

Pilate Rejects the Jews' Verdict & Cross-Examines Jesus; Sejanus's Treason & Pilate's Dilemma: How to Keep the Peace; Pilate's Fatal Question: What Is Truth?

In an effort to keep peace in Jerusalem and keep Tiberius at peace about Judea, Pilate accommodates the mob and moves his tribunal outside the palace. Once reseated on his elevated tribunal, the *sella curulis*, the official seat of a magistrate, Pilate asks the question that indicates to members of the Sanhedrin that he does not accept their verdict against Jesus as final, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?"

This is what Roman law calls the *interrogatio*: the examination of witnesses. With this statement Pilate declares the Jewish trial to have no legal authority and reopens the case.

Shocked, a spokesman for the Sanhedrin arrogantly replies:

John 18:30 - They answered and said to him, "If this person were not a habitual criminal we would not have delivered him to you."

The truth is Jesus is being railroaded. The implication of their response is that the spiritual leaders of Israel are insulted that Pilate would think they, above all people, would bring a false accusation about anyone.

Nevertheless, Pilate persists and in Luke 23:2 is recorded their indictment of alleged crimes committed by Jesus:

Luke 23:2 - They began to accuse Him saying, "We found this man subverting our nation, forbidding us to pay the tribute tax to Caesar, and claiming that He Himself is Christ, a king."

The first accusation is that Jesus misled the nation Israel. This is a lie. Jesus told them the truth about who He was and that His kingdom was at hand. But it was Pilate's job to maintain peace in Judea and the implication is that Jesus had tried to foment revolution against Rome, a capital crime.

Pilate knew this accusation was weak. He found it incredulous that the Jewish religious council on the eve of its most sacred feast was taking time out to suddenly defending the honor of SPQR.

The second charge alleged that Jesus advised the citizens of Judea not to pay their taxes to Rome, another political issue. Had this been true, Pilate would have been advised by his tax collectors, but none had reported Jewish evaders. He may have even been aware of the Lord's policy concerning taxation in Luke 22:21, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

The first two charges do not excite the prefect but the third one does peak his interest: The defendant claims that He is king. This is treason should it prove to be true. To determine if it is, or just a harmless delusion, Pilate decides to privately interrogate the accused.

Of all the accusations this one is actually true. Jesus did claim to be Messiah, the king of Israel, but it would be impossible for Him to reign at present, for the cross must come before the crown.

Pilate is initially convinced that the accused is innocent and if there is any transgression it is of a religious nature and thus falls under the jurisdiction of the Jewish council.

Pilate, not to be swayed by duplicity, countered the insult with logic:

John 18:31 - Pilate told them, "Take Him yourselves and pass judgment on Him according to your own law!" The Jewish leaders replied, "We cannot legally put anyone to death."

To be sure Jesus was not involved in sedition, Pilate had Him brought into his residence for questioning:

John 18:33 - Then Pilate went into the Praetorium, summoned Jesus, and asked Him, "Are you king of the Jews?"

This question has stimulated debate among theologians. Is Pilate's disposition one of mockery or does he seek a definitive answer for the purpose of proving or disproving the Lord's innocence?

The context indicates that it is the latter. Pilate later announces to the Lord's accusers, "I find no fault in this Man." Thus, his question to the Lord is designed to discover if Jesus is truly a traitor or just a religious fanatic. The Lord, who not only understood Jewish law but also Roman, responds with a question of His own:

John 18:34 - Jesus replied, "Are you asking this from your own initiative or have others said it to you about Me?"

Pilate is trying to determine if Jesus is a threat to the empire by assuming Himself to be a pretender to the throne of Tiberius.

Before answering, the Lord wants to know what legal ground He is on. Does this question come from Pilate's curiosity or is it from the testimony of his accusers?

Rome allowed certain of its possessions to retain their monarchical governments and therefore there were several kings who reigned throughout the empire. What was treacherous was for someone to seek the overthrow of Caesar.

John 18:35 - Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? No, I am not! Your own people and your chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Pilate knows that a large number of Jews publically proclaimed Jesus as their King just three days ago. He really doesn't care who the Jews have as their ruler and makes the point with the comments, "Am I a Jew? No, I am not!"

Pilate has no lost love for Israeli rulers and views Jesus to be as good a king as any of the high priests he has known. But from the political perspective he has to make sure that the Lord stays within certain boundaries.

Pilate's response indicates his question is based on accusations brought forward by the Jewish authorities. Pilate makes it clear that although he is not a Jew, Jewish leaders have brought to his attention indictments and in so doing have interrupted his proceedings. He wants to know from Jesus what He has done. He had refused to defend Himself outside the Praetorium, but will He do so in private?

Matthew 27:18 reveals that Pilate knew that the Jewish establishment had handed Jesus over to him out of envy. Pilate is very suspicious of the accusations and wants a testimony from the accused.

John 18:36 - Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not from this world. If My kingdom were from this world, My servants would be fighting to keep Me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. But at this point My kingdom is not from here."

With this statement, the Lord calms all of Pilate's fears. He indicates that if He were seeking a military coup it would not be directed at the present world system but the Jewish hierarchy.

The Lord's response convinced Pilate that He was not a threat to Rome.

Pilate obviously never thought that a single itinerate preacher, even with a following of a few thousand people, could possibly be a threat to Rome. But such thinking could not be tolerated. It would have been treachery — a capital crime that must be prosecuted.

The pressure of functioning under the reign of Tiberius Caesar was intense under normal circumstances. But after Sejanus was successful in convincing the emperor to semi retire to Capri, Tiberius had left Sejanus in charge of affairs in Rome.

This was fortunate for Pilate. He was Sejanus's hand-picked prefect for the province of Judea, it was a stepping stone for his advance as an officer in the Equestrian Order. As long as Sejanus was in power, Pilate not only held an important post as prefect of a province, he had the backing of the second most powerful person in Rome. That is until just a few months before the events of Passover.

In the winter of A.D. 31, Tiberius had sent a secret communiqué from Capri to the Senate in Rome. The rumor was spread that it contained a directive to make Sejanus co-ruler of the empire. However, this was a ruse. Tiberius had received information that the death of his only son, Drusus, was not the result of illness but of poisoning. The murder was carried out by Drusus's wife Livilla \liv'-ē-a\ and Sejanus. The letter to the Senate was not the announcement of Sejanus's promotion to co-ruler of the empire but rather an order for the Senate to carry out an immediate execution of both him and Livilla.

Pilate's wife Procula happened to be in Rome when these events took place and on her return to Jerusalem gave him a detailed report from copious notes she had taken while the events were unfolding.

Pilate had absolute trust in Sejanus and believed him to be loyal both to Rome and to Tiberius. The idea of Sejanus being an assassin was simply unthinkable to him. Yet the facts related by Procula clearly indicated that Sejanus was guilty of not only this treacherous assassination but also many unscrupulous acts while under the protection of his high position of authority.

What was so mentally staggering to Pilate were the lies he had come to believe as true. He believed Drusus, son of the emperor, had died of an illness. He believed that Sejanus was an honest protector of the empire but instead he had spent years in opposite pursuits. He believed that Sejanus had been loyal servant and protector of Tiberius but in the end he had murdered the emperor's only successor to the throne of Rome. And Pilate had believed that from his close association with Sejanus his political future was secure.

All that Pilate believed to be true was a lie. And now he finds himself interviewing a person who is telling him that he is a king, but not of this world, while his accusers are people that he simply does not trust.

It presented a dilemma: if he does not handle this situation properly then he may execute an innocent Man and cause an uprising among Jesus' followers who believe that He is truly the King of the Jews. On the other hand, if he does not execute Him it might ignite an uprising among those who wish Him dead.

Pilate must handle the situation in a manner that keeps the lid on Jerusalem, for if turmoil breaks out and the Praetorian Guard has to be mobilized to quell riots his reports of the operation will have to be transmitted to Rome.

Now was not a good time for a longtime supporter and protégé of Sejanus to have a bad OER (Officer Evaluation Report) come to the attention of Tiberius and the Senate. His next question to the Lord is designed to certify that Jesus has no designs on dethroning Tiberius.

John 18:37 - Then Pilate said to Him, "So you are a king then?" Jesus replied, "You are correct in saying I am a king. I am and always will be. This is the reason I was born, and for this reason, and for this cause I came into the world—to bear testimony to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears and obeys My voice."

The Lord has offered a challenge to Pilate. The prefect has been extremely insecure since Sejanus was executed, but the Lord is offering him an opportunity to guarantee his eternal security. Pilate has heard the Lord's voice proclaim that He is a king but not of this world and considers it an acceptable answer.

If a Gentile heathen like Pontius Pilate could be convinced from the testimony of Jesus that He was the political King of the Jews, then why couldn't the Jewish religious leaders, with all the Lord's signs and wonders as testimony, be convinced He was the Messiah?

Jesus Christ has fulfilled multiple prophecies over the course of His Incarnation and even over the course of the last three days—plenty of events to enable the theologians to "see the Light." Crazy by legalism and authority arrogance, they press for a conviction.

The man who can provide for them their wishes is Pilate. But the private exchange in the Praetorium gives Pilate the opportunity to switch his interrogation away from the Lord's alleged crimes and start questioning Him about His kingdom.

But Pilate is soured to the concept of truth. He has been betrayed by someone in whom he had placed absolute trust. His temporal future is in jeopardy but his eternal future is in his very presence in the Person of the Jewish Messiah.

All Pilate has to do is ask the Lord how he might enter into His kingdom. But being deceived by the lie, Pilate concludes that truth is a transient and ephemeral thing:

John 18:38 - Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no fault in Him."

4. Pilate's Fatal Question

It is said by Paul that Jesus Christ witnessed a good confession before Pontius Pilate. This indicates that the Lord revealed all the information necessary for Pilate to understand not only the political issue but the spiritual issue.

Pontius Pilate was a Gentile trying to deal with Jewish theology. Pilate was a just man, making every effort to determine the guilt or innocence of Christ.

Had he been less of a professional he would have stopped the investigation earlier when he said, "Take Him yourselves and pass judgment on Him according to your own law!" But when the Sanhedrin persisted, Pilate investigated.

Upon questioning, Pilate believed Jesus' claim to be King of the Jews. It was a conclusion that Pilate stood by when the chief priests badgered him to change the inscription he ordered affixed to the cross:

John 19:19 - Pilate ordered an inscription written and fastened to the cross, which read, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS."

v. 20 - Thus many of the Jewish residents of Jerusalem read the inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the inscription was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek.

v. 21 - Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am king of the Jews.'"

v. 22 - Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

Doctrine was too complicated for the heathen mind so Pilate, in a stroke of philosophic reflection offered the rhetorical question, "What is truth?"

Nevertheless, Pilate was convinced Jesus was innocent and in a sense of justice upheld his conclusion in the statement, "I find no fault in Him."

But by asking the question, "What is truth?" Pilate loses the opportunity to question the Lord further. He is depressed and embittered by having believed the lie as truth and in such a mental condition is not able to perceive that Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Truth.

Negative volition results in Pilate fulfilling his greatest fears. Within three years following the crucifixion of Christ, Pilate committed suicide.

Pontius Pilatus is a man made famous by contradictions. Although he declared Jesus to be innocent of all charges he ultimately made the decision to have Him crucified. His major motivation was to go unnoticed by Tiberius. But in doing so he became one of the most noticed personalities in all of Rome's thousand-year history.

In addition, he holds a place in biblical prophecy. He is the one who condescended to the demands of the Jewish rulers. But he gave them the chance to "... pass judgment on Him according to your own law!" Representatives of the Sanhedrin countered with the complaint that they were not permitted to "put anyone to death."

The fault lay with the Jewish religious authorities, but it was Pilate who didn't have the nerve to release someone he testified publicly was an innocent Man.

The reason Pilate failed was because he had once believed a pack of lies from someone he trusted completely, therefore he could not believe that the Jesus, the God of the universe, had told Him the truth.

Pontius Pilate made a correct judgment regarding Christ Jesus when he said, "I find no fault in Him." But because Pilate didn't know the truth, he was deceived by those he trusted. His inability to discern the lie led to a series of poor decisions that no washing of the hands could ever cleanse.

Three days later, Jesus, whom Pilate ordered to be crucified, was resurrected from the dead providing eternal life to those who "listened to His voice."

The voice of Christ continues to lead those who listen to Him. The preaching of His Word is available to any who will give it a hearing.

His immutable and inerrant Scripture offers protection from those in power who through deception seek to delude them into buying the merchandise of the lie.

The resurrection is proof positive that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him.

The resurrection is the truth that testifies that Jesus is the Christ. Those who believe in Him enjoy the washing of regeneration into eternal life, a subject Paul addresses to Titus:

Titus 3:4 - When the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared,

v. 5 - He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

v. 6 - whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

v. 7 - so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the confidence of eternal life.