

Bible Studies

Pilate and the Judea



Pilate was the governor or procurator of Judea for 10 years between 26AD and 36AD, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. The Jewish writers Philo and Josephus both comment on his career. In 1961 a block of limestone was discovered at Cesarean bearing an inscription which mentioned Pilate (Tiberieum Pontius Pilate). It was part of a temple he consecrated to Tiberius.

Pilate came from the upper middle classes, not the background you would expect for a governor. He was a career military man, certainly not a diplomat. He owed his position as governor to his wife Claudius, who was related to Tiberius.

Neither Josephus nor Philo are complimentary concerning Pilate, they describe him as a hard brutal man, what we would expect of a career Roman soldier. He had no understanding or patience with Judaism and no intention of making allowances for it.

Jerusalem needed sensitive handling. Their faith in God stood out from the paganism of the Romans. The Romans struggled to understand their strong, to the Romans irrational, opposition to idolatry and paganism, or their willingness to die for what they believed.

Five incidents describe Pilate's governorship



The first thing Pilate did on becoming governor was to set up the Roman legionary standards in Jerusalem. This was the first thing any governor across the empire would do, but it was something his predecessors had carefully avoided. The standards bore the image of Caesar and were associated with worship. They broke the third commandment. Josephus says he did this secretly, intending to flout the Jewish laws. Suddenly he finds the whole city up in arms and on the point of rioting.

A huge crowd of Jews went to Ceasarea, the seat of Roman government and besieged him. The stand-off lasted for six days. In the end Pilate gave them an ultimatum, back down or die. At this the entire crowd uncovered their necks and offered to die. In the end Pilate had to back down, creating a bad precedent. So began the mutual antagonism that existed throughout his governorship. **What does this incident tell us about Pilate?**

As governor Pilate was responsible to Caesar. The Romans kept their governors fully accountable, they always had to watch their backs. Being governor was a lucrative post, big money could be made out of the provinces. As governor Pilate had two overriding jobs. Collect Roman taxes and keep the peace. A governor who failed to do these would be short lived.

Tiberius appointed only 2 governors to Judea in 26 years, most emperors changed them every few years. When asked about this, Tiberius told the story of a beggar covered with blood sucking flies, a man passing by cleared the flies from him only to receive a rebuke. *"what did you do that for? Those flies have already drunk as much blood as they want, new flies will drink more."*

To complicate matters Jerusalem had 'temple sweeper status' under Roman law, as an important religious center it was autonomous and self governing. The high priest and Sanhedrin had civil control of the city but Pilate ruled the province and was in overall control. This made control of the city very awkward. The Romans built the Antonian fortress overlooking the temple mount to try to keep order.



To get his own back for the defeat he had suffered over the standards Pilate had golden shields made and hung on the wall of the fortress, and the conflict started again. Knowing Pilate would not back down a second time, Herod's sons took the issue to Tiberius. Herod always maintained good relations with Caesar and the Herod's father had previously ruled over Jerusalem. Tiberius ordered the shields removed and placed in the temple in Caesarea. From this incident sprung the animosity between Pilate and Herod. Luke 23v11

What does this tell us about Pilate?

How do you think Pilate felt about a second public defeat?

How do you think his attitude was towards the Jews?

These incidents exposed Pilate's two critical weaknesses. Danger of riot or revolt and appeal to Caesar.

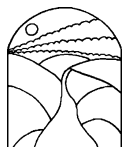


The third incident was quite different. Jerusalem's water has always been problematic. Pilate wanted to build an aqueduct from springs beyond Bethlehem to the temple. The water was seriously needed especially when Jerusalem filled up with pilgrims three times a year. Again the crowds protested. They didn't want Pilate doing anything that encroached on the sovereignty of Jerusalem or the temple, especially if he was going to confiscate temple funds to do so. The protest took place during the lead up to one of the festivals. Pilate dressed his soldiers up in civilian clothes, they mingled with the crowd. When the command was given, they pulled out their swords and massacred a large number of unarmed civilians.

Read Luke 13v1 This verse probably refers to this incident.

Galileans would not have been the only victims, but Jesus was in Galilee at the time.

What does this incident tell us about Pilate?



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He minted coins with the emperors bust on them, again something his predecessors had avoided.

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The final straw in Pilate's long and violent career occurred in Samaria. A false prophet gathered a large crowd around himself at Mt Gerazim. He promised to show them where the temple vessels had been hidden. Pilate sent out his troops to prevent them reaching the mountain, a blood bath ensued. This was a religious crowd of unarmed people who were not engaged in a riot. Representation was made to Vitellius in Syria, Pilate immediate superior. Pilate was sent back to Rome. This coincided with Tiberius' death. Pilate stood trial before Caligula. We do not know the result of the trial.

Pilate ended his life in Lausanne in Switzerland. According to Eusebius, he committed suicide on Caligula's orders. Philo describes Pilate as "*naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness*" who, "*feared exposure for his conduct as governor... the briberies, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries; executions without trial constantly repeated, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty... his vindictiveness and furious temper.*" Philo, Legatio ad Gaium

Tacticus (112AD) is the only Roman historian to mention Pilate. Tacticus' only mention of Pilate is that he condemned Jesus to death.

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Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane at about 10pm on Thursday night.

If He is to be executed it must happen before sunset on Friday, less than 20 hours later. The Sadducees are completely unprepared for His arrest. During the first part of the night Jesus is interviewed by Annas the previous high priest and then held captive. The high priest during this time has to assemble the Sanhedrin and put together witnesses to condemn Jesus. This he clearly struggles with. **How do we know this?** Mark 14v55-59

How hard would it be to fabricate evidence against Jesus?

This just goes to illustrate the unpreparedness of the high priest and the hurry they were operating under. The Sanhedrin could not condemn a man to death under cover of darkness. Jesus' final sentence could not be reached until first light. Immediately after this Jesus is taken to Pilate. Although in most regards Jerusalem was self-governing the Romans held the death penalty under their own control. Only Pilate could order Jesus' execution.

What was Jesus condemned for before the Sanhedrin? Mark 14v62-64

What was Jesus accused of before Pilate? Luke 23v2

The Sanhedrin has found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, under Jewish law this received an automatic death penalty. Pilate would never agree to this, so the charges Jesus faced carefully changed from blasphemy before the Sanhedrin to sedition before Pilate.

The first mention of Pilate in the passion accounts comes when Jesus is brought before him for sentencing by the high priest. The accounts are brief, John is the only Gospel that gives the details of the interaction.

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Read John 18v28-32.

Pilate lived in Caesarea. Festival times were tense and dangerous times. Pilate was in Jerusalem because of the danger of riots. It was a concession by itself that Pilate came out to receive the delegation. Pilate would not normally have held court on a day like this.

Why did Pilate come out to address them, rather than receiving them in his chambers?

The Passover was to be eaten that evening.

What difference does this make to the story?

It ensured that Jesus' sentencing was not done in secret behind closed doors, this was unfortunate for the Sadducees.

Do you notice anything strange about these verses? v28-32

How convincing is 'if he were not a criminal we would not have handed him over to you' as a legal argument?

It is because of this that we assume the high priest has already visited Pilate by night to prepare him. He must have explained that Jesus was dangerous and it is in everybody's best interests for him to be executed immediately. The substance of this meeting may be recorded in Luke 23v13-14. **How would Pilate be likely to treat this request?**

Knowing his track record with the high priest he must have treated it with great suspicion. Pilate has two choices he can simply endorse the Sanhedrin's verdict or he can retry Jesus' case. If he does the latter it would be sensible for him to wait until after the feast. This would be the most obvious course of action.

Which does the high priest want him to do?

How would you rate the high priest's chances?

This must have been some hard sell! Against the odds Caiaphas comes away from his midnight meeting with Pilate with an agreement that Pilate will simply endorse the Sanhedrin's sentence.

What does verse 29 suggest Pilate is going to do? Why do you think he did this?

Pilate has either had a change of heart or was tricking Caiaphas the night before. He intends to try Jesus himself, exactly what the Sadducees had hoped to avoid.

At this point the Sadducees' plans for Jesus hang on a knife edge, it all depends on a stubborn and capricious Roman governor.

Bible Studies

Pilate and Jesus



Read John 18v32-40

It is early Friday morning, the priest have taken Jesus to Pilate to have him sentenced to death. Jerusalem is crowded with pilgrims from all over the world, the atmosphere is volatile. At this point Pilate does the exact opposite of what the priests want, he takes Jesus inside the palace and proceeds to try him. Normally the judge would hear the charges and the case against the accused, then he would hear the prisoners reply. (Paul's defense before Festus is a good example of this.)

What is He charged with? Luke 23v2 & 5

Jesus is charged with leading a rebellion against Rome. All of the Gospels have Pilate asking Jesus "are you the king of the Jews?" This was the substance of the charge against Jesus.

How did Jesus respond? Mark 15v4-5

All the Gospels have Jesus talking with Pilate, John at length. This verse does not mean Jesus refused to speak to Pilate, simply that Jesus refused to defend himself. Matthew 27v12-14.

Why would He not do so?

How did Jesus respond to the question "are you the king of the Jews?" John 18v34

What do you think Jesus answer means?

Jesus wants to point out that the chief priests are trying to manipulate Pilate and that they have ulterior motives.

Was Pilate aware of this? Mark 15v10

How much do you think Pilate knew about Jesus?



Read Acts 5v37

The charges brought against Jesus mirror the crimes of Judas the Galilean, as if the priests were trying to tar Jesus with the same brush or to give Pilate a precedent. Pilate points out that Jesus is on trial because He has fallen out with his own people, not with the Romans.

What does Jesus say to the accusation that He is the king of the Jews? John 18v36-37

He acknowledges that He is a king but points out that it is not a physical kingdom He wants to establish but a spiritual one. He also points out that there has been no uprising or rebellion from his supporters. At this stage Pilate is convinced that whatever Jesus may or may not have done he posed no threat to the Roman empire or the peace of Jerusalem. Therefore Jesus was none of Pilate's business, He could be dealt with by the priests.

Were the accusations made to Pilate true?

Jesus had refused to be made king and told people to pay taxes. John 6v15, Matthew 22v21



What did Pilate mean when he said "what is truth?" John 18v38

Pilate was not a philosopher he was a career soldier, whatever others may find in this statement, Pilate meant none of it. For him the statement in cynical not profound. It was rhetorical and dismissive not inquisitive. Maybe he was saying he was not interested in the truth, or that the truth was not the issue before his court. Most likely he used the phrase to pigeonhole the issue as a religious one not a criminal one.

What is Pilate's motivation, at the end of the day what is going to make him happy?

Pilate's wish list for the day. 1. Avoid a riot. 2. Give the priests a hard time. At this stage what happens to Jesus is not really important to him.

What does Pilate propose to do? Why does he want to release Jesus?

Pilate tries to exchange Barabbas for Jesus, in doing so he probably hoped to circumvent the priests, knowing that Jesus had wide popular support. If so he seriously misjudged the crowd, most of whom were partisan to the priest or to Barabbas.

If Jesus was innocent what should Pilate have done?

None of the Gospels record all of the events of the crucifixion and it is not always easy to work out the exact order.

What did Pilate do when he discovered Jesus came from Galilee? Luke 23v5-7

Pilate was under no obligation to do this. Maybe he did it trying to pass on the responsibility, Perhaps he hoped Herod would release him or detain him and take him back to Galilee. Whatever the reason Herod took it as a mark of respect and replied in kind by sending Jesus back, thus acknowledging Pilate's authority.

What was the result? Luke 23v12 (Why had they been enemies?)

Luke takes this to be a fulfillment of Psalm 2v2. Acts 4v25.



Read Matthew 27v19

The Romans took their superstitions very seriously.

What effect do you think this message had on Pilate?

Read John 19v1-16

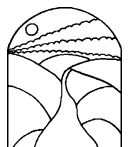
Why do you think Pilate had Jesus scourged?

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Perhaps he hoped this would be sufficient punishment to satisfy the priests. Flogging or flagellation was the first step in a harsh crucifixion regime. Humiliation was part of the process. A second time Pilate tries to set Jesus free. But Pilate's actions have an additional reason for his actions. He wants to find out what the true charges against Jesus were. It is also, of course, possible that he is maneuvering for a bribe. The Sadducees finally drop their pretension and come clean.

What were they? John 19v7

What was Pilate's response? Why do you think he reacted this way?

He had fallen foul of the Jewish sensibilities about such things before. From a minor incident this was escalating to something that had the potential for another confrontation with the Jews (most of which he had lost) or even a riot. In addition to this there was his wife's dream and something deeply unsettling about Jesus. He does not plead for mercy, or seem overly worried about being set free. He just calls for Pilate to recognize the truth. What seemed a game had suddenly become more serious.

Why did Jesus act this way?

What did Pilate mean by the question 'where did you come from?' John 19v 9

Jesus is a total enigma to Pilate. Jesus seems to have had a profound effect on Pilate, like the first time Pilate had found something true or noble.



What changes in Pilate's demeanour at this point? John 19v10-12

He had twice tried to release Jesus so why does it say 'from this time on he tried to release Jesus?'

Up until this point he has cared nothing about Jesus or his innocence, he has been playing with the priests, goading them. But now he genuinely seems to want to release Him.

The priests seem to sense this change and they play their trump card by reverting back to the charge of sedition. If He claims to be king of the Jews then He sets himself up against Caesar. If you don't convict Him then you are acting against Rome's best interests. We have already seen that a partition to Caesar over the shield previously exposed Pilate's weakness in this area.

What choice now confronted Pilate?

How does Pilate respond? John 19v16

Jesus' guilt or innocence was not important to anyone, Pilate, the priests or even Jesus himself!



Pilate stands for all those who want to sit on the fence.

Pilate stands for all those who decide the price is too high.

Pilate stands for all those who acknowledge Jesus but won't do anything about it.

Pilate stands for all those who will not do the right thing with Jesus.

Pilate was not neutral, he was positively inclined to Jesus but it was him who condemned Jesus to death. **What does this say for people around us today who acknowledge Jesus but won't commit their lives?**

It's not what you think about Jesus that is important, or what you wanted to do with Him. It is only what you do with Jesus that counts.

What cost would Pilate have paid had he chosen to release Jesus?

Would it have been worth it?

Pilate's demeanor. Some people have stated that Pilate's capitulation in this case is out of character with his previous actions. **What do you think?**

I think Pilate's actions are consistent with a person being forced to act in a way he does not want. A person who has lost too many confrontations he should have won. Who being in total authority discovers he does not have the power to act. There is a resignation, paranoia and vindictiveness that seem to point to this.

Pilate's revenge. Read Matthew 27v24

Did this make Pilate innocent or not responsible?

What do you think of a judge who finds a person innocent but still orders their execution?



Read Deuteronomy 21v6-7 & Psalm 26v6

This act had not judicial significance and was not any part of Roman law or practice. It was part of Jewish law. Pilate not known for his cultural sensitivity was using a Jewish tradition to embarrass the priests.



Read John 19v19-22

The plaque above the head of a crucified man told his crime.

What point was Pilate making? Why didn't he want to change it?



Read John 19v38 Releasing the body was unusual, part of the humiliation of crucifixion was to have your body disposed of on the public rubbish heap. To give the body to a member of the Sanhedrin meant the Sanhedrin effectively became responsible for any further problems, of which, as you might know there was just the one.

How do you think the priests felt about this?

The choices that faced Pilate that day were bigger than he realized. He thought he was deciding the destiny of one man. In the end he was deciding his own destiny. When Jesus stands before you for your verdict, your evaluation and judgment, it is your own destiny you choose.