

HOLY WEEK Readings ~ Collects ~ Reflections

## PALM SUNDAY

#### LITURGY OF THE PALMS

**Reading** Matthew 21.1–11

Psalm

Psalm 118.1–2, 19–29

# PRAYER OF THE DAY

Everlasting God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son to take our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross: in your mercy enable us to share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** 

# LITURGY OF THE WORD

#### **First Reading**

Isaiah 50.4–9a

#### Psalm

Psalm 31.9-18

#### Second Reading

Philippians 2.5-11

#### **Gospel** Matthew 26.14-27.66

# **REFLECTION - BETRAYAL**

#### "Jesus was to die for the nation." (John 11.51)

Palm Sunday, now called Passion Sunday as well, is an uneasy union of names. Is it the day of Jesus' victorious procession into Jerusalem, recalled by our parades of palm leaves? Or is it the day of his disastrous downfall?

It is both. For the great triumphant procession of palms as well as the betrayed allegiances of the human heart are both woven into the Passion and death of Jesus.

The liturgy of Passion Sunday is a collision of themes: glorious hosannas and sombre omens. Isaiah promised a servant of God who would have a "face set like flint" to brave the pummelling, spit, and ridicule. Paul's lovely hymn in Philippians is one of triumph - "every knee should bend in heaven and earth and every tongue confess" - but only after disgrace and ignominious death.

It goes unnoticed, for the most part, that the inescapable context of the Passion is a national, tribal, and political struggle. The betrayals are always hatched in the presence of looming authorities who seduce the betrayer—the Judas, the Peter, the disciple in us. You cannot avoid the sense that there is some profound geopolitical strife going on here. The stage is set for armed violence, the raised sword in the cause of right. There are secret police and public meetings of high priests, governors, assemblies. There are political prisoners. Finally, there is a crisis of authority. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Are you the king of Christians? Are you the king of Catholics?

They are questions that history poses not only to Christ, but to all who follow him. What would be our answer? Who or what is the real object of our allegiance?

In the Gospel Reading from the Saturday prior to every Passion/ Palm Sunday, we behold the crisis of allegiance that the people of Jesus' time faced. In that Gospel Jesus is condemned by a logic of self-defence and corporate survival. Chief priests and high councils are threatened by Jesus and his way. He is a menace to national and religious interests. Note the language: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come in and destroy Under every moral crisis lurks a dread that if we ever fully followed Jesus, we would lose our holy privilege and our clannish protections.

both our holy place and our nation." Caiaphas, that "realistic" murmur of expedience in all our hearts, advises us: "It is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

From this telling statement rises the suspicion that the crisis of Palm Sunday is the crisis of every epoch and culture. We are torn between Christ and tribe, between casting our allegiance with him or with the nation, between the king's call and safety's comfort. From Rwanda to Northern Ireland, from Bosnia to Guatemala City, from Johannesburg to Washington, the great contemporary struggle of faith is its clash with nationalism and tribalism. Under every moral crisis lurks a dread that if we ever fully followed Jesus, we would lose our holy privilege and our clannish protections. In Jesus' time, he was rejected and condemned for reasons of national security So he is today.

So he was rejected throughout history—when Christianity seized the mighty throne of Europe, when missionaries blessed the search for gold and turned their shamed eyes away from torture, when good Christians prayed for their slaves, their just wars, their blessings of property and plunder.

Christians may not feel the full impact of Passion week because they fail to see that Jesus Christ is still betrayed for the sake of safe religion and an imperious tribe or nation.

#### John Kavanaugh, SJ

# HOLY MONDAY

# SENTENCE ISAIAH 42.1

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights,' says the Lord; 'I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.'

# PRAYER OF THE DAY

Everlasting God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son to take our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross: in your mercy enable us to share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** 

# LITURGY OF THE WORD

#### **First Reading** Isaiah 42.1–9

**Psalm** Psalm 36.5–11

#### Second Reading Hebrews 9.11–15

**Gospel** John 12.1–11

# HOLY TUESDAY

#### SENTENCE

John 12.24

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

#### PRAYER OF THE DAY

Everlasting God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son to take our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross: in your mercy enable us to share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** 

#### LITURGY OF THE WORD

# First Reading

Isaiah 49.1-7

#### **Psalm** Psalm 71.1-14

# Second Reading

1 Corinthians 1.18-31

Gospel John 12.20-36

#### HOLY WEDNESDAY

# SENTENCE HEBREWS 12.1

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

# PRAYER OF THE DAY

Everlasting God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son to take our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross: in your mercy enable us to share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** 

#### LITURGY OF THE WORD

**First Reading** Isaiah 50.4-9A

**Psalm** Psalm 70

Second Reading Hebrews 12.1-3

**Gospel** John 13.21-32

#### MAUNDY THURSDAY

## SENTENCE

John 13.34

'I give you a new commandment,' says the Lord, 'that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'

# PRAYER OF THE DAY

Grant, Lord, that we who receive the holy sacrament of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, may be the means by which the work of his incarnation shall go forward: take, consecrate, break and distribute us, to be for others a means of your grace, and vehicles of your eternal love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** 

# LITURGY OF THE WORD

**First Reading** Exodus 12.1-4 (5-10), 11-14

#### Psalm

Psalm 116.1-2, 11-18

#### Second Reading

1 Corinthians 11.23-26

#### Gospel

John 13.1-17, 31B-35

# REFLECTION - THE WASHING OF THE FEET

John's account of the Last Supper does not report the institution of the Eucharist but does include a footwashing during the meal, an action which has no precedent in any Judaic meal-ritual of this time! What does it mean?

In the Mediterranean world, people communicate both in word and in deed. In this culture, actions often speak louder than words. This particular washing of the feet is clearly understood in the culture as a "symbolic action," that is, a deed that not only represents reality but effectively sets it in motion or a deed that propels an already initiated event still further forward toward completion. Prophets like Jeremiah (e.g., Jer 13.1-11) and Ezekiel (e.g., Ez 4) performed symbolic actions which to non-Mediterranean people look very much like bizarre behaviour.

Notice that Jesus performs his symbolic action after the devil convinces Judas to betray Jesus (Jn 13.2). The devil tests Judas' loyalty to Jesus, and sadly Judas yields and proves disloyal (Jn 13.27). Jesus' symbolic action thus further propels forward toward completion an event, namely, Jesus' death, which has already been initiated by Judas' willingness to betray Jesus.

Jesus' symbolic action receives two interpretations in the text (Jn 13.1-11; 13.12-2). In the first interpretation, the allusions to Jesus' approaching death in verses 1-3 indicate that Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, on one level, signifies his humiliating death on their behalf (see Jn 10.11, 15; 18.12-14). Verse 10 makes it even clearer, especially if the phrase "except for the feet" could be omitted in this lectionary reading as it is in ancient manuscripts and in the New Jerusalem Bible translation. Then the "bathing" would implicitly refer to the foot-washing, and the reader or listener can understand why Jesus rejects Peter's request for additional washings (head and hands), or washing of the entire body.

On another level, the washing of the feet points to another symbolism. Streets in antiquity were filled with human and animal waste. A person walking the streets inevitably had soiled and smelly feet. Washing the feet of guests was usually a task for slaves or low status servants. That Jesus would do this stuns his disciples, mainly because they are missing his intended symbolic meaning, which is more than humility.

In biblical times people considered the hands and feet as a zone of the human body symbolising human activity. To wash the feet (or hands) is to wash away the offensive deeds performed by these appendages. Foot-washing is therefore equivalent to forgiveness. When Jesus urges them to repeat this action, he is not urging them to wash feet but rather to forgive each other as he forgives them.

The end result of such mutual forgiveness, of course, is greater group cohesion and solidarity. This, in fact, is what Jesus is building here.

Verses 12-20 explicitly state the second interpretation of the footwashing which is already implied in the preceding verses (hands-feet zone). Jesus gives his disciples an example to imitate among one another. They are to forgive one another and create strong bonds of fellowship. (1 Tim 5.10 indicates how seriously this example was followed particularly by widows.) This interpretation receives fuller explanation in Jn 15.23-13 where loving one another includes willingness to lay down life for one another. Thus foot-washing even in this second interpretation retains a relationship with the death of Jesus and the community that he strengthened on the night before he died.

In the Middle-east, unrelated people rarely if ever eat together. Meals are shared only with relatives. A stranger taken into a Mediterranean family temporarily is also temporarily transformed into a friend in order to be able to share the family meal. But groups in the Middle-east, such as the Twelve, are surrogate-kinship groups-that is, they are just like family. Thus Jesus' symbolic action of foot-washing and its obvious (to those original viewers) reference to his death, to forgiveness, and to group cohesion would not be lost on the disciples. Eating a meal with Jesus renders one a family-member, and family-members willingly sacrifice for other family members.

John J. Pilch

Washing the feet of guests was usually a task for slaves or low status servants.

# SENTENCE Philippians 2.8-9

Christ became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and has given him the name that is above every name.

# COLLECTS

Almighty God, look with mercy on this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed and to be given into the hands of sinners and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified: receive our Prayers and supplications, which we offer before you for all people in your holy Church, that all its members, in their vocation and ministry, may truly and godly serve you; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. O merciful God, you have made all people and you hate nothing that you have made, nor desire the death of sinners, but rather that they should turn and live: have mercy on all who have not known you, or who deny the faith of Christ crucified; take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of your word; and so fetch them home, blessed Lord, to your fold, that we may be made one flock under one shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

# PRAYER OF THE DAY

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Saviour gave his back to the smiters and did not hide his face from shame: give us grace to accept the sufferings of this present time with sure confidence in the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** 

# LITURGY OF THE WORD

First Reading

Isaiah 52.13-53.12

#### Psalm

Psalm 22

#### Second Reading 1 Corinthians 1.18-31

**Gospel** John 18.1-19.42

# REFLECTION - JESUS' FRIENDS

#### "My heart is filled with sorrow to the point of death." (Mark 14.34)

I can admit now that when I was young I hated those movies portraying the life of Christ. They were never snazzy enough. The miracles were never convincing. To top it off, those movies always ended in failure. There is no way around it. He died. He failed. And it was a mess.

Perhaps that is why I rarely found our churches very appealing. In addition to the associations of glumness and guilt, there he was, bleeding and broken up, for all to see.

One of the best things about the Forty Hours devotion was the fact that, in addition to the incense and the processions, the cross, especially the body, would soon be covered.

Much later in life I would hear reports that the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the head of the Unification Church, as well as Ted Turner, found it somewhat strange that people would worship a figure who ended up in such failure.

And that's what it was all about. I wanted, we all want, a winner. And a winner does not end up like the rest of us—weak, beyond earthly help, frail, and failing before the great force of death.

Superman had X-ray eyes and could fly. Captain Marvel muttered "Shazam!" and zapped defeat into sudden victory. Wonder Woman, better than the Amazons, could take on armies of marauders. But not Jesus.

I would have rewritten the script. Instead of picking up the ear of an enemy and somehow reattaching it, why not have Jesus use that power to knock all their heads off?

Even after Jesus was put on the cross, I thought the cavalry could have come in at the last minute. The heavens could have opened up and the thunderous voice of God boom: "What are you doing to my beloved Son? Take that!" Lightning and earthquakes. Instead we get this: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I chose then to ignore this unpleasantness for years. Easter would come sure enough, candy, spring, and all.

This avoidance reappeared when I became a Jesuit novice. I could never adequately enter the mystery of the third week of the Spiritual Exercises, the week (or day, as the case may be) that concentrated on the passion and death of Jesus. Everything seemed to come to a stop. I would wait for the resurrection narratives and the promise of the retreat's end.

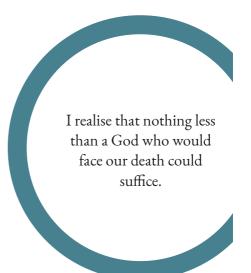
Somehow, over the years, it has all changed. A child knows death but not its implications. Most adults do.

When you get right down to it, every death is disaster. Death is a total, utter negation of everything that leads up to it. Many nonbelievers, in their more honest moments, admit the unmentionable: death seems to mock our every hope and achievement.

And after seeing so many loved ones die, whether old and frail, middle-aged and struck down by infirmity, young and suddenly disappeared, I realise that nothing less than a God who would face our death could suffice.

Could a God truly love and heal us, all so burdened with sin and its weight of death, if that God, too, had not been filled somehow with sorrow, even to the point of death?

John Kavanaugh, SJ



# **EASTER VIGIL**

# PRAYER OF THE VIGIL

Eternal Giver of life and light, this holy night shines with the radiance of the risen Christ: renew your Church with the Spirit given to us in baptism, that we may worship you in sincerity and truth, and shine as a light in the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

# OLD TESTAMENT READINGS AND PSALMS

#### **First Reading**

Genesis 1.1—2.4a

#### Psalm

Psalm 136.1-9, 23-26

#### Second Reading

Genesis 7.1-5, 11-18; 8.6-18; 9.8-13

#### Psalm

Psalm 46

#### **NEW TESTAMENT & PSALM**

**Reading** Romans 6.3–11

#### Psalm

Psalm 114

#### Gospel

Matthew 28.1–10

# **REFELECTION - THE VIGIL**

#### The story seemed like nonsense, and they refused to believe it. (Luke 24.11)

Light and Goodness. Let it be. Heavens and earth, day and night. Movements of moon and stars that would never have been, had they not been willed into existence. Water, sky, and earth. The great parade of natural kinds, nurtured by earth, fills the horizons. Waters teem and trees flower. Fertility. Multiplicity. Creeping creatures, urgent and easy, wild and gentle, small and great. God is the original environmentalist, the first cause of all our species, the eternal lover of diversity. Good. Yes.

Then the final good gift. "God created them in God's own image; male and female God created them." This final nature, a human one, would be given all else as gift to nurture, name, and affirm. All is benefaction, and the human, made specially in the likeness of God, is empowered to know existence and pronounce it all good. All is benediction.

At least one might have thought so.

But the creature with the power to name, with the freedom of "yes," said "no." It was a rejection of the great order and the great orders. There would be a resounding "no" to the goodness of limits. The tempter was a liar. They already had the tree of life as their shade and comfort. They would not die anyway. They were already like unto God. And yet, resistant to the very condition of their creaturehood

Could we chance a hope for some new spirit, for hearts no longer made of stone, for a homeland? they ate of the tree of limits. They wanted more than the power to name all the goods of the earth. They wanted to name evil, to dictate right and wrong. They wanted to control all, even if it meant losing everything they were.

In exile, there was left to them either despair or faith in a journey back. But such a journey could be led only by one who knew the way, only by one who could be absolutely trusted, one wholly other than the namers who misnamed it all. Thus Abraham, against all hope, learned to place all hope in the promise that God made, to yield and obey at the core of his very being. Thus he became the ancestor of all faith, even in the face of total loss.

The return was rife with peril, traps set by alien powers. Our people were horrified by the odds. The sea of frenzied life seemed impassible. Yet steadfast Moses, armed with nothing more than the "other's" promise, split the very sea in two, offering passage. He became the ancestral leader of all journeys. The return had its snares, captivities of every manner. Our forebears, like us, knew days and years of being lost and abandoned. Moved by our affliction, the one who first pronounced us good consoles us in prophetic voice. "With great tenderness I will take you back ... with enduring love I will pity you." The covenants of Eden, of Noah, Abraham, and Moses will never be forgotten.

Something new is promised: a water, not of chaos, but of cleansing; a new food of unremitting nourishment; a mercy confounding, lavish in forgiveness; love beyond the grasp of mere human imagination. "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." God's very word will come to be the final "yes" of goodness.

But what of our sin, our resistance, our ritual of death and folly, the compulsive repetition of Eden's inhabitants? How might the wisdom of God penetrate our thickness? If our hearts would only turn, Baruch chides us, with the humility of the stars. If our minds might only surrender to the will that moves the earth. Yet we cling to other gods, their twisted principles and precepts. Ezekiel, who saw our horrors and shame, indicted us but also promised that the covenant holds despite our deed. Unfaithful, we stay cherished. Besotted, we will be purified. Hard, cold, and lost at sea, we heard Ezekiel's rumour of our ransom. Could we chance a hope for some new spirit, for hearts no longer made of stone, for a homeland?

Who would have guessed that our home might be a person? Who would have dreamed that the passage through the sea was just that: going into the water, even under it, but with someone who, like a sleek, glorious dolphin of grace, would bear us on his back?

Jesus entered the deeps of death, a plunge he need not have made, had he not loved us in our sorry state. But he went to death with a "yes," with the utter trust of Abraham, the constancy of Moses, the bright reliance of Isaiah. In Easter's vigil, we plunge with him: "Are you not aware that we who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Being like him through likeness to his death, so shall we be through a like resurrection." The risen crucified one sounds again God's original "yes" to us now, even in our sin, even in the death which sin brought on us. Allowing us to be like and in him since he became so fully like unto us, he carries us, as one of his own, to safe land.

If we have died with Christ, we believe that we are also to live with him. His death was death to sin, once for all; his life is life for God. (Rom 6.8)

John Kavanaugh, SJ

#### **EASTER DAY**

## SENTENCE

The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

# PRAYER OF THE DAY

Glorious Lord of life, by the mighty resurrection of your Son you overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him: grant that we, who celebrate with joy Christ's rising from the dead may be raised from the death of sin to the life of righteousness; through him who lives and reigns with you and the

Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.** 

# LITURGY OF THE WORD

#### **First Reading**

Acts 10.34-43

#### Psalm

Psalm 118.1-2, 14-24

#### Second Reading

Colossians 3.1-4

#### Gospel

John 20.1–18

# REFLECTION - THE AGE TO COME IS HERE

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. This man God raised [on] the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

Whatever Jesus had said to his followers about his death and resurrection-they were simply not prepared for either reality. Mark says that most of them scattered after the arrest and were not around for the crucifixion. John notes that they were cowering behind locked doors on what turned out to be Easter Sunday. And this Sunday's Gospel, John's account of the discovery of the empty tomb, shows Mary Magdalene, and then Peter and the beloved disciple, as initially clueless. For Magdalene, the discovery that the stone had been rolled back could mean only one thing: grave robbers; someone had carried off the body of her Master.

When she informs Peter and the beloved disciple, they run to the

tomb to verify her report. On closer inspection they notice not just the absence of the body; they notice the linen wrapping lying on the ground, and the napkin that had bound Jesus' face set aside and nicely rolled up. What to make of this? Would grave robbers have bothered to undress the corpse before carrying it off? And would not the removal of linen bonded to a bloody body be a difficult and uninviting task? And is not the whole point of grave robbery to loot treasure? Of what commercial value is a corpse? No. The presence of the wrapping demanded another explanation.

Most people are aware that the famous Shroud of Turin has long been venerated as precisely the wrappings mentioned in John's account. While the jury is still out regarding the authenticity of the Shroud, some of the observations of its scientific analysers raise some fascinating questions about that piece of cloth. Trying to account for the negative image scorched on the linen and the nature of the blood stains, one (non-Christian) examiner said, in effect, "The only way I can account for these phenomena is that, to leave the blood stains intact and to produce this kind of image, the body must have somehow passed through the cloth."

We'd love to know more about what exactly transpired in that tomb. On one point, though, the New Testament accounts are insistent: resurrection is not resuscitation. When St. Paul takes up that issue with the Christian community of Corinth, he makes it clear that the risen body is not a mere return to biological existence. Nor is resurrection an entirely nonphysical existence with no continuity with the pre-mortem body. It is a bodily existence all right, but a bodily existence that has been transformed. Paul uses the analogy of the seed that is planted, and the vegetation that emerges. The seed has been transformed into a new existence (1 Cor 15.36-38).

Well, however such considerations fascinate our late-twentieth-century minds, they are not the aspects of Jesus' resurrection that fired up his Jewish followers. For them, Jesus' resurrection was not just about the body of one person. His resurrection was about world history. Yes, world history. In first-century Palestine, there were several ways of thinking about postmortem existence. The Sadducees didn't believe in any kind of life after death. The Pharisees, however, did. They developed the teaching of the book of Daniel into an understanding that a general resurrection of the faithful in Israel would be part of the "age to come"-the time when the kingdom of God would be manifest by the restoration of the tribes of Israel, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the establishment of peace and justice. For people who thought this way—and Jesus and his followers apparently did—resurrection from the dead was part of the larger package of this Age to Come.

Once they experienced Jesus as their risen Lord, present to some of them in very bodily ways—the last one being

> If Jesus had been raised from the dead, then the Age to Come—the kingdom of God—must have arrived!

Paul's own privileged experience on the road to Damascus—there was one obvious conclusion. If Jesus had been raised from the dead, then the Age to Come—the kingdom of God must have arrived! That's why the New Testament writers use the bold language of new creation to describe Christian existence.

The resurrection is not simply a proof that Jesus is truly son of God; it is also the sign that cosmic history has taken a new and fresh turn. We can sense this in the reading from Colossians 3. Paul dares to tell the Christians of Colossae that they have already died and been raised up with Christ. That is his way of reminding them that their baptism has begun a new kind of existence for them in this Age to Come. When he goes on to urge them to "think of what is above, not of what is on earth," it sounds like he is urging a kind of withdrawal from ordinary life. As we read on in this letter, however, it becomes clear that he is very much thinking of ordinary life. He says that the negative stuff

we all deal with—anger, lust, greed, deception—must be addressed with the healing power of the new life we have in Christ. The resurrection of Jesus enables us to let God reign in our ordinary lives in ways that demonstrate we are part of a new creation—not complete, obviously (just think of ethnic cleansing), but that kingdom is evident wherever communities allow the spirit of the risen Lord to have its way.

#### Dennis Hamm, SJ

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*Father Kavanaugh was a professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University in St. Louis. He reached many people during his lifetime.* 

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The Word Embodied: Meditations on the Sunday Scriptures

Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York (1998), pp. 45-47; 49-51; 53-55.

John J. Pilch was a biblical scholar and facilitator of parish renewals. Liturgical Press has published fourteen books by Pilch exploring the cultural world of the Bible.

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