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Pontius Pilate in History and Ancient Literature

Pontius Pilate (pronounced pon'shuhs p/luht) was the Roman prefect of Judea from 26 to 36 CE. Thus he was the fifth governor of the province and the second-longest holder of the office. His term included the time of John the Baptist's activity, as well as that of the public ministry and crucifixion of Jesus (see Luke 3:1).

Pilate is mentioned several times in the New Testament in connection with events surrounding the trial and crucifixion of Jesus (Matt. 27:1–2, 11–26; Mark 15:1–15; Luke 23:1–25; John 18:28–19:16; Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:28; 1 Tim. 6:13). He and his rule are also discussed in the historical writings of Philo (*Leg.* 299) and Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.2.2; 18.3.1; *Jewish War* 2.9.2), both of whom were Jewish writers from the first century CE. The only extant mention of Pilate in Roman literature is a brief reference by the historian Tacitus to the crucifixion of Jesus. Archaeology has added only one piece of information: a Latin inscription, found in Caesarea Maritima in 1961 refers to Pilate as a prefect (not procurator).

Historians often note that, since Pilate governed Judea for an unusually long term, the Roman government must not have been too displeased with his performance. Nevertheless, virtually everything known of the man must be reconstructed from Jewish and Christian

sources, which present him in a pejorative light. We have no records from those who might have held a different view.

In the Jewish Sources

Pilate's character is represented very negatively in the Jewish sources: he is presented as insensitive to Jewish religion and as all too ready to use brutal force to repress any dissent. He is also charged with incompetence and venality.

Josephus reports that, when Pilate first brought Roman troops to Jerusalem from Caesarea, he committed an unprecedented violation of Jewish sensibilities by allowing the troops to bring into the city their military standards with the busts of the emperor, which were considered idolatrous images by the Jews. This was done in an underhanded manner, the troops bringing in and setting up the busts by night. A massive protest in Caesarea's stadium forced the removal of the standards, but only after the Jews used tactics of nonviolent mass resistance, lying down and baring their necks when Pilate's soldiers, swords in hand, surrounded and attempted to disperse them.

Philo tells of an incident in which Jewish letters of protest to Rome brought the intervention of the emperor himself, who commanded Pilate to remove golden shields with the emperor's name on them that he had placed in his residence in Jerusalem.

Similar incidents, however, were not always resolved without bloodshed. Josephus again speaks of protests that broke out when Pilate appropriated temple funds to build an aqueduct for Jerusalem. On this occasion, Pilate had Roman soldiers, dressed as Jewish civilians and armed with hidden clubs, mingle with the shouting crowd and attack the people at a prearranged signal. Many were killed or hurt.

Finally, Josephus also mentions a slaughter of Samaritans in 35 CE, which apparently brought about Pilate's recall. A Samaritan prophet had gathered large numbers of his people to Mount Gerizim with the promise of showing them the holy vessels supposedly hidden there by Moses. Pilate treated the event as an insurrection and attacked the crowd with cavalry and heavy infantry, killing many in the battle and executing the leaders among the captured. Vitellius, the imperial legate to Syria, felt compelled to remove Pilate from office and send him to Rome to render account of his conduct.

This Samaritan massacre reported by Josephus is sometimes mentioned as an intriguing parallel to the incident mentioned in Luke 13:1, where Jesus was told about "the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." Nothing else is recorded anywhere of the latter incident, but scholars note that such a slaughter would fit with the character of Pilate as described by Josephus in recounting the Samaritan incident.

In the Gospel Accounts

Pilate's part in the trial and execution of Jesus is the focus of most later interest in him. In general, the Synoptic Gospels present him as possibly weak and certainly cavalier about the administration of justice. He questions Jesus about the accusation that he claims to be the "King of the Jews" (Mark 15:2; cf. Matt. 27:11; Luke 23:3) and is amazed by Jesus's silence in response to charges brought against him (Mark 15:5; cf. Matt. 27:14). He knows that it is out of jealousy that Jesus's opponents have handed him over (Mark 15:10; cf. Matt. 27:18) and recognizes that there is no valid reason for his execution; still, he capitulates to the will of the people, sending Jesus to the cross (and setting Barabbas free), hoping that this will "satisfy the crowd" (Mark 15:14–15; cf. Luke 23:23–24) or, in Matthew, prevent a riot (Matt. 27:24). Later, Pilate gives the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43–44; cf. Matt. 27:57–58; Luke 23:51–52); in Matthew's Gospel, Pilate allows for a guard to be placed at the tomb (Matt. 27:62–65).

Matthew's account also introduces Pilate's wife (not named in the Gospel but called Procla or Procula in later tradition). She warns Pilate to have nothing to do with "that innocent man," about whom she has had a dream (Matt. 27:19).

In addition, Matthew's Gospel includes an episode in which Pilate washes his hands before the people maintaining that, though he knows he is sentencing an innocent man to death, he will be free of responsibility for his blood; this prompts the people to respond, "His

blood be on us and on our children!” (27:24–25). The meaning of that exchange is debated but it seems to be part of a motif according to which Judas and the chief priests also attempt to avoid responsibility for Jesus’s blood (27:3–7). It seems unlikely that Matthew would have wanted to present Judas, the chief priests, and Pilate as somehow escaping condemnation, which fell instead on the people who Jesus supposedly came to save (cf. Matt. 1:21). Thus one prominent interpretation suggests that the attempt to avoid Jesus’s blood is ironic: Jesus’s blood brings forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28) and Pilate is depicted as foolishly cleansing himself of his only chance for salvation while the Jewish people in general are depicted as unwittingly praying for forgiveness.

Luke’s version of the story has Pilate send Jesus to Herod Antipas, whose soldiers mock him. Furthermore, in Luke’s account Pilate actually declares Jesus to be innocent three times (23:4, 14, 22). Many interpreters think that Luke wants to emphasize for Roman readers that Jesus was not actually a criminal—the Roman governor himself acknowledged this and so acted irresponsibly in having Jesus put to death.

In the Gospel of John, Pilate attempts to engage Jesus in a philosophical discussion over the definition of kingship (Jesus says his kingdom is “not from this world,” 18:36) and the nature of truth (Pilate asks, “What is truth?,” 18:38). Also, according to John, the Jewish opponents of Jesus need Pilate’s judgment against Jesus in

order to have him put to death. The problem, as John presents, is that (a) the Jews believe Jesus is guilty of blasphemy, which according to Jewish law merits the death penalty (19:7); but (b) they do not have the authority under Roman law to put anyone to death (18: 31); and (c) blasphemy is not a capital crime under Roman law. Therefore, they have to manipulate Pilate into passing judgment against Jesus for another reason, namely that he had set himself against the emperor (19:12; cf. 18:30).

In John, Pilate is also said to be afraid of Jesus, who has claimed to be the Son of God (19:7–8). Jesus makes clear that Pilate has no authority over him except that given from above (19:11): thus, in John, Pilate is depicted as a helpless pawn, but less a pawn of the Jewish authorities who want to manipulate him than a pawn of God, who is determining what must take place. In seeming recognition of this, Pilate has an inscription put on the cross that reads, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,” and when the authorities object that it should read, “This man said, I am King of the Jews,” Pilate answers defiantly, “What I have written I have written” (19:19–22).

This article is adapted from an entry by Francisco O. Garcia-Treto and Mark Allan Powell in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).