The background is a composite image. On the left, the lower portion of the Colosseum is visible, showing its iconic tiered arches. On the right, a large, detailed marble bust of a man with curly hair is shown in profile. The upper portion of the image features a map of the Roman Empire, with various regions labeled in Latin: DACIA, MYSIA, MARE, TRACIA, MARE, and ISADICANA. The title text is overlaid on the center of the image.

ROME & THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY



Part 5: Introduction

Pontius Pilate was the sixth procurator of Judea. Sabinus, Coponius, Ambivus, Rufus, and Gratus had preceded him in the government of the province. His character was such that he could not be considered “above reproach.” Jewish philosopher Philo (25 BC – AD 50) charged him with “corruptibility, violence, robberies, ill-treatment of the people, grievances, continuous executions without even the form of a trial, and endless and intolerable cruelties.” He possessed the full *imperium*, a term nowhere defined but described in its effects. Included in his reign were criminal and political jurisdiction, permanent military occupation, and the power to levy taxes. He had power over the lives of Roman citizens and over provincial subjects like Jesus.



Introduction

Only one law limited his power: the *lex repetundarum* against extortion. Otherwise, he could do as he pleased.

The power that Pilate had in criminal cases was called *coercitio* if it fell within the crimes listed in the statutes designated as *leges publicae*: e.g., adultery, forgery, murder, bribery, and treason. Juries were not used in Roman trials. But the judge had to formulate the charges and penalties and present a formal act of accusation. The judgment could be handed down in chambers (*in cubiculo*). But there was also an alternative to this method which is reflected in the Gospel account of Jesus' appearance before Pilate. This is the *bema*, or judgment-seat of



Introduction

Matthew 27:19, the technical term for an official's tribune or raised platform. Perhaps there are some ambiguities in this description of the political scene under Pilate but, in general, it appears to be the pre-Claudian (i.e., prior to AD 41-54) state of things. It was to this political structure under Pilate that the Jews (chief priests, elders, scribes – Mt. 27:1; Mk. 15:1; Lk. 23:1; Jn. 18:28) brought Jesus.



Personal Note

My first serious inquiry into the trial of Jesus Christ before the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate came in the spring semester of my second year at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. On May 22, 1975, I submitted a paper to one of my New Testament professors, Dr. James DeYoung (1931-2016) entitled “The Trial of Jesus Christ Before Pilate,” using source material from the RTS theological library. I was deeply moved by the miscarriage of justice at the time and continue to maintain that Jesus was innocent of all accusations leveled against Him. Perhaps William Clough said it best: “The courts gave judgment and adjourned, a cross arose, and the world still gazes, wonders and inquires, what, why?”

Important Facts About Jesus' Trial

- The Pharisees and scribes did not have the power to pass a capital sentence. With the conquest of their country, this right passed from the Jews and belonged to the Romans alone (cf. Jn. 18:31).
- The government of the province of Syria was under a *praeses* (Latin, *at the head*), and Judea was under its authority and ruled by Pilate, a *vice praeses*, or procurator, with capital jurisdiction.
- The Herod referred to during the trial was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and the tetrarch of Galilee, who was visiting Jerusalem at the time of the trial of Jesus.
- Tiberius Caesar, 70, was the Roman emperor when Jesus was on trial.



Important Facts About Jesus' Trial

- The religious leaders employed “subterfuges (to escape the force of an argument), artifice (to contrive), perfidy (to deceive), and violence” against Jesus rather than taking the ordinary course of *legal accusation* (Simon Greenleaf).
- The Pharisees employed *hired informers* to entrap Jesus.
- John unmasks their motive: “If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (11:48). Translated: they will no longer believe in us. The priests and Pharisees are motivated by a violent hatred of Jesus.



Important Facts About Jesus' Trial

- An order of arrest was never issued by the Sanhedrin. “And they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth, and kill him” (Mt. 26:4). “So from that day on they planned together to kill Him” (Jn. 11:53). His arrest was a fraud.
- Jesus’ arrest occurred at night and was an illegal act of violence.
- Jewish law prohibited all legal proceedings at night.
- It was Passover, and no judicial procedure was allowed to take place on a feast-day.
- Caiaphas interrogated Jesus about *His disciples and His doctrine* (Jn. 18:19).



Important Facts About Jesus' Trial

- False witnesses were called to testify against Jesus. “Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death; and they were finding none” (Mk. 14:55).
- Caiaphas was both accuser and judge and would not allow an inquiry. Jesus should have had the full protection of the law.
- The Pharisees and scribes failed to present their *articles of accusation*.
- Ultimately, Jesus was not condemned for blasphemy but for sedition against Rome. The precise charge on which Jesus' sentence was pronounced is indicated by the wording of the *titulus*: “King of the Jews.”



Important Facts About Jesus' Trial

- Luke writes that there were four people or groups of people who “were gathered together against Thy holy Servant Jesus”: Herod (Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee), Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the peoples of Israel (Acts 4:27).

Roger Ebert



Roger Ebert
1942-2013

“The Middle East in biblical times was a Jewish community occupied against its will by the Roman Empire, and the message of Jesus was equally threatening to both sides: to the Romans, because he was a revolutionary, and to the establishment of Jewish priests, because he preached a new covenant and threatened the status quo.”



Jesus Brought Before Pilate

- The processional probably occurred between six and seven o'clock in the morning, for "oriental labor anticipates the day because of the excessive heat of noon; and, at daybreak, Eastern life is all astir."
- Only John records the reason that they did not enter the Praetorium then: "They themselves did not enter into the Praetorium in order that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover" (Jn. 18:28).
- The hypocrisy of these leaders comes to the fore at this point. Their own trial of Jesus in Caiaphas' palace was marked with "a dozen judicial blunders." They now hesitate to violate a ritual regulation?

Pilate Hears the Case Against Jesus

- **Pilate:** “What accusation do you bring against this Man?” (Jn. 18:29). In Roman criminal trials, the accusation was more important than inquisition. This idea is reinforced by the words of Pilate’s successor in the same office, Festus. He said, “It is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any man before the accused meets his accusers face to face, and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges” (Acts 25:16).
- At first, Pilate did not understand the exact nature of the proceedings against Jesus.
- **Jewish leaders:** “If this Man were not an evil-doer, we would not have delivered Him up to you” (Jn. 18:30).



Pilate Hears the Case Against Jesus

- In essence, they were asking the governor to waive his right to re-try the case, to accept their trial of him as sufficient. The passing and execution of the sentence was all they desired from Pilate.
- **Pilate:** “Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law” (Jn. 18:31).
- **Jewish leaders:** “We are not permitted to put any one to death” (Jn. 18:31).
- Pilate had ascertained from their answer that the crime with which they charged Him was one against their own laws – and he did not want to meddle with such offenses.



The Essence of Pilate's Response

- **Stalker:** “If I am not to hear the case, then I will neither pass the sentence nor inflict the punishment; if you are insisting on this being a case for yourselves as ecclesiastics, then keep it to yourselves. However, if you do, you must be content to punish Him as the law permits you.”
- **Chandler:** : “If the accusation and the facts are not placed before me, I will not sentence the man to death; and under the law, you cannot.”
- The general accusation has radically changed from the night before. Jesus had been convicted of **blasphemy** by the Sanhedrin, but now he was charged with being an **evil-doer**.



A Second Accusation

- The second charge: “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’” (Lk. 23:2).
- Some on the court of the Sanhedrin were lawyers. They knew that Pilate could easily evade their own charges, but that he could not easily pass over the central charge they had in mind, which was against the security of the Roman state.
- They knew what the law written on brazen plates of Rome called *Laesa Majestas* (high treason) meant. So the priests converted the accusation from a religious to a political offense.



What Jesus' Accusers Knew

- They knew that they would have no standing in court based on a charge of blasphemy. Blasphemy was not an offense against Roman law.
- Roman judges would “generally assume cognizance of no such charge” (Chandler).
- The political charge is implicit in Pilate’s question to Jesus: “You are the King of the Jews?” (Jn. 18:33).

An Examination of the Three Charges

- The **first charge** was the indictment of **perverting or misleading their nation**. Though it was vague and indefinite, it was unquestionably against Roman law because it was in the nature of sedition. This was one of the forms of treason under Roman jurisprudence.
- The **second count** of the indictment was that **He forbade to pay the imperial tribute**. This was of a more serious charge than the first. To forbid to pay tribute to Caesar in Judea was a form of treason. It was an open defiance of the laws of the Roman state as well as a direct denial of Roman sovereignty in Palestine.

The Planned Entrapment: Tribute to Caesar

“Then the Pharisees went and counseled together how they might trap Him in what He said. And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?’” (Mt. 22:15-17).



Tiberius Tribute (denarius)



The Planned Entrapment: Tribute to Caesar

- They believed that any answer to the question posed would prove to be fatal to Him. If He advised not to pay the tribute, He would be charged with being a rebellious subject of Caesar. If He advised to pay the tribute, He would be charged with being an enemy to His own countrymen – the Jews.
- They marveled at Jesus' reply, and they went away: "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Mt. 22:21).
- So the charge looks like a deliberate falsehood. Keim calls it "a very flagrant lie."



An Examination of the Three Charges

- The **third** count in the indictment was the last and most serious of the charges: the prisoner had claimed to be “**Christ a King.**” By this, He was deliberately accused of high treason against Caesar. This was the gravest offense known to Roman law.
- Pilate could not ignore this charge, being a loyal deputy of Tiberius. (Tacitus records that 52 prosecutions for treason took place during his reign).
- Jesus’ accusers were well aware that the statement, “Christ a King,” would convey a different meaning to the ear of a Roman from that conveyed to their ears.

Jesus Before Pilate

- Having heard the indictment, Pilate called Jesus into the Praetorium and said to Him, “You are the King of the Jews?” (Jn. 18:33). It seems as if Pilate brushes the first two charges aside as unworthy of consideration.
- Jesus’ response to Pilate: “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” (Jn. 18:34). He desired to know the sense in which the question was asked – whether from the standpoint of a Roman or from that of the Jews, because, of course, His answer would be different from the two viewpoints.
- Roman: No; Jewish: Yes



Jesus Before Pilate

- His reply from a Jewish point of view would at once repudiate pretensions to earthly royalty and, at the same time, assert His claims to the Messiahship and heavenly sovereignty.
- **Pilate:** “What have you done?” (Jn. 18:35).
- **Jesus:** “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is My kingdom is not of this realm” (Jn. 18:36).
- Jesus simply meant that there was no possible rivalry between Him and Caesar.



Jesus Before Pilate

- **Pilate:** “So You are a king?” (Jn. 18:37).
- According to Pilate’s reasoning, Jesus stood self-condemned. But Jesus responds to Pilate’s question in such a way as to give a perfectly clear description of His kingdom and His title to spiritual sovereignty.
- **Jesus:** “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears My voice” (Jn. 18:37). His was not an empire of matter, but a realm of truth.
- **Pilate:** “What is truth?” (Jn. 18:38) – to which he (famously) awaited no answer.



Jesus Before Pilate

- Pilate went out again to the Jews and said to them, “I find no guilt in Him” (Jn. 18:38).
- Luke tells us that there was a response from the people at this point: “He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee, even as far as this place” (Lk. 23:5).
- This charge served a double purpose: (1) to strengthen the general accusation of high treason, and (2) to embitter and poison the mind of the judge against the prisoner by telling Pilate that Jesus was from Galilee.
- Upon hearing “Galilee,” Pilate sent Jesus to Herod (First Move).



Jesus Before Pilate

- Herod had wanted to see Jesus for a long time, but Jesus did not answer him (Lk. 23:9). So he sent Him back to Pilate.
- **Pilate:** “I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. I will therefore punish Him and release Him” (Lk. 23:14-16).
- This proposal to scourge Jesus (Second Move) was another of those “cowardly subterfuges” through which Pilate sought at once to satisfy his own conscience and the demands of the mob. But his offer was rejected. So he sought another loophole of escape.



Jesus Before Pilate

- Three of the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, & John) tell us that it was a custom on Passover Day to release to the people any single prisoner they desired. The Jews began to ask for Barabbas (Third Move).
- Pilate believed (wrongly) that the newly arrived crowd would be free from the envy of the priests. But they shouted all the more: “Crucify, crucify Him!” (Lk. 23:21).
- James Stalker memorably writes that “Pilate was now made sensible that what he had considered a loophole of escape was a noose into which he had thrust his head.”



Jesus Before Pilate

- Pilate had Jesus scourged, the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed Him in a purple robe, mocked Him, and gave Him blows to the face (Jn. 19:3).
- In desperation, Pilate made another attempt to have Him released. He “came out again, and said to them, ‘Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no guilt in Him’” (Jn. 19:4).
- When they cried out, “Crucify, crucify!” Pilate said to them, “Take Him yourselves, and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him” (Jn. 19:6).
- “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’” (Jn. 19:7).



Jesus Before Pilate

- However, there is no Jewish law to the effect that a person who claims to be the “Son of God” is liable to capital punishment.
- Finally, on the kingly idea of loyalty to Roman sovereignty, they framed their last menace and accusation: “If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; every one who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar” (Jn. 19:12).
- This last maneuver of the mob sealed the doom of Christ.
- Pilate washed his hands, even though he believed Jesus was innocent.
- It mattered nothing to those in authority what sort of treatment was shown him now. He was a condemned criminal.



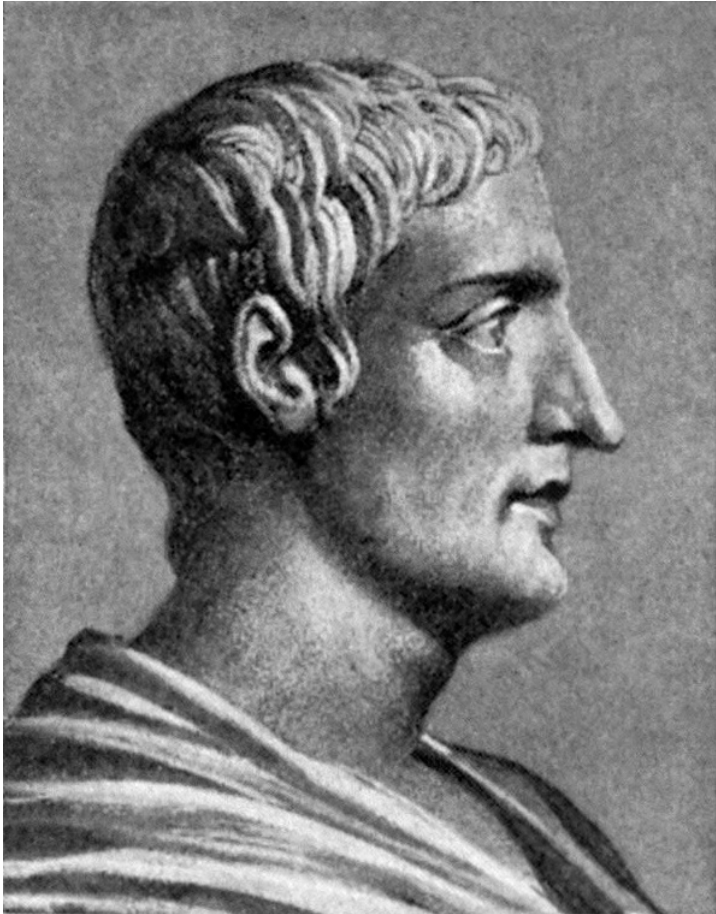
Who Killed Jesus?

- **First:** The most important proof that the death sentence was passed by the Romans and not by the Jews is the form of capital punishment: crucifixion. Had Jesus had been convicted of blasphemy by the Jews, He would have been stoned to death.
- **Second:** The inscription on the cross is also confirmation that Jesus was not condemned by the Jews for blasphemy, but by the Romans. What we have here is standard procedure in the case of passing a death sentence.
- **Third:** Confirmation of the Roman death sentence is based on the property of Jesus, which was lost to the state.

My Conclusion in 1975

Thus ended the most memorable act of injustice recorded in history. At every stage of the trial, before Caiaphas or Pilate, Jesus Christ conducted Himself with that commanding dignity and majesty so well worthy of His origin, mission, and destiny. And He stood alone through it all. His friends and followers had deserted Him. All alone, the Galilean peasant had “bared His breast and brow to the combined authority, to the insults and outrages, of both Jerusalem and Rome.”

Tacitus (c. AD 55-c. 117)



“Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.”

- Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book XV, 44

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