is prompted by the blindness and envy of His chosen people.⁸⁸ The response of the crowd: "Let him be crucified!" in verse 22 repeats itself in the verse that follows. Such a frenzied cry, notes Harrington, is phrased in the language of a legal decision. The repetition makes it plain that it is a deliberate choice on the part of the crowd, while the language of legal decision stresses the seriousness of the matter involved.⁸⁹ The people of God now

86 Rose Sallberg Kam, *Their Stories, Our Stories: Women of the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 241.

87 Kam, *Their Stories, Our Stories*, p. 241.

88 Senior, *Passion Narrative According to Matthew*, p. 247; cf. Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, p. 133.

89 Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 391.

condemn the one whom they once acclaimed as the Son of David (21:9), and twice they demand the one called the Messiah to be crucified (27:22, 23).

If we follow the opinion of the textual critics that Barabbas was originally also called Jesus, then the choice Pilate offers to the crowd in 27:17 should read: “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?”⁹⁰ Gundry is convinced that the reading of Jesus Barabbas has been so formulated

to dramatize the choice between the “notorious prisoner called ‘Jesus Barabbas’” and “Jesus the one called ‘Christ.’” The dramatization heightens the guilt of the Jewish leaders in persuading the crowds to ask for Barabbas.⁹¹

It is worth going deeper on this notion of the name Jesus. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, of which the meaning is “Yahweh saves” (cf. 1:21: Jesus is so named because he is to save his people from their sins). Now the crowd is asked to choose what kind of savior they want. As Hare puts it, “Which Jesus do they want, one who will strive to save them with his sword or one who will give his life for their sins?”⁹² Readers know that the choice the crowd make will prove to be a big irony as the Gospel unfolds.

⁹⁰ So NRSV, which approves of the reading Jesus Barabbas.

⁹¹ Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 561.

⁹² Hare, *Matthew*, p. 316.

Pilate seemingly retains his “neutrality” in the affair while exercising his ultimate political power in condemning Jesus to death. He could have heeded his wife’s advice about Jesus’ innocence. Yet he does not, but rather chooses to hand Jesus over. As Bond reminds us, after all, it is entirely Pilate’s own decision to offer the crowd the choice between (Jesus) Barabbas and Jesus the Messiah in 27:17. Then, even after his wife’s attempted intervention in verse 19, Pilate reiterates the same offer of choice to the crowd in verse 21.⁹³ Luz also holds that “Pilate is not actually compelled to act as he does”—even if he has miscalculated the crowd’s choice initially.⁹⁴ Then he makes a public show of his non-involvement in condemning Jesus’ death by washing his hands (27:24). But as Dodson asserts, in repeating to the crowd the same words of disclaimer which the chief priests and the elders say to Judas,⁹⁵ Pilate, just like the Jewish leaders, cannot absolve himself of any responsibility in Jesus’ death.⁹⁶ Most ironically, Pilate now declares himself innocent when he hands over the innocent Jesus to crucifixion.⁹⁷

93 Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 133.

94 Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, p. 499.

95 Note that Pilate’s utterance of disclaimer: ὑμεῖς ὄψεσθε “see to that yourselves” (v. 24) resembles that of the Jewish leaders: σὺ ὄρη “see to that yourself” (v. 4) both semantically and syntactically.

96 Dodson, *Reading Dreams*, pp. 165-166. Dodson (p. 165) explains how Pilate and Judas are juxtaposed in Matthew 27: while Judas confesses having sinned by betraying innocent blood (v. 4), Pilate declares himself innocent (v. 24).

97 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, pp. 593-594.

5. Conclusion

Because of the brevity and ambiguity of the content of the dream of Pilate's wife, nothing determinate can be said about the meaning or purpose of her dream, except about its effect of witnessing the innocence of Jesus. The innocence of Jesus, however, is something even the devil's messenger will confess—should the dream be attributed to the devil. Using irony as an interpretative key, we can now offer some suggestions for the questions raised earlier.

First of all, how are we to understand the purpose of the dream in 27:19? If Pilate's wife is simply thinking of the interests of her husband (as Nolland and Gnilka suggest), or if she truly regards Jesus a dangerous threat that is to be removed (as Carter proposes), then all the exemplary ironies which have shown up in our discussion will no longer find any place in the narrative. The dreamer will function no more than another adversary of God. There will be no Gentile recipient of divine revelation pertaining to the death of Jesus. The Roman governor will not be shown in a bad light in front of his wife. We will not see a Roman woman acting as Jesus' advocate. The Roman governor will not be so scared of the divine message, to such an extent that he would rather give up his role as the judge. The chosen people will not have to reiterate their choice to free Barabbas and condemn the Messiah. No self-acclaimed declaration of innocence will be heard.... Hence, logically, our interpretation is that Pilate's wife actually urges Pilate to deal justly with the innocent Jesus.

Then, the next question is: Does Pilate heed his wife's advice? Again this is where the interpretative function of irony comes into play. Understanding the whole narrative of Jesus' trial before Pilate as an irony would favor the interpretation of Pilate taking no heed of his wife's warning, despite his apparent performance of neutrality. Thus, ironies manifest themselves as follows:

- The Judge of the world standing before the judgment seat of a lesser;
- The governor having no power over those he governs;
- The Gentile woman acting as a divine agent;
- Pilate's wife as the advocate of Jesus versus the Jewish religious leaders as the prosecutors;
- The courage of Pilate's wife in contrast with the cowardice of her husband;
- The choice of the chosen people to free a criminal instead of the Messiah;
- Pilate's declaration of innocence in condemning the innocent.⁹⁸

As regards the question about the timing of the intervention of the dream message, we believe it is the evangelist's purpose that the message should arrive at that particular moment in the middle of the trial of Jesus. The timing of its arrival magnifies the ironic effects: here comes the intervention of Pilate's wife to defend Jesus'

⁹⁸ Readers can find an overview of the ironies in 27:11-26 in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, pp. 593-594.

innocence while the Jewish leaders are manipulating the crowd to demand an innocent death.

Given that Jesus is executed unjustly at the end, it is undeniable that the message of Pilate's wife is, nevertheless, not able to alter the unfolding of history. This might lead one to conclude that the divine intervention fails. Hence, our last question: What is the function of the dream of Pilate's wife in the Gospel? In this regard, despite his different interpretation of the message of Pilate's wife, Carter agrees that the narration of the dream puts human's attempted control over the world in the context of God's purposes to establish His Kingdom.⁹⁹ Indeed, it seems it would not be exaggerating to interpret the whole *Gospel according to Matthew* as an irony. We take the view that even when everything seems upside-down, God will work out His plan amidst all kinds of unexpected circumstances.¹⁰⁰ With the help of the interpretative key of irony, it is believed that one can better understand and appreciate the message of the Gospel in the midst of ironies.

⁹⁹ Cf. Carter, *Pontius Pilate*, p. 94.

¹⁰⁰ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, pp. 593-594.