

-Save This Page as a PDF-

Jesus Before Pilate

Matthew 27:2, 11-14; Mark 15:1b-5; Luke 23:1-7; John 18:28-38

About 6:00 am Friday morning, the fifteenth of Nisan

Jesus before Pilate DIG: What was Pilate's overriding concern in this trial? What insights into Pilate and Jesus' character do these scriptures offer? Or the procurator's conscience? What new charge does Caiaphas and the Great Sanhedrin bring against Messiah? Why was He silent before His accusers?

REFLECT: What is truth to you? Without Jesus, all truth is relative. You are a ship without a rudder? Do you have a morale compass? Why? Why not? Do you believe in situation ethics? Since both Peter and Pilate "caved in" under pressure, why do we tend to scorn Pilate but honor Kefa? Isn't that pretty hypocritical? Do you see any of Pilate's qualities in you? Do you want to change? How can you change?

The pale grey light had passed into that of early morning and **Yerushalayim** was just waking up. **Judas** had already come before **Pilate** before midnight and presented the official charge so that **the Roman** cohort could be released for **Yeshua's** arrest.

Pontus Pilate was in **the City of David**. He normally resided seventy miles (113 km) northwest of **Jerusalem** in Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea, but **his** presence was always required in **the City** at times like this. So when visiting **Yerushalayim**, **Pilate** occupied the official residence of **the procurator**, called **the praetorium**, which had been the palace of Herod the Great. **Pilate** was a personal friend of Lucius Sejanus, during Emperor Tiberius' extended retirement on his lavish villa on the isle of Capri. Sejanus had earned the emperor's trust by transforming a small regiment of the imperial bodyguard into the Praetorian Guard, a kind of secret police force that became an influential factor in **Roman** politics. Furthermore, Sejanus shrewdly eliminated all of his political rivals through slick maneuvering and violent intrigue. One of the rivals he destroyed was none other than Drusus, the emperor's own son, whom he slowly poisoned with the help of the unfortunate man's wife.

With Drusus dead of seemingly natural causes, Sejanus enjoyed ruling as the *de facto* leader of **Rome**, and he saw to it that his friend **Pontius Pilate** received one of the most coveted posts in the empire: procurator of Judea. While extremely challenging, the post offered unlimited potential for political greatness in the empire. Sejanus wanted a strong ruler to keep Judea peacefully subservient, despite the Jews' mounting discontent.

The historian Philo of Alexandria describes **the procurator** as "a man of very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate." **Pilate's** inflexibility had served **him** well in the past, but it nearly became **his** undoing in Judea. Where **he** brought brute force, finesse was required. **He** failed to understand the delicate balance between autonomy and control needed to govern Jews. Soon after taking command from **his** headquarters in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, **Pilate** sent a clear message to **Jerusalem**, letting the Israelites know **he** was in charge. Normally, the procurator's army wintered in Caesarea, but **Pilate** ordered **his** soldiers to spend the winter in **the City of David**. Not only that, but **he** ordered them to bear Caesar's image on their shields and to display it in key locations throughout **the Holy City**. **He** had determined that **Tziyon** should be treated like all other conquered nations. But this, of course, violated the Torah which said: **Watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman (Deuteronomy 4: 15-16).**

Before long, a large delegation of **members from the Great Sanhedrin (to see link click [Lg - The Great Sanhedrin](#))**, marched *en masse* to Caesarea to protest. The resulting standoff became a test of wills. For **Pilate** to remove the images would be a humiliating show of weakness, yet keeping the peace was **his** sole responsibility. **The Jewish leaders** refused to go home until the images were removed, which prompted **Pilate** to respond with brute force. The Jewish historian Josephus described **the procurator's** means of breaking the stalemate.¹⁵⁴⁵

"On the sixth day of the protest **he** ordered **his** soldiers to have their weapons hidden while **he** came and sat on his judgment seat. It was so prepared in the open place of the city that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress [**the Jews**]. And when **the Jews** petitioned **him** again, **he** gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass around **them**, and threatened that **their** punishment should be no less than immediate death unless **they** stopped bothering **him** and go home. But **they** threw **themselves** onto the ground, and laid **their** necks bare, and said **they** would rather die than that the wisdom of **their** laws should be violated. **Pilate** was deeply affected by **their** firm resolution to keep **their** laws inviolable. So **he** commanded the images to be carried back from **Jerusalem** to Caesarea."¹⁵⁴⁶



Then the Jewish leaders rose from their illegal trial in the Royal Stoa, bound the Suffering Servant and led Him to the palace of the Roman governor Pilate. Caiaphas demanded an immediate audience with Pilate. He stood outside the double gates with Jesus, the disguised Temple guard, and the at least a quorum of the Great Sanhedrin. By now it was early morning, and they did not enter the praetorium because it would defile them and they wouldn't be allowed to celebrate the Passover (Matthew 27:2; Mark 15:1b; Luke 23:1; John 18:28 NLT). The festive offering, or the Chagigah, was offered at 9:00 am on **Passover**. Ironically, it was a peace offering, which **they** had to offer undefiled. Therefore, here we see the strangest contradiction. **They** who had not hesitated in breaking every commandment of **God** and every law of **their** own making (see [Lh - The Laws of the Great Sanhedrin Regarding Trials](#)), would not enter **the praetorium** lest they should **defile themselves** and be unable to participate in the Chagigah offering.¹⁵⁴⁷ Consequently, **Caiaphas** requested that **the governor** come down to the double gates where **the two** had met earlier that morning. **He** knew that **Pilate** would understand.

It took a while to wake **the Roman governor** up, to tell **him** about the Jewish assembly outside, and for **him** to dress and make **his** way down to the gate. But once **he** got there, **he** could not have been very pleased to see a large crowd, extravagantly dressed **Sadducees**, plainly dressed **Pharisees** and a **prisoner** who had clearly been beaten up.¹⁵⁴⁸

So Pilate came out to them. This is the first time **he** came down the steps. A servant brought out a regal chair and **the procurator** walked down the right-hand stairway and, five steps up from **the praetorium**, sat on a chair that was placed on a stone landing. **Jesus** saw through swollen, purple eyes. **His** wrists were tied behind **His** back and a rope was tied around **His** neck. **He** stood alone, in front of the mob, and **Pontius Pilate** looked at **the Nazarene** for the first time, as **Yeshua**, for the first time, looked at **Cesar's governor**.

What each one saw was hardly earth-shattering. **The Messiah** looked at **the Roman** and saw a short, patrician-looking man of about fifty years of age. **He** appeared to be nervous. **His** eyes shifting from side to side, swinging quickly to anything or anyone that moved. **His** hair was graying and **he** wore an expensive toga and gilded sandals. **Pilate** stared at **Jesus** and saw a rather average looking **Jew** with puffed lips and discolored cheeks. There were flecks of blood on **His** robe. **He** was dirty. Behind **the Nazarene**, **the Procurator** saw **Caiaphas**, some of the ranking **priests**, deferential, but still uneasy in the presence of Gentiles. And behind **them**, people jammed the arches, some even hanging from the wall-bracket lamps.

Pontius Pilate held **his** right hand aloft. In a few seconds, the babbling of the crowd subsided. A tribune marched forward from the rear of the court, followed by four legionaries and took **his** post by the side of **the prisoner**. The Temple guards dropped back. From now on, the disposition of this case of **the Meshiach** versus pharisaic Judaism was squarely in the iron fist of **Rome**. **What charges are you bringing against this man**, asked **the Roman governor** loudly (**John 18:29**)? **He** pointed to **Yeshua**.

Caiaphas appeared to be shocked at **Pilate's** question. **The high priest** had been there early that morning to discuss the case with **the Procurator**, to explain to **him** the seriousness of the matter in its relation to Jewish law. Not only that, but the Temple guard knew that the tribune who had led the raiding detachment to Gethsemane had surely returned and briefed **Pilate** on everything that had gone on there. Why, then, this pretense of no knowledge of **the renegade Rabbi**?

The priests exchanged uneasy glances. This could mean that **the cruel oppressor** was ready to have **Jesus** tried before **him** - and, in that case, might dismiss the charges against **Him** for lack of evidence. Outside, **Pilate's** question was passed on to the gathering crowds, who roared so much that **Caiaphas** had to wait for silence before **he** answered. **If He were not a criminal**, they replied: **we would not have handed Him over to you** (**John 18:30**).

Take Him yourselves, shouted **Pilate**, standing and preparing to leave, **and judge Him by your own law** (**John 18:31a**). With no accusation there would be no condemnation, and with no condemnation there would be no sentence. Ultimately, **the Great Sanhedrin** was successful in having **the Romans** execute **Yeshua**, but **Pilate** had the last laugh. **He** used these very charges to infuriate **the Jews** with the sign that **he** had placed above the head of **Jesus** on the cross: **THIS IS JESUS, KING OF THE JEWS**. They asked **him** to take it down, but **he** would not (**Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19-22**).

He knew, of course, that **the Great Sanhedrin** had already tried this **blasphemer** and had condemned **him** to death, but the coldly angry **procurator** was determined to have the final say in this semantic swordplay. To bring **the high priest** to **his** knees, symbolically, all **Pilate** had to do was to pretend innocence of the entire matter and walk off the scene.

But several of **the priests** cupped **their** hands together and shouted together: **We have no right to execute anyone (John 18:31b).** They did not say that **they** had no power to condemn a prisoner to death; only that **they** could not carry out **their** own sentence. **This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die (John 18:32).** **The Mishna and the Talmud, commentaries on the TaNaKh, tell us the exact date that the Romans took away the death penalty from the Great Sanhedrin. It was 40 years before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Thus, 30 AD, the very year of this trial, the Roman government took away the right to enact the death penalty by stoning.** This demonstrates the providence of **God**. It shows **He** made sure that **Jesus** would die by crucifixion. Because **the Jews** would never have crucified **Him**, **they** would have stoned **Him** to death. And if **they** had stoned **Him**, there would not have been any atonement for sin.¹⁵⁴⁹

Caiaphas had dreaded that moment. Though **he** wanted **the Romans** to execute **Yeshua**, the charge of blasphemy was a Jewish offense and **the Romans** couldn't care less about it. Not only that, **Pilate** could hardly tolerate **Jews** and was not about to risk **his** career by allowing Jewish laws determine whom **he** crucified.¹⁵⁵⁰

The governor did not answer. **He** turned **his back** on **the priests** and started to walk up the steps **inside his quarters in the praetorium**. The accusers were dismayed. It looked as though the hearing was over. The crowd of disguised Temple guards were stunned! One of **the** ranking **priests** shouted: **We caught this man subverting our nation** (not true). **He** opposes the paying of taxes to Caesar (not true), and passes **Himself** off as **the Messiah** (true), **a king** (true) (**Matthew 22:21; Luke 23:2**). They took **their** religious charge against **Christ** and turned it into a political charge.

Halfway up the steps to **his quarters**, **the procurator** paused and looked around. **He** pulled **his** long toga up off the stones and thought about what **he** had just heard. The idea of **a Messiah** wouldn't have bothered **the Romans** too much, but the idea of **a king** meant opposition to **Rome** - someone other than **Caesar** as **their king**. The last thing **Pilate** needed was a **Jewish** rebellion. Really, all three charges had their roots in sedition. Therefore, **the Jewish leaders** attempted to force **Pilate** to sentence **Jesus** without a witness because **they** couldn't seem to find **Judas** anywhere.

Pontius Pilate studied the little knot of **priests** and was forced to show a brief smile of admiration. **They** had rid themselves of **Yeshua** as a local problem and had thrown **Him** to **the procurator** as a menace to the Empire. **Pilate** could hardly put **himself** in the position of defending **Jesus**. That was not **his** job. **He** was the highest **judge** and the top administrator of the country. However, there was still a little room for maneuver. Not much. Just a little.

He summoned a servant to go out into the courtyard and tell the tribune to bring **Jesus** to **him** in **his** quarters. **The prisoner** was brought in and stood in the center of the room. **Pilate** studied **him** carefully. But there was nothing to see except a pathetic figure of a **man**, stripped of **his** dignity. **Pilate** looked at **his** staff of officers . . . they just shrugged.

Once an accusation was made, the defendant was interrogated. This was his opportunity to tell his side of the story. **Pilate** asked **Yeshua** the pertinent question, presumably because **he** already knew the official charge against **Him**. It's likely that **the procurator** had witnessed **Messiah's** triumphal entry just days earlier. **He** wanted to know if **the Nazarene** was, in fact, in the process of overthrowing the government in Judea.¹⁵⁵¹ **The governor** stood up and walked over to **Yeshua** and asked **Him**, "Are you the king of the Jews?" **Pilate** wants to know if **Jesus** was a competitor to Cesar. **The words are yours, Christ replied (Matthew 27:11b; Mark 15:2b; Luke 23:3a; John 18:33)**. While this response might seem a bit evasive to some, it was really the most fitting to answer **his** question. To merely say "yes" would imply that **Messiah** sought an earthly **Kingdom** at that time. To say "no" would deny the fact that **He** is, in reality, **the KING of kings and LORD of lords (Revelation 19:16)**. **Yeshua's** answer covered both interpretations of the question; in essence, **He** is **the King of Isra'el** but not in the sense that **Pilate** could understand.¹⁵⁵²

The swollen lips began to move. **Are you asking this on your own, Jesus inquired, or have other people told you about Me?** The words do not convey the intended shadings of meaning. What **Jesus** really meant was this, "Did you, as a **Roman governor**, observe **Me** acting as **king of the Jews** or have others told you about **My** spiritual **Kingdom**?" **Pilate** misunderstood the interrogative reply and stood before **the Messiah** and asked: **Am I a Jew?** The Gentiles in the room howled with laughter. **Your own nation and high priest have handed you over to me. What have you done (Matthew 27:11b; John 18:34-35 CJB)?** The tone now was soft and sympathetic. **The procurator** looked at **the prisoner** hopefully. All **he** needed was a denial. **He** knew that **Jesus** had not pretended to be the temporal **king of the Jews** and had not aspired to it. **He** also knew the story about the coin with Caesar's image, because **he** had spies everywhere. **He** knew that self-preservation is critical to all human beings and **he** was giving **the Nazarene** the chance to

save **His** life.

My Kingdom, Jesus said slowly, almost as though **He** was selecting the words with special care, **is not of this world**. It was as if **Yeshua** was saying, "I'm not a competitor to Cesar." Then **He** offered simple proof of this. **If it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jewish leaders. But My Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36 NLT)**. This is not to say that the messianic **Kingdom** and **the Lord's** rule is only "spiritual," not to be expressed really and physically in this world, fulfilling the prophecy that **Isra'el** will become **the head and not the tail (Deuteronomy 28:13)**; but that the present aspect of **His Kingdom** is in the hearts and lives of believers, not in international politics (which was the basis of **Pilate's** question). Therefore, **Christ**, without denying **His** office as **the Messiah**, claimed that **He** was no threat to **Rome** and could not be condemned on a charge of treason.¹⁵⁵³

Unhappiness on earth cultivates a hunger for heaven. By gracing us with a deep dissatisfaction, **God** holds our attention. The only tragedy, then, is to be satisfied prematurely. To settle for earth. To be content in a strange land . . . We are not happy here because we are not supposed to be happy here. We are **like foreigners and strangers in this world (First Peter 2:11)**. And you will never be completely happy on earth simply because you were not made for earth. Oh, you will have your moments of joy. You will catch glimpses of light. You will know moments or even days of peace. But they simply do not compare with the joy that lies ahead.¹⁵⁵⁴

Pilate was annoyed with the foolishness of the pious faker. **He** said: **You are a king, then!** **He** wanted to know if **Jesus** was **a king** in *any* sense. Our **Savior answered** saying: **You say that I AM a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to Me (John 18:37)**. The days of guessing and groping and half-truths are gone. **Jesus** came to tell us **the truth**. That is one of the great reasons why we must either accept or reject **Yeshua Messiah**. There is no halfway house about **the truth**. We either accept **it** or reject **it**. **Christ** is **the truth**.¹⁵⁵⁵

Pontius Pilate drew **himself** up to **his** full height. **His** lips were curled with scorn and **he** snapped: **What is truth (John 18:38a)?** The problem was **he** was looking right at **the Truth**, but didn't recognize **Him**. And many people still ask that question today. Many have become disillusioned with life because they don't recognize the existence of **truth**. In the absence of solid, basic **truth**, we are adrift on a churning sea of ideas with no compass to tell us which way to go. But **Jesus** taught there this is **truth**. Not only that, **He** made the

bold claim: **I AM the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6)**. Yeshua presented **Pilate** with a choice – the same choice **He** offers us – compromise truth and advance your status in the kingdom of Tiberias, or walk in the light of **truth** and receive unseen glory in **God's Kingdom**.¹⁵⁵⁶

With this . . . the governor motioned for the soldiers to take **the prisoner back outside to the Jews gathered there (John 18:38b)**. The soldiers and **Jesus** led the way, followed by **Pilate** and **his** officers. The crowds at the twin gates watched tensely as **the procurator** came all the way down the steps for the second time and across the courtyard of **the praetorium** to a point in front of **Caiaphas** and **the Sadducees**. A servant carried **the Roman** curule chair and placed it behind **him**. It was a special chair on which **the Roman governor** sat when **he** was about to render a judgment.

The people watched, almost breathlessly, as **Pilate** sat. **The Messiah** stood at **his** right side and some of the soldiers stood between the judgment chair and the crowd with their swords drawn. **The governor** wasted no time **and announced to the Sadducees and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man" (Luke 23:4; John 18:38c)**. There was a moment of stunned silence, and then a riotous roar resounded from the crowd. **Caiaphas** and **the other priests** repeatedly struck **their** foreheads and turned to the people in mute appeal with **their** arms extended to the heavens and their mouths open wide. The snarl of the crowd grew louder. Some of the off-duty soldiers ran into the garrison room and retrieved their body armor and swords and ran to **the praetorium**. This is the first declaration of innocence. There will be others.

Pilate sat. **He** smiled a small smile as **he** looked at the frenzied faces. **Caiaphas** and **the others of the Sanhedrin** knew that **he** was turning **Jesus** loose to confound **them**. **The Lord** looked out at the mob under the arches and all the eyes **He** saw were on fire with hatred for **Him**. **God the Son** was not alone; however, because **God the Father** and **God the Spirit** were with **Him**. The soldiers began to make threatening gestures. The crowd quieted.

However, **the Sadducees and the elders** were not satisfied. **They** wanted **the troublemaking Rabbi** dead, so they **accused Him of many other things**. But **He** gave no answer. So again **Pilate** asked **Him**, "Aren't You going to answer? Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against You?" But **Jesus** still made no reply, not even to a single charge - to the great amazement of the governor (Matthew 27:12-14; Mark 15:3-5). **Yeshua** was not going to answer those charges. **Caiaphas** and **the Great Sanhedrin** had invented a political charge to disguise the real source of **their**

fury . . . **the Nazarene** claimed to be the long awaited **Messiah**, but did not believe in the Oral Law (see [Ei - The Oral Law](#))! And yet **He** was performing miracles, so **they** claimed **He** was demon possessed (see [Ek - It is only by Beelzebub, the Prince of Demons, that This Fellow Drives Out Demons](#)). Since **the procurator** had already declared **His** innocence and **the Sanhedrin** had already declared **His** guilt, there was no reason for **the Lord** to answer any accusations.

But the Jewish leadership kept on insisting. **They** bowed formally and said: **He stirs up the people, pointing to them, all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here. On hearing this, the governor**, who had been listening with annoyance, suddenly grabbed the arms of the curule chair and sat up. **He** had forgotten that **the prisoner** originally came from the north. **Pontius Pilate** began to look pleased.

Pilate asked if the prisoner was a Galilean (Luke 23:5-6). Certainly, **the priests** said. Everybody who knew this **mockers of God** was aware that **He** came from the little town called **Nazareth**. Indeed, **His** name was **Jesus of Nazareth**, son of Joseph the carpenter. This gave **Pilate** the opportunity to get off the hook because **Herod** Antipas was in **Jerusalem** for the Passover. Therefore, **the Roman governor** refused to accept custody of **Yeshua**. **When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction and** just a short distance away **at that time (Luke 23:7)**, he said, "Well then, this is not **my** case to decide. It should be under the jurisdiction of **Herod**, Tetrarch of **Galilee . . . send Him to Herod.**"¹⁵⁵⁷