

**The Croaking Mob: Contagion Theory; Barabbas's Rap Sheet; What He Might Have Thought; Scofield's "Barabbas or Christ"; Our Cross, God's Substitute**

**John's Report of Jesus Taking the Place of Barabbas:**

**John 18:39** - "You have a traditional custom that I should release one prisoner for you at the Passover. So are you willing for me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

**v. 40** - Then they all continued to cry out with a loud and raucous voice [ **ingressive aorist of the verb κραυγάζω, *kraugazō*** ], "Not this Man, but Barabbas! Not this Man, but Barabbas!" (Now Barabbas was a career criminal [ ληστής, *lēistēs*: a thief with a history of violence ]).

The verb *kraugazō* is literally the "croak of ravens" and is frequently used in the New Testament to describe the sound made by those who were demon possessed, for example the demoniac in Mark 5:5.

Further, the verb is in the ingressive aorist tense which denotes entrance into a state or condition. The people shouting, or croaking as it were, may not have been demon possessed, but they sounded as if they were and their continuous, repetitive response without doubt indicates they were motivated by what may be described as "crowd psychology."

This phenomenon was studied by French sociologist Gustave Le Bon \la-bō\ . According to Le Bon's Contagion Theory, crowds exert a hypnotic influence over their members through collective suggestibility. Shielded by the anonymity of a crowd, people abandon personal responsibility and surrender to the contagious emotions of the crowd. A crowd thus assumes a life of its own, stirring up emotions and driving people toward irrational, perhaps violent, action. This aptly describes the mob that demanded the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus.

There is one more piece of information we need to note on the subject and it comes from Peter's sermon at the Temple in:

**Acts 3:13** - "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His Son Jesus, Whom you betrayed and denied Him in the presence of Pilate, although he had decided to let Him go.

**v. 14** - "But you denied the Holy One and Just, and desired a murderer [ φονεύς, *phoneus*: a murderer ] to be freed unto you.

**v. 15** - "You killed the Originator of Life, whom God raised from the dead. To this fact we are witnesses."

The noun *phoneus*, "murderer," is a general word for homicide and is a synonym for the more specific term of σικάριος, *sikarios*: an assassin, noted in Acts 21:38.

From these passages we can now extract a bio and a rap sheet for Barabbas:

1. Βαράββας \bār-āb'-bas\ means "son of the father or teacher."
2. He was a "notorious prisoner": ἐπίσημος δέσμιον, *episēmos desmion*: a man well known for his criminal acts. He would be on the FBI's Most Wanted List. (Matthew 27:16)
3. Having been arrested the Romans had imprisoned him and locked him in chains.
4. The charges brought against Barabbas included involvement in an insurrection, an attempted *coup d'état* of some description.
5. Mark refers to him and his compatriots as στασιαστές, *stasiastēs*: rebels who were also charged with murder. (Mark 15:7)

6. Luke reiterates the same details about Barabbas as did Mark.
7. John's details reveal that he was a career criminal by the use of the noun *lēistēs*. This indicates that he was a repeat offender of robbery and was considered armed and violent. (John 18:40)
8. Finally, Peter implies that he was among the assassins known as the *sicarioi*. (Acts 3:14 cf. Acts 21:38)

Thus Barabbas's rap sheet included rebellion, murder, robbery, violence, and membership in a terrorist group that systematically assassinated anyone that did not agree with its political agenda. This man deserved to be executed. Since he was not a Roman citizen and was guilty of capital crimes he was sentenced to be crucified.

Yet the religious leaders conspired to kill Jesus and were successful in influencing the mob to demand His death. They chose to have a career criminal, guilty of several capital crimes, to be released on the Passover rather than the One Whom Pilate consistently proclaimed to be innocent.

If a movie were to be made of this part of Christ's Passion (and one has: *Barabbas* (1961), starring Anthony Quinn as Barabbas, Arthur Kennedy as Pilate, and Roy Mangano as Jesus), Barabbas would not legitimately have a speaking part. He never says a word in Scripture and apart from these passages is never referred to or heard from again.

But regardless of his verbal silence, Barabbas is the source of a great message to those who have been saved by grace through faith and thus have the guarantee of eternal life.

We don't know if Barabbas ever believed in Christ. We don't know if he remained in Jerusalem following his release to observe the drama that took place just outside her walls as the sinless Scapegoat was nailed to the central cross.

What we do know is that we all can identify with the message of Barabbas's cross and we can contemplate what we would have thought had we been in his place and, having been set free, observed the sacrifice that took place on Golgotha that afternoon.

What conceivably could have gone through Barabbas's mind during this time is the subject of excerpts from a sermon delivered in the early twentieth century by Dr. Cyrus Scofield, editor of the *Scofield Reference Bible* and the *Scofield Study Bible*. In it he proposes what Barabbas might have been thinking had the Holy Spirit given the Gospel writers such inspiration.

Dr. Scofield's evaluation of Barabbas and the impact of His cross focus our attention on our so great salvation and emphasize the magnitude of the historical impact our Lord's resurrection has had on all mankind.

**Scofield, C. I. "Barabbas or Christ." From *In Many Pulpits*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 98-:**

Men, good and bad, who come into the old Bible story never pass. Not without purpose are they there; never, so long as men sin and repent, bless or curse, win or lose in the tragical battle we call life, will those Bible personages lose significance. And none of them tells the story of the cross like Barabbas. No man who ever lived, except Barabbas, saw Jesus die on a cross that had been made, not for Jesus, but for him. If you and I are to understand the central significance of the cross we must look through Barabbas' eyes. Let us try to do that. (p. 98)

Barabbas was condemned to die. No one has ever questioned the justice of his sentence. He was a rebel against the law, a robber, a murderer. And so are we all. Outraged law had laid strong hands on Barabbas, and he lay bound under sentence of death. Like us, he was not awaiting trial, but execution. He was not under probation to see if he would be good, but under doom because he had proven to be bad. Like us he was "condemned already," John 3:18. (pp. 98-99)

Before Barabbas was the awful death of crucifixion. He knew what that meant. Long hours of unspeakable agony; the hands and feet torn by great spikes; the wrist and shoulder joints dislocated by the dragging down of the body; each quivering nerve a separate torture through tension; a burning, unquenchable thirst; and, all around, a jeering, taunting mob. The only question was—when? Even that began to be answered. The jailors prepared three crosses. Was one of the three crosses for him? Then he was told. Yes, he was to suffer in the morning. Two malefactors were to die with him, but he, as the greater criminal, was to have the place of eminence, was to have the middle cross. (pp. 99-100)

The night fell. But it was a disturbed night. Confused noises, outcries, the tramping of feet, penetrated the thick walls. Barabbas dumbly wondered what it all meant. Perhaps it was another insurrection such as he raised against the majesty of inflexible law. But the night wore on, and at last it was daylight—the light of Barabbas' last day. And now he heard footsteps, the key ground in the lock, his prison door swung open; but, just as he summoned all his brute fortitude for the awful ordeal before him, he heard the joyful words: "Go free, Barabbas! Another takes your place. Another is to die between the two malefactors!" (pp. 100-101)

As Barabbas emerged into the free, glorious sunshine the crowd was already surging out toward the Place of the Skull. And then, if not before, the desire must have arisen to know who had been condemned to die in his place. One can easily imagine how Barabbas followed the throng, striving eagerly to see the man who was to die for him. Perhaps it was not until the cross—his cross—had been upreared that Barabbas saw the man who was dying in his place. (p. 101)

It is easy to see that Barabbas had no need to be a theologian to form a good working theory of the atonement.

He knew that he was a guilty wretch, under the righteous condemnation of the law. And in both these respects Barabbas was a representative of all men.

"As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one:"

—Romans 3:10

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

—Romans 3:23 (p. 103)

Barabbas knew that the sufferer before him had done no sin. He knew that Jesus was, for him, a true substitute. Christ was actually dying in his place and stead; an innocent and holy Being bearing the very penalty which the laws had justly decreed to him. Whoever, in the coming ages, might question whether Christ's death was vicarious and substitutional, he could never question it.

"For he has made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

—II Corinthians 5:21

"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree:"

—Galatians 3:13

"Christ has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh; but (made alive) by the Spirit:"

—I Peter 3:18

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one of us to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

—Isaiah 53:5-6 (p. 104)

Barabbas knew that he had done nothing whatever to merit the marvelous interposition of that substitutional death. Whatever may have been back of it, it reached him as an act of pure grace. (pp. 104-105)

Barabbas knew that Christ's death for him was perfectly efficacious. There was, therefore, nothing for him to add to it. Just because Christ was dying he was living. The only question before Pilate was, whether Christ should die for Barabbas. When it was decided that Christ should die Barabbas was set free.

Whether Barabbas became the disciple of Jesus who died in his place we do not know. What is more important for us, is to decide, each for himself, that we shall be His disciples. (p. 106)

The key principle that we draw from this sermon is that Jesus Christ died on Barabbas's cross. But also, there is the point that Jesus Christ died on a cross that any one of us could just as easily have been the owner in first-century Jerusalem.

We were each judged guilty of unrighteousness by the Supreme Court of Heaven at the moment of our physical birth and faced the prospect of being sentenced to eternal condemnation. As Dr. Scofield wrote, "Like us, Barabbas was not awaiting trial, but execution. He was not under probation to see if he would be good, but under doom because he had proven to be bad. Like us he was 'condemned already,' John 3:18."

True humility requires a person to see himself as Barabbas—a criminal justly condemned, viewing the central cross on which Jesus was nailed as his own, and realizing the judgment which Christ endured was his just punishment. Such humility enables him to comprehend the hopeless condition he is in, and will remain, should he not place his faith in the vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice performed on his behalf.

True humility brings a person to the stark realization that he is guilty before the righteousness of God but that instead of leaving us lost in our sins the love of God provided His Son, Jesus Christ, to take our place and then judged him instead of us. Such humility demands that an objective person admit his inability to resolve his fallen state and accept the only solution to the problem.

**Romans 8:1** - Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

**1 Corinthians 5:21** - God made Christ, who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

**1 Corinthians 15:3b** - Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

**v. 4** - He was buried, and He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

**John 3:16** - "God so loved the world, that He gave His uniquely-born Son, so that that [ *ἵνα*, *hina*: introduces both purpose and result ] whoever believes in Him [ responds to the Gospel ] shall not perish [ purpose ] but have and hold eternal life [ result ]."

Therefore, consider this:

Jesus of Nazareth, Who is both perfect God and sinless Man, was sacrificed on the cross for the sins of the human race after which He died, was buried, and three days later was resurrected from the dead. The *purpose* of these things is so that anyone who believes them will be delivered from retribution in the lake of fire. The *result* of these things is that anyone who believes them will be delivered into eternal life and will go to heaven when he dies. Do you believe this?

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