

The following story has four main individuals: Jesus, Pilate, the Jews, and Herod Antipas.

Pilate (from Edwards pages 663-664)

Pilate was the fifth Roman governor over Palestine, ruling for 11 years from 26–36 A.D.; this alone is a testimony of his competency, for the Jews were a difficult people to rule.

Pilate's three chief responsibilities were to command Roman troops in Palestine, supervise judiciary functions, and administer financial affairs. Pilate was required to be present in Jerusalem at Jewish festivals as thousands of Jews gathered and nationalistic fervor was heightened. When in Jerusalem, he presumably resided at Herod's palace at the western wall of the city, and it was probably there where Jesus appeared before him.

Pilate was not as brutal as some rulers, certainly not on the scale of Nero, and by standards of his day he was not overly corrupt. He was capable of constructive endeavors on behalf of the Jews, but he was also dismissive of Jewish traditions. When confronted by opposition he inevitably responded with force rather than diplomacy. His Jewish subjects were themselves stubborn and defiant, but his contempt for their religious customs exasperated rather than lessened the conflicts between him and them. Both Philo and Josephus described him as being "inflexible, stubborn, and cruel."

On one occasion he introduced military standards (poles with banners) into Jerusalem bearing the bust of the Emperor Tiberius; these violated the Jewish ban on images. This resulted in Jews going en masse to Pilate's residence in Caesarea, nearly 70 miles away, to stage a nonviolent protest for five days. Pilate initially gave orders to slay the protesters in the arena, but when they bared their throats welcoming death rather than transgression of the law, he withdrew the images from Jerusalem.

On another occasion he financed the construction of a 23-mile aqueduct to bring water to Jerusalem with the funds from the temple treasury. When the Jews protested he responded with military brutality that ended up being more violent than he had wanted.

The final atrocity in Pilate's reign was an unprovoked attack on a group of Samaritans making a pilgrimage to Mt Gerizim. Some were killed; others fled, and still others were captured. Of the captured the most respected and distinguished were executed.

Eventually, Pilate's contempt for Jewish religion, customs, and privileges tarnished his tenure as governor and resulted in his banishment by Emperor Gaius.

Herod Antipas (mostly from Edwards, 666-668):

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great's fourth wife (Herod the Great had ten wives!). Herod the Great was a very formidable ruler and was the one who built the great Herodian temple of which Jesus was so familiar. "The only time he is mentioned in the New Testament is in Mt. 2 and Lk. 1. In Matthew he is associated with the wise men of the East, who came to investigate the birth of the 'king of the

Jews.' Learning their secret, Herod found out from the 'priests and scribes of the people' where the Christ was to be born and ordered the 'massacre of the innocents,' with which his name is perhaps more generally associated than with any other act of his life" (ISBE, Herod). When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided as follows among his sons: Archelaus received one-half of the kingdom, and governed Judea, Samaria and Idumaea; Antipas was appointed "tetrarch" of Galilee and Peraea, and Philip became "tetrarch" of what was left.

Herod Antipas ruled for 40-plus years and respected Jewish traditions and beliefs by not issuing offensive coins that had images on them. Herod divorced his wife in order to marry Herodias, his brother's wife (Matt. 14:1 ff.). The divorce led to a war with his deposed wife's father and the beheading of John the Baptist who announced his remarriage as adulterous. Later, Herod was fearful that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Other than this, Herod Antipas avoided the kind of provocations that resulted in Pilate's recall.

23:1 Then the whole body of them got up and brought Him before Pilate.

23:2 And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King."

By now the sun was up; the Sanhedrin was outside the Praetorium standing in the street near the temple shouting their accusations against Jesus where people could hear them, resulting in a crowd beginning to swell as it became clear what was going on.

The Sanhedrin brought Jesus to Pilate as a united group (23:1 "the whole body of them"). This does not necessarily mean that literally all 71 members were present or that all opposed Jesus, for we know that Joseph of Arimathea, one of the Sanhedrin, was not in agreement (Lk. 23:50-51). Nicodemus, whom John calls "a Pharisee" and a "ruler of the Jews" (a member of the Sanhedrin?), did not oppose Jesus either; at the Feast of Tabernacles, when the Sanhedrin was enraged at Christ's proclamation of Himself as the "living water" (Jn. 7:37, 38), Nicodemus was emboldened to stand up in His defense (Jn. 7:48ff.).

The Sanhedrin's claims against Jesus were similar to the claims brought against Paul and Silas in Acts 17:6-7, yet they were not the same accusations that they made when they had met with Jesus earlier (22:67, 70). Before Pilate they were attempting to generate the maximum negative political reaction as possible. To paraphrase 23:2, they were claiming that Jesus was turning the nation against Rome - He was forbidding people from paying taxes and trying to weaken Rome by claiming to be a King, an adversary to Caesar.

Of course, the accusations of the Sanhedrin were either completely false or twisted to lead Pilate to their desired conclusions. Jesus never misled anyone. He never told people to stop paying taxes (20:22, 25); He even associated with tax collectors (5:27-30; 7:34; 25:1; 18:9-14). The third charge, that Jesus called Himself Christ, is the only charge that was made at His trial before the Sanhedrin (22:67), but even this charge is deceptive. Jesus, as the Christ, is a king but He never promoted insurrection, violence, or rebellion against Rome as the Sanhedrin wants Pilate to believe.

23:3 So Pilate asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him and said, "It is as you say."

Pilate's question, "Are You the King of the Jews?" is found in all four gospels and became the wording that was affixed to the cross (Matt. 27:37). The title was not randomly used. Josephus uses the expressions, "King of the Jews" or "King of the Hebrews" every time he references an Israelite king; it was the default expression for every sovereign in Israel, from Saul to Herod (Edwards, 671). The Jews brought kingship up since their previous charge of blasphemy had no bearing in a Roman court. The greatest crime that they could think of to be brought before a Roman prefect was that of Jesus claiming to be king. If the Jews could convince Pilate that Jesus was a threat to Caesar, a threat to *pax romana* (the peace that existed between nationalities within the Roman Empire), Pilate would be duty-bound to execute Jesus.

Jesus' response to Pilate, "It is as you say" (23:3), is qualified in John 18:36-37: Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." Therefore, Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

23:4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man."

23:5 But they kept on insisting, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place."

23:6 When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

23:7 And when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time.

23:8 Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him.

We know from the other gospel records that more interrogation went on than what is recorded, but in the end Pilate concluded that Jesus had done nothing deserving punishment. Pilate was no doubt wise to the Sanhedrin's antics in trying to make Jesus look like a political threat to Rome; he saw no such threat.

Pilate reported back to the Sanhedrin saying, "I find no guilt in this man." The Sanhedrin, however, would not accept Pilate's decision. The imperfect tense of "they kept insisting" means that their objections were unrelenting. They repeated their accusation that Jesus was stirring up the people to rebel against Rome (23:5). Although their claim of being concerned about the peace of Rome was insincere, they were concerned that if rebellion started, Rome would step in and they would lose the position and power they enjoyed. They hated Jesus for exposing their hypocrisy and dismantling their man-made theology, and they did not believe that He was the Messiah. Furthermore, if He gathered a

following and mob violence erupted, they would surely lose their political power. The stakes were so high they could not let Jesus live.

When Pilate heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he decided to share the responsibility of Jesus' fate with Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Herod was also in Jerusalem at the time since it was the Passover festival, and the masses of people resulted in latent revolutionary potential. He had had several rebellions during his rule and was sensitive to the possibility again. Technically, Jesus fell under Herod's jurisdiction (23:7) even though Pilate was in a higher position of authority.

Herod was pleased to see Jesus, for he had heard about Him and hoped that He would perform some sort of sign (23:8). He didn't realize that those who come to Jesus "for any purpose other than knowing, loving, and following Him will inevitably be disappointed" (Edwards, 673). Luke had already associated signs in particular with diabolical intent (Lk. 4:9-12) or lack of faith (Lk. 4:23-24). To desire Jesus for signs or wonders, health or wealth, power or privilege, or for any other ulterior motive is not to desire Jesus (Edwards).

23:9 And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing.

"Jesus did not reply to the Sanhedrin because it was too hostile (22:67); He does not reply to Antipas because he is too trivial. . . The silence of Jesus is not dissimilar to the emphatic silence of God before the frantic prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel – 'there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention' (1 Kings 18:29)" (Edwards, 674).

23:10 And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently.

23:11 And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate.

23:12 Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other.

The scene ends with the chief priests and the scribes accusing Jesus, and Herod and his soldiers mocking Him and treating Him with contempt. The synoptic gospels emphasize the mockery of Jesus over the physical suffering.

Herod and Pilate were not friends, but having a common enemy binds people together. Nevertheless, when Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate, he was then once again faced with dealing with the issue. Jesus has been declared innocent twice – once by a Roman prefect and once by a Herodian king. With that the trial should have ended.

23:13 Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people,

23:14 and said to them, "You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him.

23:15 "No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him.

23:16 "Therefore I will punish Him and release Him."

Verse 13 introduces the sixth and final phase of the trial of the Lord. The first three phases consisted of the Jewish trial. Jesus was first taken before Annas, the former high priest. Then He was taken before the current high priest, Caiaphas, and the Sanhedrin. The third Jewish phase took place right after dawn, again before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

Jesus then stood before Pilate and Herod which constituted the fourth and fifth phases of His trial. Now, He is before Pilate once again, and it is in this phase of the trial the verdict is handed down. At this point the situation is getting more volatile. The response of Pilate and Herod had not met the Sanhedrin's goal of killing Jesus. In 23:15 Pilate stated that the case against Jesus had no merit. He had already declared a verdict of not guilty in 23:4, but now Pilate points out that Herod had reached the same conclusion. All the Jewish courts found Jesus guilty; all the Gentiles found Him innocent. Thus, Pilate declares, "I will punish Him and release Him"(23:16).

His words in verse 16 are deceptively innocuous.

The word "punish" is a euphemism for whipping. Whether it was the dreaded *verberatio* prior to crucifixion – flogging a bound and naked prisoner with a leather whip woven with bits of bone or metal – or a lesser punishment, we cannot say for sure. Given the fact that Jesus was not a Roman citizen, and that Pilate was caught in brinkmanship with the chief priests, the prefect may have intended a very severe beating as something of a plea bargain. The overture is repeated in v.22. This extreme bargain should rid readers of any illusion that Pilate's appeal on Jesus' behalf is motivated by kindness. (Edwards, 676).

23:17 Now he was obliged to release to them at the feast one prisoner.

23:18 But they cried out all together, saying, "Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!"

23:19 (He was one who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder.)

Pilate's decision was once more rejected by the crowds. However, Pilate had one last card to play: he was obliged to release one prisoner at the feast so he decided to allow the Jews to choose between Jesus and Barabbas. Oddly, the name "Barabbas" means "son of the father." Barabbas was a notorious prisoner (Matt. 27:16), an insurrectionist (Mk. 15:7), a thief (Jn. 18:40), and a murderer (Lk. 23:19). He had already been through a trial and been deemed guilty. Pilate's offer was made because he assumed that, given the options, they would be forced to call for Jesus' release. After all, if they wanted Jesus killed for potential insurrection, they surely would not release a proven insurrectionist, a hardened criminal, a murderer in His stead. But their false accusations become evident by their response. Their concern was not justice, nor was it founded in an interest in maintaining peace in Rome; they had one goal – kill Jesus!

23:20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again,

John 19

7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God."

8 Therefore when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid;

9 and he entered into the Praetorium again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

10 So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?"

11 Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

12 As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out saying, "If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar."

13 Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha.

14 Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; it was about the sixth hour. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your King!"

23:21 but they kept on calling out, saying, "Crucify, crucify Him!"

23:22 And he said to them the third time, "Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him."

23:23 But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail.

Matthew 27

24 When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves."

25 And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"

23:24 And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted.

23:25 And he released the man they were asking for who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, but he delivered Jesus to their will.

Matthew 27

26 Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him.

28 They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him.

29 And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

30 They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head.

31 After they had mocked Him, they took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

Pilate made a noble effort at being a just judge. He tried adjudication - a just verdict. Three times he declared Jesus not guilty (23:4, 14, 22) and in verse 15 he added the conclusions of Herod who sent Him back because He had done nothing deserving of death. He tried accommodation: "I will punish Him and release Him." He tried an alternative - make them to release Jesus instead of Barabbas. He tried asserting himself and his authority (23:22). But everything had failed. He was once again in a situation where he needed to respond with military force or stand down. His previous history with the Jews (see intro above) had taught him that indifference to the will of the crowds can turn out worse than expected. So, "he delivered Jesus to their will."

Jesus, the glorious Son of the Father, would be murdered in Jerusalem while Barabbas, a man who murdered in Jerusalem, would be pardoned (Edwards, 677). Peter makes this very point in Acts 3:13-15: "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But *you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life*, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses."

Pilate was helpless to change Jesus' fate, but all happened just as God had intended. Jesus had predicted that He would die at the hands of the Jews (9:22), humanity (9:44), and the Gentiles (18:32); all three joined in the chant to crucify Him. But Acts 4:24-29 also makes it clear that Jesus' death was according to the will of God. The prayer of believers is recorded there after they were threatened by the authorities (Acts 4:18, 21). In the prayer they quote Psalm 2:1-2: "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ."

The point of Psalm 2 is that the people are aligned against God and His Messiah. But as Acts 4:28 states, they only did what God's hand and purpose predestined to occur (also see Acts 2:23; 3:18).

The prayer continues by specifically applying Psalm 2 to Herod, Pilate, the Jews, and the Gentiles. Acts 4:27-28 says, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."

In other words, even Jesus' crucifixion involved the sins of Herod, Pilate, Gentiles and Jews; nevertheless, it was God's will. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. As Gill says, "It was not their intention and design to fulfil the purposes and decrees of God, but to fulfil their own lusts, and satiate their rage and malice against Him; but it was so in the event, according to the wise disposal of providence, that by their gathering together, by their consultations and conspiracies they brought about what God in His everlasting council had decreed."

The nation had committed a horrific sin against God and His Servant, Jesus. One might expect God would respond with wrath and destruction; however, the patience of God is long. Peter healed a man and then addressed the crowd that gathered. He said:

“you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, . . . And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. . . Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you. . .”(Acts 3:14-20).

Listen to Peter’s words to all of us: You put to death the Prince of Life but there is forgiveness. You are guilty but your sins can be wiped away. You deserve judgment, but you can enjoy times of refreshing from God’s presence. Simply repent and return. That is grace. That is God!