

Pontius Pilate's Judgement of Jesus

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The Roman Ways

Jesus was born about 4 B.C. (see [Anno Domini](#)). You may remember that after the wise men announced the birth of Jesus to King Herod I, the king ordered that all baby boys in Bethlehem, who were two years of age or less, should be destroyed. Ironically, Herod himself died shortly after issuing this malicious decree.

Augustus Caesar honored Herod's will that stated that his kingdom was to be divided between his three surviving sons. The will gave Antipas a quarter of the realm, (the territory around Galilee), Philip a quarter of the realm (the area around Traconitis and later, Ituraea), and Archelaus the remaining half of the realm (Judea and Samaria). Each son that governed a quarter of the realm was called a "tetarch" (or a ruler of a fourth, see Luke 3:1), and Archelaus was called an "ethnarch" (a ruler of a province).

With the passage of time, Augustus did not think Archelaus was fit to be a king, so he removed Archelaus from his throne about ten years later. Archelaus was exiled and the province of Judea became a third-world Roman province that governors ruled. From A.D. 6 to the Jewish revolt in A.D. 66, governors that came from Rome's middle class ruled Judea. (The exception to this was the brief reign of Herod Agrippa I. (A.D. 41-44))

The first duty of a Roman governor was to maintain order and keep the peace according to the provisions of Roman law. Governors typically had a contingency of Roman soldiers at their command and they used them when necessary to keep order. Governors were also responsible for imposing and collecting taxes for Caesar which was no small task given the intense animosity between the occupied territories and the heavy hand of Rome.

Then as now, people who had political ambitions coveted the office of governor, and yet, with all its trappings, the office was not very glamorous. A Roman governor walked a very fine line. He was trapped between keeping peace in a province who hated to pay taxes to Rome, while simultaneously, meeting all of Caesar's demands. If the governor offended the people, it often caused an uprising. When this occurred, Caesar would hear about it and question the governor's ability to keep the peace.

If the governor tried to please the people by softening Rome's demands, Caesar would fire him in a heart beat and put him to death for insubordination. So, to be a governor in Jesus' day may have been a powerful job, but it required a delicate political balance.

Pontius Pilate

History says that Pilate was the fifth governor of Judea. Most governors served two to four years, but Pilate served as governor of Judea for about eleven years. (A.D. 26-36) We have no

information about Pilate before he arrived in Judea as governor. If it were not for a few hours with Jesus on one fateful morning, Pilate would have disappeared long ago into the silent hallway of history. Josephus indicates that Pilate's career in Judea ended abruptly when he agitated his subjects one time too many. (Antiquities 18:85-89)

As the story goes, a messianic figure rose in Samaria and formed a group of enthusiastic followers. Problems became serious when they armed themselves in an attempt to deliver their people from the hands of the Romans and establish God's kingdom. To prove his assumed identity as the Messiah, the messianic figure invited his followers to follow him to the summit of Mt. Gerizim, a mountain the Samaritans considered a holy site. (See Deuteronomy 11:29.)

He claimed that Moses had buried sacred vessels on top of the mountain and he knew where they were. (Evidently he believed if the sacred vessels were revealed, it would legitimize his messianic claims.) Pilate learned of this development and sent a platoon of Roman soldiers to block their ascent up the mountain. This led to a bloody confrontation and the Romans killed several Samaritans in the melee that followed.

The Samaritan Council formally complained to Caesar about Pilate's abusive use of power and Tiberius summoned Pilate to Rome. Pilate left for Rome, but reached the city after Tiberius had died. The new emperor, Gaius, did not send Pilate back to Judea and Pilate suddenly disappeared from the radar screen of history.

Eusebius, a spiritual counselor to Emperor Constantine in the fourth century A.D., supports a legend that Pilate committed suicide during the reign of Gaius. The legend maintains that Pilate committed suicide due to his remorse for what he did to Jesus. (Hist. Eccl. 2.7.1)

History does not reveal if Pilate became a born-again Christian. However, it is interesting that Christian churches in northern Africa years later declared Pilate a saint. In fact, Tertullian claims that Pilate was a Christian at heart in a letter he wrote to Tiberius. (Apology 21) I believe that Pilate had a complete change of heart after meeting Jesus, and his actions in the drama you are about to read are quite revealing, when put in context.

Even though we do not actually know what happened to Pilate in the end, we do know what happened on Friday morning, April 7, A.D. 30, when a long sequence of events brought an unsuspecting Pilate face to face with God. All four gospels record descriptions of this unrehearsed confrontation in all four gospels. This will be the focus of this study because there are profound end time parallels between the events that transpired in Pilate's judgment hall and events that will happen in courtrooms all over the world during the Great Tribulation.

Note: To review Pilate's experience, I have taken excerpts from the gospels and attempted to put them in chronological order. You may note some redundancy since each gospel describes the events with a slightly different perspective. It is my hope that this study will reveal something about Pilate that you may not have noticed before. Insertions in brackets [] and italics are mine and are added for clarity or emphasis.

John Begins the Story

"Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas [the High Priest] **to the palace of the Roman governor [Pilate]. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate came out [of his palace] to them and asked, 'What charges are you bringing against this man?' 'If he were not a criminal,' they replied, 'we would not have handed him over to you.' Pilate said, 'Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.' 'But we have no right to execute anyone,' the Jews objected. This [response] happened so that the words Jesus had spoken [Luke 18:31-33] indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.**

Pilate then went back inside the palace, [he] **summoned Jesus and asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' 'Is that your own idea,' Jesus asked, 'or did others talk to you about me?' 'Am I a Jew [that I should care]?' Pilate replied. 'It was *your* people and *your* chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?' Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.' [So!] 'You are a king, then!' said Pilate. Jesus answered, 'You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. *Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*' 'What is truth?' [a puzzled] Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, 'I find no basis for a charge against him.' " (John 18:28-38)**

Commentary:

Pilate's fairness is seen in his first report to the Jews. Pilate knew of Jesus' reputation. He had heard of His miracles and in a secular way, he quickly decided that Jesus was not a common criminal or rabble rouser. Pilate did not have a religious heart, therefore the teachings of Jesus, which infuriated the Jews, did not personally offend him. After listening to Jesus for a few moments, Pilate sensed the Jewish leaders and Jesus were embroiled in a religious squabble "over words" and he really did not want to get involved. Pilate returned to the waiting crowd and *boldly declared Jesus to be innocent.*

Luke Says

"But they insisted, 'He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.' On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction [Herod Antipas], **he [Pilate conveniently recused himself on this civil matter and] sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time [to observe Passover]."**

Commentary:

Pilate and Herod Antipas had a long history as political enemies and in the quicksand of this

situation, Pilate saw a golden opportunity. By sending Jesus to Antipas, Pilate flattered the king's ego by showing respect, but Pilate also had a political motive. He was trying to escape further confrontation with his contentious subjects, the Jews.

"When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate [because Antipas did not want to offend the high priest and because of possible political repercussions, Herod made sure Jesus was Pilate's problem]. **That day Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies.**"

"[A couple hours later] **Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, [in an effort to please you, how about this?] I will punish him [for stirring up trouble] and then release him.'**" (Luke 23:5-16)

Commentary:

Pilate declared Jesus was innocent a second time.

Matthew Says

Now it was the governor's custom at the [Passover] **Feast to [gain the favor of the Jews and] release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called [Jesus Barabbas or just] Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered [at his palace], Pilate [sought to set Jesus free through negotiation. So he] asked them, 'Which one do you want me to release to you: [Jesus who is called] Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' For [now] he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.**"

Commentary:

At this point, Pilate was convinced that Jesus was innocent of all the charges that the Jewish leaders had brought against him. So, Pilate attempted to reason with them, comparing the worst of society (Barabbas) with the best (Jesus). The hostility directed toward this innocent man amazed Pilate. I believe he sensed there was something supernatural about the intensity of the clamor.

"While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.' But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas

and to have Jesus executed. 'Which of the two do you want me to release to you?' asked the governor. 'Barabbas,' they answered. 'What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?' Pilate asked. They all answered, 'Crucify him!' 'Why? What crime has he committed?' asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!' "

Commentary:

The note Pilate received from his wife stunned him. After reading her comments, the truth planted in his mind by the Holy Spirit was confirmed. This was no ordinary trial. Jesus was the Son of God, the predicted Messiah. At that moment, the tables turned. Pilate suddenly found himself on trial. What should he do with Jesus? Pilate had the power to set Jesus free and he had the power to crucify Him. If Pilate set Jesus free, the mob would go crazy and Caesar would question his ability to govern.

If he crucified Jesus, Pilate knew an innocent man, even the Messiah, would be put to death. Pilate had to make a choice! In exasperation, Pilate uttered a sentence that every sinner who comes under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit has had to ask: "What shall I do then, with Jesus, who is called Christ?" The mob's reaction became unreasonable. Pilate raised his voice above the noise of the crowd asking, "What crime has He committed?" The response was deafening. Pilate discovered an awful truth: There is no reason in rebellion.

"When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere [and he had no political options left], **but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!' All the people answered, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and [after further discussion with the Jews, Pilate] handed him over to be crucified.**" (Matthew 27:15-26)

Commentary:

When the week began, Pilate had no idea what would occur on Friday morning. Suddenly, God powerfully catapulted Pilate to the forefront of an incredible moment of truth and he, the governor of Judea, like the Apostle Peter a few hours earlier, proved to be a coward. Pilate had a lot at stake. In order to keep his prestigious job as governor, he had to demonstrate skills worthy of his appointment. In order to satisfy the protests of angry Jews, he had to offer them something.

Pilate was convicted that Jesus was innocent, yet he sought to deflect his guilt by simply washing his hands of this murderous event. Consider the irony of his action. The Jews who were standing before Pilate, believed that they had to be ceremonially clean for the Passover.

To maintain their "cleanliness," they would not allow themselves to enter Pilate's palace, yet within their own hearts they harbored such hatred and malice toward Jesus, they were willing to murder Him. Neither the Jews' sanctimonious ceremonies nor the water used by Pilate could remove the stain of sin. The only thing in the whole universe that can wash away the guilt of sin

is the sinless blood of Jesus.

Both Peter and Pilate discovered something about themselves that day. The Apostle Peter discovered the cowardice within his own character when he denied knowing Jesus, just as Pilate also discovered his cowardly character when he allowed an innocent man to be put to death. Pilate thought that if he had Jesus flogged (a punishment of indescribable agony), the Jews would relent and their rage would be satisfied – in which case, Pilate could save Jesus from death.

John Says

"Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again, saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' And they struck him in the face."

Commentary:

After the blows and the flogging, I am sure Jesus was barely conscious. He had received the harshest treatment possible this side of death.

"Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.' When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify!

Crucify!' But Pilate answered, 'You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.' The Jews insisted, 'We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.' When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace [to speak with Jesus]."

Commentary:

Every human heart is capable of feeling the hatred the Jews expressed toward Jesus that morning. It only takes the right circumstances and issues to align. Pilate was trapped in a power play between Heaven and Hell. I believe that every demon possible, who had formerly enjoyed the glories of Heaven, was present to ensure that their Creator was destroyed. Lucifer, the anti-Christ himself, was present – using every influence and every power in his arsenal to torture and destroy his holy Adversary.

A watching universe shuddered to see the depths that sin-full hearts can sink. Pilate knew in his own way that Jesus was the Messiah and when the Jews said, "He claimed to be the Son of God," they ironically confirmed a truth that had previously stirred the heart of the governor. At that moment, he became "even more afraid."

During the Great Tribulation, circumstances and issues will align in such a way that everyone on

Earth will be forced into a situation like Pilate faced – not to judge Jesus, but to be judged by Jesus. **"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."** (2 Corinthians 5:10) The Holy Spirit allowed Pilate to know the truth about Jesus.

His wife's note was not a coincidence, but instead it was a message from Heaven. *In desperation Pilate declared Christ's innocence a third time, yet he could not bring himself to set Jesus free and face the ridicule for doing the right thing.* This is a parallel of how it will be during the Great Tribulation. The will of God will be set before the world in terms that are as bright as the noonday Sun, yet few will have the strength of character to stand up and take the ridicule for doing God's will.

No wonder Revelation says, **"But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."** (Revelation 21:8) Let us be real. Every human being is a coward and will not take a stand for truth unless they are infused with Holy Spirit power, which can help them stand courageously through trials of faith.

"[A troubled Pilate interviewed Jesus again.] **'Where do you come from?' he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. 'Do you refuse to speak to me?' Pilate said. 'Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?' Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'** "

Commentary:

Pilate condemned himself with his own words when he told Jesus that he had the power to set Him free. Jesus, knowing that He had come into the world to set us "free," did not address Pilate's cowardice. Instead, Jesus condemned Lucifer, who truly was responsible and guilty for handing Jesus over to be killed.

When the demons heard these words, I believe they shuddered. The mouth of God declared that He would annihilate Lucifer. Meanwhile, Pilate's consternation was on a different plane. For the first time, Pilate recognized a fatal flaw in his own character. He could not bring himself to do the right thing. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent and believed Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah. He also knew that Jesus was hated *for no other reason than declaring who He was.* Jesus was the King of kings!

"From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.' When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha).

It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour [noon]. [When the audience became silent, Pilate spoke soberly from a deep spiritual awakening within.] **'Here is**

your king,' Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, 'Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!' 'Shall I crucify *your* king?' Pilate asked. 'We have no king but Caesar,' the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus." (John 19:1-16)

Commentary:

Believing that Jesus was the Son of God was not enough to stop Pilate from acquiescing to the demands of the Jews. Simply knowing the truth will not prevent you from denying the truth. Peter and Pilate represent both sides of this dilemma. Even though Peter was religious and personally knew Jesus, he still denied him. On the other hand, Pilate was secular, but he knew Jesus was innocent and still sent Him to His death.

In an effort to mitigate his guilt and show some support for Jesus, Pilate did the following:

"Pilate [deliberately] had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, 'Do not write "The King of the Jews," but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.' Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written [and it will remain unchanged because I believe him].' " (John 19:19-22)

"Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead [since death by crucifixion usually took days]. **Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph." (Mark 15:43-45)**

"The next day [Saturday], the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 'Sir,' they said, 'we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, "After three days I will rise again." So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.' 'Take a guard,' Pilate answered. 'Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.' So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard." (Matthew 27:62-66)

Commentary:

The Bible does not indicate if Pilate knew about the predicted resurrection of Jesus. Sensing the Jews' desire to cover their deed and keep the peace, Pilate may have cooperated with them. Even better, if Pilate was aware that a resurrection might be possible, *his* guards could validate the event for him if they were present.

"[On Sunday morning] **While the women were on their way** [to tell the disciples about the empty tomb], **some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this report gets to [Pilate] the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.'** **So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this [false] story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.**" (Matthew 28:11-15)

Commentary:

Pilate awoke on that Friday morning only to discover it was *his* day of judgment. Yes, Pilate sat in the judgment seat, but Pilate was on trial. Pilate declared Jesus was innocent three times. Still, Pilate had Jesus flogged and crucified rather than take any ridicule from the Jews and a possible reprimand from Caesar. When that day ended, I am sure that Pilate was not the same. You cannot violate your innermost sense of fairness and justice, and still have respect for yourself. Pilate violated "the right" to keep his job. Peter violated "his loyalty" to keep his dignity. Both men lost the very thing they sought to protect.

Conclusions:

Given the scant history we have about Pilate, I would like to offer the following scenario about the end of Pilate's life. When the guards reported to Pilate their personal experience at the tomb on Sunday morning, inwardly Pilate was overjoyed. Imagine that! Jesus really is the Son of God! When Pilate put the details of Christ's birth, life and death together, he became a silent believer in Jesus.

When Pilate sent his soldiers to intercept the "messianic figure" from Samaria six years later, he gave orders to destroy the movement because it was an insult to Jesus, who according to reliable sources, had ascended into Heaven. The "uncalled for brutality" of Pilate's soldiers aroused the Samaritan Council, who appealed to Tiberius Caesar. He summoned Pilate to Rome for a reprimand. Tiberius died before Pilate arrived in Rome and his successor, Gaius, relieved Pilate of his career. Pilate eventually settled in northern Africa where he confessed to being a believer in Christ.

He found refuge in Alexandria among the Christians who had also found refuge from Rome's hatred there. (This may explain why the Coptic and Ethiopian churches later made him a saint.) In time, Pilate became ill and impoverished. I am sure he often relived that infamous day and probably never forgave himself for having Jesus flogged and crucified. In a depressed and lonely state of mind, he may have ended his life. Ironically, legend says that when Peter eventually faced his own death on a cross, he asked to be crucified upside down, since he was not worthy to die as Christ had died.

Evidently, both men died without being able to forgive themselves of their cowardice. However, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus forgave them both, and because of their faith in Christ

as the Lamb of God, I sincerely hope to see *both* men in Heaven.